



THE NEWSPAPER OF  
**CLAREMONT**  
**STREET**

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*Elizabeth Jolley*

Elizabeth Jolley was born in 1923 in the industrial Midlands of England and grew up in a household ‘half English and three quarters Viennese’, and later attended a Quaker boarding school.

She came to Western Australia in 1959 with her husband. Although she began writing at a very early age, it was not until she was in her fifties that her first book was accepted: *Five Acre Virgin and Other Stories*, published by Fremantle Press (then Fremantle Arts Centre Press) in 1976. Her reputation as a major writer grew with the publication of a further nineteen works of fiction. Her novels won many prizes, including the Age Book of the Year Award (three times) and the Miles Franklin Award.

Celebrated as one of Australia’s major writers, Elizabeth Jolley also established a formidable international reputation, with her books being widely published throughout the world. She received an Order of Australia for services to Australian literature and was awarded honorary doctorates from four universities. She died in 2007.

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*treasures*

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*for Leonard Jolley*



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## One

*The landscape of ridge, tree,  
rock and valley, red brick, terracotta tile,  
all leave fingertouch imprints  
upon the memory,  
slivers of images  
beneath the skin.*

Ian Templeman

*there are no trees here no ghosts this is  
the edge tomorrows world...*

*the new timber grunts the owners change already  
already...*

Thomas Shapcott

No one knew or cared where the Newspaper of Claremont Street went in her spare time.

Newspaper, or Weekly, as she was called by those who knew her, earned her living by cleaning other people's houses. Every day she was in someone else's place cleaning. While she worked she sang,

*'... the bells of hell go ting a ling a ling  
for you and not for me ...'*

She liked hymns best and knew a great many.

'Well, and 'ow are we?' she called out, arriving with great noise, filling untidy kitchens with her presence, one kitchen after another, for she worked steadily all day, every day, one house after another.

She would start by throwing open the windows and, while the sink overflowed with boiling water, she would

pull the stove to pieces. She knew everything about the people she cleaned for and she never missed anything that was going on.

‘Who’s getting married Weekly?’ they asked her, and ‘Who’s moved into the corner house Weekly?’ She told them everything they wanted to know, and when they asked more questions than she would answer, she said, ‘If yo’ know people is living, what else is there to know?’ But she did know other things, deep hidden wishes for possessions and for money to get them; and there were wishes for those things which cannot be bought with money.

‘I think that word should be clay. C.L.A.Y.’ She leaned over old Mr Kingston’s chair, ‘Let’s see, what was that clue again?’ She read it aloud,

*‘Universal building material which does not endure forever.’*

You and yor intellectshall crrosswords!’

Mr Kingston smiled shyly down at the paper. CLAY, he pencilled in the letters. The word fitted. For some years now Weekly had taken part in one of his few remaining interests. On purpose, he did not finish the puzzle before her arrival. He took pleasure in the

discovery that he shared with this uneducated woman a background of long Sunday afternoons devoted to getting by heart passages from the Bible.

‘Don’t you remember,’ Weekly said, ‘let me see now,’ she looked up at the ceiling, ‘now let me see,’ she muttered to herself, ‘something like this,’ she said.

*‘Remember that thou hast made me as the clay; and wilt bring me into dust again.’*

They learned me that at Sunday School.’

‘Ah yes!’ Mr Kingston said in his kind old voice. ‘Ah yes!’

*‘He remembereth His own who lie in the dust.’*

‘I can’t say as I remember that part, Mr Kingston, but o’ course it was a long time ago and they didn’t learn us everything.’

‘Chatham’s girl’s engaged at long larst,’ she reported to Mrs Kingston. ‘Two rooms full of presents you should just see the jugs and glasses and the stainless steel cuttelry and talk about coffee tables and vawses!’

‘Kingston’s boy’s ’ad ’orrible accident,’ she described the details to the Chathams. ‘Lorst ’is job o’ course but

then that's because of what e's been taking, growing the stuff on a piece of clorth on top of the wardrobe. Whatever next! Missis Kingston said to me only larst time, "Whatever shall I do with this Weekly?" and there was this soup plate with the weeds growing, only they was all withered. "I think they must be bean shoots," she sez but I thought otherwise. "I'd water 'em," I told her, "looks as if they're on their larst garsp." Poor Missis Kingston my 'eart bleeds.'

Weekly sadly shook the tablecloth over the carpet and carried out some dead roses carefully, as if to keep them for the next funeral in Claremont Street, which in her opinion was sure to be soon. Seen from the back, the top of Mr Kingston's head dropping over the personal columns of an old *Sunday Sun* gave an impression which supported Weekly's unspoken opinion.

