

Remember Me...

MELVYN BRAGG


SCEPTRE

FOR WANT OF A NAIL
THE SECOND INHERITANCE
THE CUMBRIAN TRILOGY:

The Hired Man

A Place in England

Kingdom Come

THE NERVE

WITHOUT A CITY WALL

THE SILKEN NET

AUTUMN MANOEUVRES

LOVE AND GLORY

JOSH LAWTON

THE MAID OF BUTTERMERE

A CHRISTMAS CHILD

A TIME TO DANCE

A TIME TO DANCE: the screenplay

CRYSTAL ROOMS

CREDO

THE SOLDIER'S RETURN

A SON OF WAR

CROSSING THE LINES

Non-fiction:

SPEAK FOR ENGLAND

LAND OF THE LAKES

LAURENCE OLIVIER

CUMBRIA IN VERSE (edited)

RICH: The Life of Richard Burton

ON GIANTS' SHOULDERS

THE ADVENTURE OF ENGLISH

12 BOOKS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Remember Me . . .

MELVYN BRAGG



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Dido: Death is now a welcome guest.

When I am laid in earth,

May my wrongs create

No trouble in thy breast.

Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.

Libretto by Nahum Tate for
Dido and Aeneas by Henry Purcell
from *The Aeneid* by Virgil

IN MEMORIAM

L.R.

PART ONE
MEETING

CHAPTER ONE

She was silhouetted against the log fire, sitting on the floor, her legs drawn elegantly to one side, her right arm as it were a prop, in her left hand the cigarette. When Joe saw her as he came, nervous through loneliness, into the grand drawing room of the riverside house, he went across to her tentatively but immediately, perhaps already sensing a fellow loneliness, captured by the dark silhouette, darkened further by the deep purple dress she wore, which, he would learn, was her only good dress. He was attracted across the quietly convivial room full of strangers by the sadness of her isolation and the space around her.

There was the mystery of her, from the beginning, the difference about her. Joe would often come back to that first image. It was not love at first sight. It proved to be not much of a conversation. He wanted to tell her that she looked like the engraving of Shelley in his book of the poems, but he could not summon up the nerve.

They smoked. He poured her a glass of red wine from the cheap bottle he had brought. He never could remember much of what they talked about but he always remembered not telling her, not then, that she looked like Shelley. Even many years later when it finally proved to be the time to tell her story, their story, to their daughter, to tell it in full as far as he could, it was this picture of her to which he returned, the silhouette, which made him want to cry out again for the violent death, the wounded life. He could find so much, fathomless, which came from that first accidental encounter. He did not know then that like him she was still numb and lost in the aftermath of a love which had taken almost too much to bear; he did not even sense that, and as for the rest she was and in ways remained as unknown as an undiscovered planet. Whereas before her, from the first he felt transparent; he believed she could understand everything about him. To the end, he held onto the conviction that she saw right through him.

The party went on around them but it was as if the volume had been turned down by someone aware that the two of them needed all the silence and stillness they could get to nurse the feeble pilot flame of this slight encounter. Nothing should have come of it. They were not meant to meet, he never felt that nor did she, nor did they pretend. But for a splicing of accidents they would never have met at all and yet, given the way this unsought fragile conversation was to wrench their lives, mark, brand and gut them, it came to seem impossible that their life could have been lived on any terms other than those to be set in motion in these unplotted moments. A million taunting reasons never to meet each other. Trajectories in different quarters of the universe. The worlds of their deeper past so far apart. All they had to build on was the temporary companionship of strangers. But the pilot flame stayed alive, that night, in the week before Christmas, in the rather rundown Victorian manor house by the Thames just outside Oxford, leased by American art students, log-lit, candlelit, everyone shadowed, the flickering lights stroking a glass or revealing the sudden fullness of a glance across the room.

In the early days, Joe had liked to dwell on the high odds that led to their meeting. It lent the glamour of the miraculous. Even sticking to the narrow window of that evening, so many exceptional factors had been required. She had stayed on in Oxford rather than return to France following another bitter exchange of letters, so bitter that for the first time in her life she would not spend that season in her own country with her own family. Jonathan, one of the Americans in the art school, had taken pity, knowing, as they all did, what had happened between Robert and herself, what a cruel breaking apart had been, and though this friendly soul did not know the worst of it he knew enough to seek her out and persuade her to come to Shillingford that evening where there was to be a gentle party for the leftovers and leftovers. Several students from their art school had missed her over the past weeks, he said

She was persuaded partly out of her good manners, partly because the American was kind; mostly, though, because the family she worked for was on holiday and the house was cold and its emptiness intensified her dread.

