The Geranium’ by Patricia Grace

AFTER THE KIDS HAD GONE TO SCHOOL MARNEY STARTED ON the work. She did the dishes, washed the tea-towels and hung them out. She wiped down the table and the bench, and the windowsill and the frame of the window. She cleaned the window and the fireplace, and took the ashpan out and emptied it where she'd been digging. She wiped the hearth with a damp cloth.

Then she put the mat outside so she could sweep and mop out. She liked the mat, which was new. Bob had come home with it the week before and she'd put it in the centre of the room where it wouldn't get marked. She thought Bob might get another mat for by the door, not a flash one, just a little rope mat to step on. She began sweeping, moving from the kitchen to the bedrooms. She was sorry the kids were all at school now, and she thought about having a job. She swept, getting into the corners with a dustpan and brush. Some of the women had kitchen jobs or did part-time cleaning, or did machining down at Hayes.

When she'd finished sweeping she got a bucket of water and a mop and mopped out. She scrubbed the back step and mopped the porch, then opened the window and door to let the breeze blow through, hoping that the floor would dry out quickly before Sandra and Joey came. She was looking forward to mid-morning when Sandra and Joey and their kids might call in on their way to the shops. Before they came she would put on her cardigan to hide her arm.

She went out into the wash-house and began rubbing the clothes that were soaking in the tub. If she had a job she'd get her a washing machine. Not a dear one, just a second-hand.

She'd seen washing machines advertised in the Wanted to Sell column of the paper that came on a Wednesday. Tomorrow. At about two o'clock every Wednesday the woman came with the papers. Tomorrow there'd be another paper. And when it arrived she'd stop what she was doing and have a read, sometimes reading right up to the time the kids came home from school. But she didn't read everything on the Wednesday.

There were all sorts of things to read - stories about people of the district, or about some new building going up. A picture of their street had been in once, showing one of the Works' trucks loaded with shrubs that were being given out to each house.

She liked reading about sports and the different things that people did, and there was a cooking section and sometimes a special section about gardens.
The Public Notices took up two pages and told about meetings and raffles, or where you could buy firewood or coal or an incinerator. Or you could read about garage sales and jumble sales, and where to send clothes and household goods that you didn't want. Sometimes there were notices of market days advertising produce, crafts, jumble, quick-fire raffles, white elephant, lucky dips and knick-knacks. Sometimes there were auctions with everything going cheap.

If you wanted to join a club you could read through the notices and find the one you liked, and anyone could join. The notices said things like 'Enrol Now', 'Special Welcome to New Members', 'All Welcome', 'Intending Members Welcome'. And there was one big ad that always had 'WE NEED YOU' in extra large print.

There were a lot of church notices telling the times of the services, and where you could ring for further enquiries. There were notices about where you could get advice to do with money or marriage or the law.

The schools put their notices there when they were having elections or fundraising, or when it was time for the kids to enrol. Or people could enrol at dancing school to learn ballet, tap or jazz. They could do Tae Kwan Do, aerobics, or collect spoons, just about anything. They could learn something, like swimming or ceramics or floral art.

She liked flowers. She had looked after her shrub and it was starting to grow. Sometimes she'd thought about having a few bulbs and poking them in round underneath the shrub. Or a geranium. She thought about having a geranium which could be red or pink. She liked red, but pink was all right too.

There were three pages about houses in the paper, where it told you about each house, how many bedrooms, what sort of fireplace, if there was a carpet, whether there was a garage or a double garage. Some of the houses were great for kids, some were close to shops or schools, or only a step to the railway station. Some had fabulous views. There were photos of a lot of the houses, and she liked counting the windows and looking to see if there was a chimney or two chimneys, or no chimney at all.

It was good looking at all the advertisements to do with things for the house. And there were clothes adverts about fashion frocks, fashion jerseys, fashion sweat-tops. And baby-knits, fleecy and supafleece, flexiwool, polywool, wronderwool. There were pictures of nightwear and shoes and slippers, and the ads told the sizes and colours you could get. Sometimes you could get 'All Sizes, All Colours'.

Then there were the grocery and meat ads, which had the prices of everything and told you
which were special and how much off, or how much for two, and there were coupons and competitions, and how to put money aside for Christinas.

And there were jobs advertised too, jobs for all sorts of tradespeople, for office workers, sales people, machinists, cleaners and kitchenhands. Sometimes people advertised for someone to mind children after school, or to do house cleaning for a few hours each week.

She liked the page where people put in what they wanted to buy or sell — like beds, bikes, lawn-mowers, pianos, washing machines, TV sets or aerials, high-chairs, freezers, fridges, pine-cones, vacuum cleaners.