When she went into the houses she saw what people were trying to do with their lives and she saw too what they did not try to do. Some things simply happened to them. The mess made by living did not bother her. People's efforts to clear up their mess were touching, their dead flowers drooping in stained, treasured vases and crumbs left in the bread tin made her shake her head and feel sad, not because she had to throw away the flowers and clean out the tin. It was the picking of

flowers in the first place and the buying of the bread and bringing it home to eat, they were the symbols of their efforts to live. Weekly made great efforts herself and was not unaware of the efforts of others. She noticed everything there was to notice about people and their houses; she could not help it.

She had worked for so many years in Claremont Street and had seen a great many people grow up and grow old. She could remember old Mr Kingston as a much younger man, someone to whom many people had turned for advice. Now he sat wrapped in red and yellow shawls knitted by his granddaughters. He smelled of a mixture of whisky and tobacco. Though members of the household paused briefly by his chair or put off going into his room for as long as possible, she realised that, unlike herself, he had relatives. His apparently useless life had been, and perhaps even now was useful, even precious to someone. This striking fact about human life could never be ignored and, without ever mentioning it, Weekly was aware of it and knew its importance.

*'I could not do without Thee Thou Saviour of  
the Lorst,'*

she sang at the Laceys' while she washed the wrought

iron trellis on the mezzanine terrace. 'You should 'ave seen the mess after the Venns' party,' she called down to Mrs Lacey. 'Broken glass everywhere, blood on the stairs and a whole pile of half-eaten pizzas in the laundry. Some people think they're having a good time! And you'll never believe this, I picked up a bed jacket, ever so pretty it was, to wash it and there was a yuman arm in it...' Mrs Lacey hurried to her walk-in wardrobe to change into something suitable for going out.

Weekly cleaned in all sorts of houses. Her body was hard like a board and withered with so much work. Her feet were so large and ugly with rheumatism, she seemed to have stopped looking like a woman.

On her way home from work, she went in the shop at the end of Claremont Street and sat there, taking her time, seeing who was there and watching what they bought. No one needed to read anything, the Newspaper of Claremont told them all stories and kept them up to date with the news. No one needed to bring a shopping list because Weekly knew what they needed to buy.

The boards on the floor of the shop were dark with repeated moppings with kerosene. Weekly sat on a broken chair propped against the counter. She sucked in her cheeks and peered unashamedly into the shopping baskets of the women who were hurriedly

buying things at the last minute.

'Any pigs been eatin' babies lately Newspaper?' one of the shop girls called out.

'What happened to that man who sawed orf all his fingers at the timber yard?' the other girl nudged the first one out of the way. Both girls had on new pink cardigans, both were good natured and plump. They ate biscuits and chocolate and scraps of ham and cheese all day.

'Yo'll not be needing flour,' Weekly advised a woman.

'Why not then?'

'Yo' bought some yesterday,' Weekly said. 'Now eggs yo' didn't get. Yo'll be needing eggs.'

'What about "No fingers" Newspaper?' someone asked.

'Well,' Weekly looked all round, waiting for attention from the shop. 'He never got no compensation as he'd only been there half hour. Half hour and not a finger nor a thumb left on him. Both 'ands gorn and nothin' for it!' She let an impressive silence follow this appalling misfortune and, after a suitable time, she rose from her chair and went home.

She lived quite alone in a rented room covered in brown linoleum which she polished mercilessly every morning. Back at home she rummaged in the flyscreen cupboard where she kept her food, and taking out some

bread and boiled vegetables, she sat reading and eating until she was rested. She was so thin and her neck was so scraggy that when she swallowed you could see the food going down. But since there was no one there to tell her about it, it did not really matter.

There was very little furniture in the room and none of it belonged to her. All the clothes she had were given to her at the places where she worked. While it was still light, Weekly pulled her chair across to the narrow window of her room and sat bent over her mending. She darned everything she had; the needle was awkward in her fingers because the joints were enlarged with hard work and from an unnamed ailment in childhood. She put on patches with a herringbone stitch. Sometimes she made the worn out materials of her skirts firmer with rows of herringboning, one row neatly above the other, the brown thread glowing in these last rays of the sun which make all browns beautiful. Even the old linoleum could have a sudden richness at this time of the evening. It was like the quick lighting up of a plain girl's face when she smiles because of some unexpected happiness. The corners of the room softened in this last sunlight and the herringbone stitch satisfied Weekly with that pleasure which belongs to creative thrift. With the dusk came the end of her sewing for she was

too mean to put on the light. She was tired and so was pleased when the darkness came.

'Mam! One of my titties is bigger than the other,' she had called at dusk once.

'Oh never you mind!' her mother's weary voice had called from the washhouse. 'Just you wait a bit and some man'll knock 'em into size for you. Get off with you now to Granny Ackroyd's for the eggs. Hurry now!'

Weekly had never forgotten the dark lane alongside the pit mounds, it was part of her early childhood which remained with her all her life; so was the strange old woman who kept fowls in a yard right up against the brick kilns. The coal mine was just behind.