On that evening, Joe had been standing in front of the Oxfam shop in Broad Street wondering whether to go back to the library for a last couple of hours. For the first time he had stayed on at the university for an extra week. The excuse was that he needed to catch up on his work, but a stronger reason was that he was reluctant to go home to Wigton and see Rachel, whom he still loved, as happy now with someone else as she had been for so long with him. The Oxfam window could trap him. On late afternoon he had been convinced that Rachel would come to see him and he had gone to the station and waited until the last train arrived and departed and still he sat on the station bench as if he could will her to appear before him. On the way back that night he had stopped in front of this Oxfam shop, bewildered with his need for her, and looked at the rows and rows of second-hand paperbacks, attempting to staunch the bleed of hopeless passion by trying to memorise the titles and authors.

Roderick called him from across the street, clipped military syllables cracking through the icy air. Off to some party, sure Joe would be welcome, just grab a bottle at the off-licence next to the bus station. An American GI met at a concert, very bright, at the Ruskin School of Art. Party would be full of arty types but could be fun.

Yet that was no more than the tip of it, Joe would think later. He could so easily have walked back by the High Street and not the Broad. He could have stayed in the pub for another drink as he very nearly did. She could have changed her mind about the invitation as she had so often done about other things in the past few weeks. Roderick might not have spotted him across the street. He could have said 'no'. She could have been in another room and not silhouetted against the log fire. Someone else could have been talking to her. The possibility of their meeting could be sliced so thin it would disappear altogether like the thought of parallel lines meeting only in infinity which had once made him giddy. He could still sweat at the thought years on. What if he had missed her? If destiny meant anything surely they were destined not even to know of each other's existence let alone to meet, and yet out of this would come an embrace to the death: so perhaps, he thought, later, chance was their destiny.

It seemed very difficult to ask her name. 'Natasha,' she said and waited, but Joe took time to enjoy the name, the charm of those three syllables falling like quiet notes in a Romantic sonata, a name unique in Joe's personal experience and pronounced in a silver-toned English which managed to sound both pure and foreign.

'French?' he guessed.

The response was a barely perceptible smile.

'Joe,' he announced.

'That's American. GI Joe.'

'No it isn't!' He spotted no playfulness. 'Joe's plain English.' Once again the brief smile across features as pure and foreign as the accent. Again she waited. 'It's Jewish, to be fair,' he said. 'The colour of many colours.'

'That's Joseph. I prefer Joseph.'

His aunt Grace, who had aspirations, had wanted him to be called by his 'full name'. 'Call him Joseph and he'll get Joe,' she had warned, 'and Joe's common.'

'Joe it is, then,' said Sam, his father.

'Natasha's a great name.'

'It's not good enough for my aunts. But my mother was bohemian.'

Joe held tight to the fistful of questions her sentence provoked. It was as if there were a bowl brimful of mercury between them and he must not spill it. Bohemian!

‘Thomas Mann wrote a novel about Joseph,’ he said.

‘I’ve read only *Death in Venice*. I must go to Venice. I must.’

He caught something of urgency, even desperation, but it was too remote a cry to do anything but hear and faintly register, and again be excited by the foreignness and want for more, try to fix her face despite the failings of candlelight.

‘It did not get much further,’ he told their daughter, ‘and some of what I remember could well have been drawn from later encounters, or be made up, or be misremembering, or come from the desire to please you. But she always called me Joseph.’

Joe stayed the night. He was given a bed in a large room with two double beds. Don, the blond American painter who seemed to be in charge, was in the other bed.

‘Natasha Jeanne Prévost,’ said in answer to Joe’s question. ‘She’s been at the college for years. She’s an enigma.’

Joe wanted more than that but he did not know what he was looking for.

