

PRO

by Lydia Torrance

As my husband Portleigh often said, "It's not *what* you do in this world, Lydia, that makes the difference, it's *how* you do it." Portleigh was right about so many things. Like the Dauphine mansion I wanted to buy, but he said I'd regret it. And he was right. But I forgot, I've already told you about all that, if memory doesn't deceive me!

Anyway I was thinking of Portleigh's words the other day because there was a lady in my Diet and Disease class with a beautiful handwriting. I happened to notice because the professor was lecturing on Bubonic Plague and what happens when rats get into the corn and then people eat it. There were all these slides about London, and "Bring out your dead!" and people rotting all over — it was just awful. I'm sure it all did take place, I'm not disputing, but why dwell on it? And I *am* willing to consider history. As Grace Livingstone Hill says, "If you don't pay attention to history, you'll have to do it over until you get it right." I *do* pay attention to history, but this professor was getting all worked up and saying "Just think of it! All those dead! You could walk across the Thames on corpses. And the stench! Can you imagine?"

Well I think enough is enough. So I said to myself, "Lydia, just stop listening, it's all in the textbook *Eat Right or Die!* anyway. And I just tuned him out. So I started noticing this lady's handwriting. She wasn't listening either, she was making doodles. She had a lovely shade of turquoise ink and was writing writing things like "Dead Men Tell No Tales," and "The City was as Still as a Graveyard," and "Putrescence," as if they were little plaques, with curlicues and borders. She's older than most students, maybe in her forties, so I passed her a note just to be friendly, that said: "Want some Dentyne? Isn't HE awful??!! Are you an Artist???" She looked at it a long time and then wrote back, "I am a Calligrapher," with borders and flowers around it.

After class she told me what a calligrapher is. It's a person who can do fancy writing and penmanship. She'll copy your favourite poem out for five dollars. So I gave her my favourite, "Sonnets from the Portuguese, Number 17" and the next class she brought it to me on pale blue paper with red ink, suitable for framing. So then I asked her what she was doing in Household Ec. with all that talent.

"Are you kiddin'?" she snorted. "I've sent my stuff to magazines, to art dealers and publishers, to collectors — it always comes back. Let's face it, we live in a crass world where only the vulgar and metriculous survive. Op Art, Pop Art — it makes me sad. The day of the sensitive and fragile is over. You must know that."

"I know what you mean," I said cautiously, "there *is* a lot of ugliness around. Like that professor and his plague. But there's a lot of beauty too. You just have to block out all the other. It's just a matter of finding your right audience. Frinstance they sell pretty things in SUB every Friday, why don't you get a table there?"

"Yuck! You *like* that stuff? It's homemade junk of the first water! The Triumph of the Amateur — valued because it's crude, off-centre, unfinished. No thanks!"

"Why I've seen beautiful glass animals and belts —"

"They've really gotten to you, eh, old girl?" She turned away with a disgusted look and took one of those little brown cigarettes that smell so awful. "I thought you'd be able to remember when 'home-made' meant better-crafted and more polished than a store-bought object that had been whipped up by a machine, because made with loving care."

I never did like being called 'Old Girl.' "Well if it comes to that, I've seen plenty of beautiful books that weren't made by hand. So why do you still do it that way?"

"You've seen poems written like mine that were printed?" she said hoarsely. I couldn't exactly remember, but I nodded anyway. She grabbed it out of my hand.

"Then you won't need this one." She tore it to little bits. "And here's your five bucks, O last of the sensitive pioneers!" She flung the money at me.

"There's no need to get so riled," I said flabbergasted. Boys at the coffee machine were staring at us. "I liked your writing a lot. You shouldn't be so hysterical. My word, no wonder you never sell anything if you act like that. You've got to be more easy-going."

"Sure! Sell out completely! Why not! What do I have to lose? Dumpy, frumpy, deserted, trying to raise two kids —" She burst into sobs. "You'll never have to worry about being out of step — you're a real member of this generation, Lydia. I thought you had real standards, but I see your philosophy is 'Just drift with the tide.'"

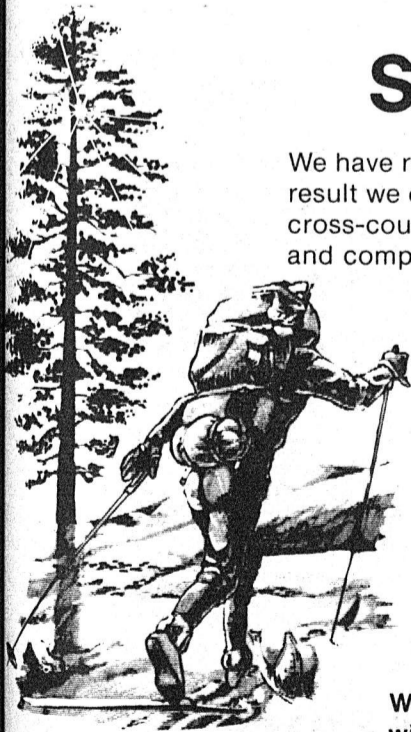
"Look," I said scared, "I didn't mean to get you like this, all worked up and wrought over. Why don't we have some coffee? And maybe you could do another poem for me sometime? I've got to get back to my dorm pretty soon."

"I don't want any stupid coffee. And what are you staring at?" She shrieked at the boys by the coffee machine. She stalked up and knocked the cup out of the big one's hands. I made a dash for the door.

There was a terrible row, I heard later, and the Dean called me in, so I want to say that I really had nothing to do with it. As anyone can plainly see.

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