'Hurry up with you,' her mother's voice continued, 'the five o'clock bull's gone.' It was getting dark, the skeleton of the pit shaft, where the wheels turned, was crazy and black on the sky left red by the setting sun. All day and all night they heard the throb and pant of the engines and the noise of the wheels turning, taking the cage of men up out of the mine.

Granny Ackroyd's yard was pit dust and slag and sunflowers. The heads of the sunflowers were as big as Royal Worcester dinner plates and they grew like this out of this dust. Out of this nothing there also grew a very old pear tree. In spring Weekly stood pretending

she was being married in the cascade of white blossom, but later, when the fruits came, they were small and hard and dry and had no taste at all.

‘Yo’ must never take a tree for granted,’ Granny Ackroyd said, ‘same as yo’ must never take a person for granted. People and trees is special. Always look at the tops of trees as you would look into people’s hearts.’ Weekly used to try to look at the top of the old pear tree, especially if Granny Ackroyd was about, but it was over thirty feet high, really as big as a house. Sometimes Weekly wished they had a yard and a tree; a pear tree of her own would be nice she thought.

‘It’s old, that tree,’ Granny Ackroyd always said the same things, ‘planted it when I was a young woman. Take some pears.’ She offered the fruit as if she did not know how useless it was or, if she did know, refused to believe it.

Weekly forgot about her breasts almost as soon as she was aware of them. She was sent into service, and from then on hardly noticed her own body at all, being well covered with the uniform supplied by the Lady of the Big House. She was so busy having to learn and to do things for other people.

Later on when she saw young people on their way to the beach, she thought how lovely they looked. They

were so well made and graceful. It seemed to her that if she had ever looked like these girls, she had never had the chance, or the time, to either see herself as she was or to let other people see her.

The house where the Newspaper of Claremont Street had her rented room was large and had been built a long time ago for a big family. It had wide wooden verandahs all around it and, when she stepped onto the rough boards in the morning, she liked to think of the people who had built the house and the pleasure they must have had when they discovered that, at all times of the day, the verandah had some patches of sunshine, first in one place and then in another. Now the house was all divided up, a different life in every room and every life isolated from all other lives. She paid no rent for her room because, before she left for work every day, she swept and washed out the passages and the toilet, and she swept all the verandahs.

When the first grey light of the dawn filled the narrow space of her tall window, Weekly woke up and saw the sky of the new day waiting for her. Every morning she woke with an aching back. Sometimes she ached all over and had to ease herself out of bed, groaning. This stiffness seemed to get worse every day, but fortunately it wore off after some polishing and sweeping.



Some days it was so bad she thought she would not be able to get to work. While her body ached and was slow to see the reason for making haste to get up, her mind was alert. She knew she must go to work if she ever wanted to do the things she wanted most to do. And, with her eyes fixed on the changing sky, she planned which cupboards she would attack as soon as she stepped indoors at the Kingstons' and, before she put one foot out onto the smooth linoleum, she made a decision about the fate of the Chathams' shower curtain. She allowed herself the luxury of a few more moments, just a little time more, to think her favourite thoughts, and a glow of pleasure spread through her thin aching body. There was something she wanted to do more than anything else, and for this she needed money. For a long time she had been saving, putting money aside in little amounts till they became larger amounts. The growing sum danced before her, every morning growing a little more. For a few moments then, she thought about her money, calculating what she would be able to put in the bank this week. She was not very quick at arithmetic and it took her a little more time to do the addition.

She used the sky as a blackboard, and in her mind wrote the figures on the clouds of the morning. The

total sum came out somewhere halfway down her window. And then she rested on this total sum with the warm glow which had seemed to start somewhere in her chest, spreading and spreading over her body until, at last, she felt able to get off her bed.

Every morning it was the same and she groaned with every garment she put on. And, as she started to sweep, she was afraid she would not manage the work in the houses where she would be going. Slowly she swept, trying to force the ache out of her body.

'Hi Newspaper! Are you once weekly or twice weekly?' some boys hailed her from the street. She ignored them, forcing herself to sweep.

'Hi Newspaper!' they tried again. 'Did your nose get born first and then the rest of you grow all around it?' Weekly sent the leaves and dust swirling off the edge of the boards.

'Nope!' she said. 'I chose me own nose.' And they went on their way because there was no answer they could give to this.

Years ago a policeman had called at the front door, frightening her mother. Together she and her mother had hidden under the table. They had seen the shadow of the helmet on the frosted glass. When no one opened the door, the officer had come to the back door and,

letting himself in, called out, 'Missis Morris, Missis Morris you can come out from under there.' As Weekly and her mother scrambled from under the edges of the tablecloth he removed his helmet in front of the staring neighbours and stepped inside the small scullery.

