On Living With Lucinda

LUCINDA writes. At least so she replies to inquirers as to what she "does" in these pragmatic days when every unmarried woman in the thirties, such as Lucinda and I, "does" something. I do not wholly understand Lucinda's answer. "Writing" covers such a variety of—sins, I was about to say—of forms, that I should think that Lucinda would say that she does essays or plays or stories or poetry, just as I say that I am in insurance instead of in business. But writing is not business, as Lucinda implies reproachfully with her shadowy gray eyes when I fail to respond delicately and appreciatively to a new idea. I suppose that she can hardly say she is doing essays or poems or plays or stories when she is creating an entirely new form. The new form is not prose and not verse. Neither is it free verse—Lucinda shudders at this suggestion and says that free verse was born with death already at its throat. I hesitate to tell you about Lucinda's new form for fear you will smile, and I love Lucinda. When she has lived a little harder, she will write better. Just now she sits down at her desk and lets the Creative Wish tell her what to write. I don't think

he—or it—tells her very clearly, because her papers are crazily crisscrossed and I am always bringing her home new erasers from the office.

Lucinda belongs to a "group". The boys in my office speak of the gang or bunch to which they are attached, and I myself have been decoyed into clubs, but Lucinda has a share in nothing so commonplace. The "group" is a serious circle to which I may never refer frivolously without having her hiss "Philistine" at me—whatever that may mean. Obviously I am not a member of the group; I simply own the apartment in which Lucinda and I live together and in which the group gathers for talk, as they say, and for refreshments, as I know, from the number of sandwiches I make and they consume. Talking does make one hungry, and ye gods! how they do talk! They are all writers and talk about nothing but writing. They can spend a whole evening and halfway to dawn arguing about the faults of a single play or novel. It is inconceivable to me that one piece of literature can be so bad as they find it. I could not find a similar number of defects in a whole library. They get positively happy disagreeing over the deficiencies in a play. They are not content to damn a thing and let it die; they disagree as thoroughly as doctors at a consultation as to the reason for its extinction. The more successful a thing is, the more dreadful they find it. If I enjoy a book, I have learned never to tell them so. They used to smile cornerwise and avoid politely any discussion of the book while I was still in the room. Later I would catch murmurs of damnation.

They have a strange attitude toward success. Apparently to be successful is to be commonplace. Now in my business, the more people we insure, the more successful we are, but the converse seems to be true of literature. The group has the notion that if an article is accepted, it cannot be good, and yet they are always trying to get things accepted. When the one man among them whom I considered to have normal intelligence, sold a series of stories to a popular weekly, he soon stopped coming to the apartment. Though the others called him the "money-changer" and sighed it was "such a pity" whenever his name was mentioned, it is my idea that he deserted, and not that they cast him out, as they claim. But then, I don't, as Lucinda says, "understand".

They read a great deal, their own work, of course. I do not attend these readings, since I know nothing about literature as it is made today and would, therefore, disturb the circle of sympathy. The apartment is so small, however, that I am forced to hear more or less of what is read. I must confess that I respect the judgment of the editors who reject what the group write. I think the readers themselves do too, for it is my private, never-to-be-murmured opinion that they read to be encouraged and not to be criticized. Of course, the theory of the group is that they shall constitute a perfect forum of honest criticism by which the author shall abide. From my observation the reader laps up the encouragement and discards all unfavorable comment as unintelligent.

Perhaps I am too severe on Lucinda's group; I may be a Philistine-whatever-that-may-mean; they may all be the neglected geniuses each secretly assures himself he is. I am influenced, I admit, by a thoroughly reasonable grudge I hold against the lot,—they use me for copy! I am to them the Average Human Being. I do not write or know anything about

writing. The Creative Wish never wished anything on me, as my office boy would put the point. Since I am entirely untalented, the group therefore regard me as a perfect specimen of the General Public. They pursue my reactions on any and all points with the zeal of a hunter for a fox. They lay mental traps, springing questions at me even as I come into the room bringing them long drinks—they talk so much they are always desperately thirsty. When I answer, they cross glances triumphantly. A week later, they read and I have to overhear articles in which my opinions, usually distorted beyond the recognition of anyone not familiar with the "creative process", have become the attitude of a large section of the human race. It is hard for the world in general to be blamed for my opinions, but fortunately the world rarely has to know it is blameworthy, since the articles do not often appear in print.

For example, the group asked me recently what I thought of Bodge in his new play. I replied that I liked him; he amused me when I had brain-fag. Laughter, all doctors agree, is a better tonic than unnecessary tears and besides, the insurance business uncovers its own tragedies. Anyway, I *liked* him. The silence after my comment was so very quiet that I am sure I know the quality of the stillness while anarchists wait for the bomb they have planted to explode. Nobody spoke, but the atmosphere hissed with the unuttered "There!" Then Lucinda, who cannot help being a lady, remarked: "Lydia, this is delicious iced tea."