But she didn't read everything on the Wednesday. She saved some of the reading for the next day, and the day after that. She always hid the paper away when she'd finished reading so that it wouldn't get put in the fire.

When she'd finished washing and rinsing the clothes, she wrung them and put as many as she could into the bucket ready to take out. She went inside for her cardigan and saw that the floor was nearly dry. If Sandra and Joey came before it had dried properly she'd put paper down, or she could mop again afterwards, just in the places where they'd walked.

The teatowels she'd put out earlier were dry, so she took them down and began pegging the clothes, returning to the washhouse every now and again to refill the bucket. There weren't enough pegs for all the washing and she had to drape the towels over the line without pegging them. She thought she might mention about the pegs.

When the women and kids came she was pleased and put some water on the stove to boil. She buttered some biscuits and put jam on some and cheese on some.

'You do this every day?' Sandra said, stepping on the papers.

'Yeh, what for?' said Joey, carrying the pushchair in so that it wouldn't make marks.

'You kids want a biscuit?' Marney asked.

'Take one and go outside,' Sandra said.

'Take two, one on top. And you come in after, I'll give you a banana.'

'They don't need a banana, tell them to get out and stay out.'

'Yes,' Joey said. 'Keep the bananas for your kids, these ones have been stuffing their faces all morning.'

She poured the tea, then they talked about the curtains some people were getting; there was a curtain bug going round and just about everyone was getting new curtains. They knew who it was taking the milk money too, and it was kids from the next street. Someone had seen them
and called the cops, and that's who it was, kids from the next street. That skinny-bone one with the asthma was one of them.

Everyone was getting sick too. All the kids had runny noses and coughs. But not as bad as the one over the road from Sandra who ended up in hospital, but no wonder, spaghetti, baked beans. That's what they lived on, spaghetti, baked beans, spaghetti, baked beans.

Then they talked about some T-shirts they were going to buy for the kids, and about the kids growing out of their clothes. They were going to sort some of the stuff out to give to someone. Some of it was haddit and would have to be chucked out.

Then Sandra and Joey thought they'd better get going.

'Good cup of tea, Marney,' Sandra said. 'You coming?'

'Not today.'

'How come? You're always sticking home.'

'Bob does our shopping . . .'

'But a walk won't hurt.'

'Yeah, come for a stretch.'

'Well I'm a bit busy:'

'Busy my foot. What else you got?'

'Ironing . . .'

'Jesus, it can wait. Be back in an hour . . . a few minutes' walk, have a look around and home again . . .'

'And I might do a bit more . . . out the back . . .'

'Dead loss all right, why not let your old man dig? Anyway, what for? It's all rock, nothing grows.'

'I'll look after the kids if you like.'

'Fat chance, they've got money for lollies.'

'What about baby?'

'I could leave bubby. Yes, good, I'll leave her, and . . . better get going, otherwise we'll never get. You kids coming?'

'We want a banana.'

'Look . . .'

'Let them have a banana, there's plenty . . .'

'Well I don't buy bananas, they never last in our house the way they stuff their faces. In and
out, in and out, wanting, asking. I go to the shop today, and just about all gone next day. But you... you always seem to have...

'It's Bob, always bringing stuff.'

'Mmm. Not like my old man. Her's too. All they bring home is a skinful of booze, one's as bad as the other. Well look, we better... You leaving bubby, Joey?'

'Well...'

'Yes it's all right, leave her. When she wakes up I'll mash a banana, make some custard.'

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

'And sure you don't want to...?'

'Nah. Some other time.'

'Okay then. There's a nappy in the bag, and her bottle.'

'Good, see you on the way back.'

Marney washed the cups and wiped the table down. The floor was dry and she collected up the paper and brought the mat in. She put milk into a pot to make custard for Jemmy.

By the time the women came back she'd changed and fed Jemmy, washed the nappy and hung it on the line. She'd taken Jemmy outside to play for a little while, and Jemmy had toddled about on the rough ground, laughing and pointing, and occasionally sitting down with a bump.

'She didn't cry,' Marney said. 'Not even when she first woke up.'

'She's good like that,' Joey said. 'Likes everybody. Easy to leave.'

'Here, we brought you a bit of geranium. Joey's got a bit, I've got a bit. They reckon you can grow it from a bit like that.'

'Good. Good, I was thinking about a geranium. Red too. It's just what I was thinking.'

But she was worried about the geranium, and after the women had gone she thought she might get rid of it. Then she decided to put it in a jar of water and put it on the kitchen windowsill.