'I'm here on duty Missis Morris,' he said, 'but you can boil up your kettle. I'll take a cup of tea at your table since I have taken this off.' Carefully he placed the helmet on the draining board and sat down.

The boys in the street reminded Weekly of other boys in other streets. The policeman had called that day, long ago, to warn her mother about Victor who, with other boys, was, as he put it, harassing the tram drivers on the number seven route. Weekly tried to dismiss the memory. Her mother had been terrified.

There was something special about sweeping. While she swept, all the time while her broom was moving, sweeping and sweeping, her mind found a freedom that might be quite unknown in any other kind of work.

Weekly felt the fresh air of the morning touch her cheeks, it brought with the forgetfulness of sweeping, green meadows and willow trees along the flat, grassy banks of a river. This river was known as the Factory River.

'It's called ground baiting,' Victor, hurrying on the

grass, told her. Half her size, he knew everything. She was older and protected him, but he was the one who ordered her about. 'Ground baiting,' he said, 'you get the fish to come to your part of the stream, away from them. See?' All along the river bank men were sitting huddled in the drizzle, hour after hour, hoping to catch fish. Together Weekly and her brother scattered meal on the slow moving water. The other fishermen – some had their wives silently beside them – took possession of their stretches of the river in humped up immovable shapes. Some of the wives had sour expressions.

In their enthusiasm Victor and Margie, as she was then, used up all their ground bait. They threw in all the ordinary bait and then their jam sandwiches and, without fish and without lunch, they set off hungry and wet and miserable for home. Victor consoled himself by throwing clods of grass and earth at his sister.

'Here! Take the bloody World! Here's another bloody World!' The muddy lumps flew towards her. Feeling sorry for this – she later liked to think that it was the reason – when they reached the main road, that he stepped hopefully into a dilapidated shop. As Weekly thought about the shop, she felt again some of the reverence she had had for her brother. This reverence was mixed with love, but more with shame when she

recollected, all too often now, her betrayal of the one person in the world she had loved.

In the shop that day Victor, with his refined accent and his knowledge of flattering words and gestures and movements, describing the plight of himself and his dear sister, lost and far from home, moneyless too because of a cruel uncle, and on their way to their sick mother, had extracted from a shopkeeper, so hardened by lack of business that her eyes had turned to little sharp stones, two stale doughnuts from under a glass jar on the counter.

‘Where’s the fish then?’ their mother was waiting for them at the end of the dingy street where they lived. Victor was ready for her with a neat little story about a poor old lady, with no home and no money, who had begged from them.

Quite soon after this life became more difficult for the Morrises. Mr Morris was kicked in the jaw by a dray horse and gangrene set in. After he died Betsy, Weekly’s elder sister, persuaded the family to emigrate. Betsy was in service with a family who were leaving for Australia, taking her with them.

Moving from one country to another had not suited Victor. Leaving his ambition for the grammar school behind him, he was not able to adapt easily to the

change of scenery and climate, and particularly to the people and the different attitudes he had to face. He seemed to feel the heat badly and he was too sensitive to the loneliness and the crude remarks showing lack of welcome to the new arrivals. Weekly realised much later, for she had not understood his behaviour then, his great disappointment, which he had never spoken about, at not going to the longed for grammar school where he had managed, by a mixture of intelligence and trickery, to gain a place.

Weekly and her mother were in service in a large house. House cleaning was the only work they knew. Between them, on swollen feet, they waited on Victor, cherishing him, because they knew no other way. And Victor, as he grew older, made his own life which they were obliged to hold in reverence because they did not understand it.

‘But how has he harassed the tram driver?’ Their mother’s cry, so long ago, was without answer. Was it the fireworks, the jumping-jacks or those bombs he’d made, she wanted to know.

The police officer tried to soothe her, telling her it was none of these things. He reminded her that he had made a friendly visit. He promised not to put his helmet back on till he was clear of their place and the

neighbours could see he had just stopped for tea. The harassment he said had been of the intellectual kind. But Weekly's mother had not been able to understand what that meant.

It was as if her mother's sigh persisted through the years, sadly and quietly, in the noise of the leaves fluttering in front of the broom. Weekly added her own sigh and then shook off the thoughts. It was such a long time ago now.

## *Two*

It was the time for Weekly to hurry out to her first house. In cast-off clothes of good quality – for, watching each other, no one in Claremont Street would have given her a garment which was worse than something someone else had given her – she was an unusual figure. All her clothes were well washed and well mended and completely out of date. She was tall and elderly and leaned forward when she walked. The sweeping had made her feel better.

Somehow the mornings had not changed since she was a girl. The big houses in those far-off days were all along the river. The water shone peacefully and the road curved around by the river. Through the trees it was possible to see the town on the far side of the wide expanse of water; clean and always looking as if asleep on the skyline. It was very different from the mean dirty streets they had come from. There, there had been blue