Only last night, as a corollary to this incident, Beekman, who is fat, read a tirade on "The Extinction of the Theatre", in which he deplored the attitude of the public which goes to the theatre to be amused. I once saw —and was not amused by—a play of Beekman's which the group put on at a little theatre for a choice circle of sympathizers. (Beekman, by the way, has not written a play since. He always has something in mind, but not on paper.) In Beekman's play, a man, discovering that he has leprosy, kills himself, wife, and child, lest they should all be infected. When they are in the last throes, a doctor, hastily summoned, says the man hadn't leprosy, after all. The group acclaimed the play as a masterpiece of realism. Needless to say, I did not enjoy the performance. "What chance", said Beekman, hitting back at me in his "Extinction", "has realism with a mob which turns down its thumbs on anything which does not tickle its risibles? When shall the true drama get a hearing? Lives there no longer a public not too soft to endure the torments of a fellow man upon the stage?" No, Mr. Beekman, the public of which I am your sample, does not any longer choose to pay its cash for the privilege of being merely tormented. If I must be harrowed, I want to get a sense of righteousness in the harrowing, some fundamental principle which I can store away as a bulwark for moral defense at later crises. When I said something of this sort, Mr. Beekman promptly rapped in his next paper the Puritan public which insists that a moral be served with every drama.

I have even appeared as the heroine of a very modern novel in which the leading woman is made to choose between domesticity with a husband and business. In earlier days, I have wept over marvelous voices sacrificed in the matrimonial mausoleum of the Home —not my phrasing but that of the popular serial—and have suffered with

actresses obliged to sacrifice careers to husbands who could not endure the thought of their earning a copper cent; but I have yet to learn the lure of business, though I have earned my living by it for eleven years. In this novel I was aflame with ambition. I believe I was made to sell stocks and bonds instead of insurance, but I was absorbed in buying and selling. I ate, drank, and slept with stocks and bonds in my mind. I dreamed always of—not gain, but financial glory. I had the lust for power over other people's bank accounts. And then a man came and asked me to wash his dishes and cook his dinners and be his wife. Of course I refused him—in the novel. My would-be husband's love turned to jealousy of his rival, my business; he became my enemy in a desperate war on the stock exchange. Twenty years later, we broke each other. I have always longed to steal the manuscript of the novel to read to my associates. Ada Millbank wrote it, Ada who has so little business acumen that she has been known to take her July rent on June 30 to buy a muff for the next winter. I have never been able to account for the overwhelming ambition with which Ada endowed me, since my chief interest in my occupation lies in the fact that it provides me with tea and toast and occasionally steak. Just before Ada evolved the story, I did refuse Dick Halliday, as I fear Lucinda may have hinted, but I did so for no other reason than that I did not care for him. He did not want me, either, as much as he did a wife and a home—it is the men who want the homes, regardless of the writers who write otherwise.

Even Lucinda uses me for literary purposes. She thinks I do not know because she disguises my thoughts and words in generalizations. For example, she has made capital of my preference for vanilla ice-cream in chocolate ice-cream soda. In summer I am as devoted to ice-cream soda as a school girl or a man working off the tobacco habit. I remarked casually to Lucinda upon the fortunes squandered for ice-cream in a modern lifetime. Not long after Lucinda produced an article on "Modern Puritanism", in which she discussed relics of the Puritanical attitude in contemporary thought. My preference for vanilla ice-cream became an inheritance from Puritan ancestry. How? Lucinda argued that since human nature is a constant, fundamental characteristics simply reappear in new aspects. Puritanical principles exist today, she declared, reacting to new conditions. To the Puritan, modern extravagances for purely physical comforts would be appalling. "Take so simple a matter as ice-cream soda," said she; "I have a friend who salves her conscience for spending money on anything so fleshly as ice-cream soda by eating vanilla instead of chocolate ice-cream in a chocolate drink,—a less Epicurean mixture."

If Lucinda went always so far astray, I should not care, but the Creative Wish has a habit of telling her my inmost secrets, particularly after we have had a brisk walk in the winter air. Lucinda sees too clearly, understands too much at such times. I doubt if she realizes that it is my soul she is dissecting in the verses she produces. She thinks she is generalizing from her own experience, whereas she is making my self a symbol for the race. To her, even as to the group, I am at these moments the Average Human Being and not her oldest friend.

I like to be helpful, but the highest altruism could find no joy in serving as a Type.

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