After that she went out to do some more of the digging, working quickly to make up for the time she'd spent talking, or playing with Jemmy.

When the kids got home she went in and put the tea on. By then the clothes were dry and she took them in to iron.

The children had had tea and she'd almost finished the ironing when she heard the truck stop and heard Bob calling to the driver. After a while he came in and put the bag of groceries on
the bench.

'So you been digging?' he said.

'Yes.'

'What else?'

'It's hard . . . quite rocky . . .' 

'I said, what else?'

'The ... the house . . .' 

'What did you do this morning?'

'I got the kids off to school. . .'

'Well come on. Did they have breakfast, did they have a wash?' 

'Yes. The kids got up just before you left and they had a wash. Then they got dressed while I was getting their lunches ready. I got them their breakfast. . .'

'Late, I suppose.'

'No, plenty of time. They went about quarter past.'

'And who was here?'

'No one . . .' 

'I said, who was here?'

'No one. Just me. Just the kids.'

'Then what?'

'I did the dishes, then I wiped down the table, the bench, round the window, cleaned the window. Then I swept out and mopped out and . . . started on the washing . . .'

'What else?'

'I went and hung it out. . .' 

'And?'

'I needed a few more pegs.'

He reached out and gripped her arm, she could feel his fingers bruising her. 'Stop changing the subject,' he said.

'I wasn't... I just thought. . . when you get the shopping.'

'Stop grizzling about pegs. If I want to get pegs I'll get pegs . . . What then?'

'Sandra and Joey called in.'

'What did those nosey bitches want?'

'Just called, on the way to the shops.'
'So you all went off to the shops, I suppose?'
'Not me.'
'How do I know?'
'No, not me. I looked after Jemmy while Joey . . .'
'Is that all you got to do?'
'No, but . . .'
'No but, no but. You better not be lying, that's all.'
'They came and got Jemmy and . . .'
'Who's they?'
'Sandra and Joey.'
'Who else?'
'No one . . . No one else . . . Only Sandra's two kids but they ran on home. It was just Joey who came in, Sandra waited out . . .'
'So first you say Sandra and Joey, then you say just Joey. Can't you make up your mind?'
'Joey came in, Sandra waited for her.'
'I better not find out different.'
'And after that was when I did the garden. When the kids came home I started the tea. I brought the clothes in and . . . I've been ironing . . .'
'So, what else have you got to grizzle about?'
'No, I wasn't . . .'
'And what's that?'
'What's . . . ?'
'That?'
'That's just a geranium.'
'Where from?'
'Sandra gave . . .'
'Sandra hasn't got geraniums.'
'She did. Sandra. She got it when she went to the shop . . .'
'Shop? What shop? I haven't seen any shop with those.'
'I mean she got it, from somewhere.'
'Changing your mind again?'
'No. It's what I meant. She got it, pinched it off someone's hush . . . or . . . spoke to someone and
'they gave it.'

'You don't know what you're talking about.' His grip tightened even more on her arm, he was beginning to twist.

'She said to put it... in water . . . and might grow.'

Then suddenly he let go and sat down at the table. So she went over to the stove, took a plate from the warming tray and began to dish up food. Her arm hurt. She piled the plate high and put it down in front of him.

'Chuck that thing out,' he said, so she took the geranium and put it into the scrap bucket. She could hear him chewing the meat, sucking at the bones and shifting about in his chair as she waited for water to boil for the tea.

And as she waited she thought about the next day when Sandra and Joey might call in. She remembered that tomorrow was the day the woman came with the paper. There would be new stories and she wondered what they could be about. She wondered what there would be to look at in the pictures of clothes and things for the house.

When she had poured his tea she began stacking the dishes into the sink. She squirted dishwashing liquid over the plates and let the water run.

There would be the week's grocery specials to look at, telling about prices down and cut prices, and with crosses over the old prices and the new prices shown in big print. Some of the pictures of houses would be the same as for last week, but there'd be some new ones too, close to shops, great outlooks, good for kids. And there would be some new jobs but not very many.

She remembered that this was the time of the year that clubs put notices in about meetings, with special welcomes to new members and intending members. There could be new clubs with some different things for people to learn and do.

Then she thought about Wanted to Sell, Wanted to Buy, the page she liked best, where you could read about all the things people had for sale or would like to buy. Sometimes she read that page first, but sometimes she kept it until last to read. And she always read it slowly and carefully so that she wouldn't finish it too soon.

Behind her she heard him sucking his teeth and shifting his chair. She pulled the plug and watched the sink emptying, watched the water turning, heard it rushing in the drain.