‘If you concentrate,’ said Don, after a long pause, ‘you can hear the Thames out there. Just close your eyes – that strengthens your hearing – and listen. Out there.’ They listened. Joe thought he heard something but he may have been trying to oblige his host who had so easily and generously offered the bed. ‘I used to imagine the Thames to be such a big river, when I read about it back home,’ Don said. ‘Something like the Mississippi. I couldn’t believe how small it was when I saw it. But now I think it’s a big river again because of the artists and the history. Does that make sense to you?’ Joe wanted to think it through and say something which sounded intelligent, as if Don were an examiner. ‘I’ll open the curtains,’ said Don. The moonlight lit up his nakedness: he was built like a boxer, Joe thought, not like an artist at all, a light heavyweight at least, and unashamed to stand ivory-white nude before the big window, which he opened. You yourself could be a painting, Joe thought.

Don went slowly back to his bed. The moonlight was a shaft between them and now Joe could hear something in the distance.

‘It’s the weir,’ Don said. ‘A boy was drowned there last fall. Another boy tried to rescue him and he got in trouble but they pulled him out in time.’ Don paused. Joe liked these pauses, they implied deeper meaning. They introduced a grain of drama. ‘What would make a boy risk his life to save another boy?’

‘You just do it, don’t you?’ Joe said. ‘You just – do it.’

‘I see that,’ said Don, in a rich American tone that reminded Joe of so many films and because of that made Don instantly familiar, friendly, to be liked and trusted. ‘Instinctive heroism. Dying for your comrade in arms.’ Again the pause, but the distant drama of the weir, the few glasses of wine, the newness of it all were making Joe sleepy, keen to burrow into the bed, squirrel down and defy the winter air. ‘Deeper than that,’ said Don, ‘it must be the love that the Bible says passes the understanding of women. Women don’t do what we do. For other women. Men can love men, don’t you think so, Joe?’

‘Yes.’ He thought of one of his friends at home in Wigton of whose adolescent friendship he had been so jealous and he thought of James, so discerningly understanding, with whom he had shared a room in his first year at Oxford. ‘I’m sure they can. You can even put your arm around their shoulder. I used to do that.’

‘And when you did that, was it a sort of love you felt, do you think? Would you call it that?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ said Joe. ‘There’s got to be lots of different sorts, haven’t there?’

‘But the intensity of voluntary love – not family – voluntary, is that always the same? Man or woman?’

This time the pause came from Joe and it lengthened into silence and the soft purr of his sleep.

Natasha always slept with the curtains open. She preferred the night.

She had come home the moment Jonathan had offered her a lift. The party had filled in time but there was nothing to keep her there. The art students, the genteel young English, had been discreet; the older Americans more awkward but then Natasha suspected they might be a little ashamed of what Robert had done to her. She had invited Jonathan in for a polite coffee but he had to pack, he said. Paris tomorrow and then Berlin with his sketch pad as a cover. After all, he said in his slow delivery which had always amused Natasha because she could never quite work out whether it was a heroically corrected stammer or a sly means of commanding and controlling the fullest attention, artists had long been anonymous in European capitals and he wanted to spy on the existentialists in Paris, sketch out the culture of the Cold War in Berlin, stitch the two together and see if he could place the piece in the *New Yorker*.

As he drove away to his digs in Walton Street he wished he had not mentioned Paris.

Natasha lodged in a tall, Georgian house in the Banbury Road and the three flights of stairs to her attic room were steep. She ought not to have felt so very weary after such a small effort, but when she closed the door of her room behind her she could have collapsed. She sat on the edge of the bed to undress and the clothes lay where they dropped.

Her portrait of Robert was where she had left it and full on to the moonlight. She should get out of bed and turn it to the wall but in the secrecy of the small room she could study it. It was unfinished. She could see its technical shortcomings. Unlike Robert, the other Americans and most of the English. Natasha had come to the Ruskin without any formal training beyond a modest talent encouraged by one of the nuns who had taught drawing at school. But the portrait had a strong look of him, Robert himself had admitted that and he was even more critical than Natasha herself. Sometimes, he said, technique can get in the way. The perfectly crafted thing can be perfectly dead. An ounce of true innerness can be worth a ton of accuracy. Better not to finish it, he said, this is as good as you’ll get.

He was the best artist in the Ruskin, they all said as much. He had picked her out, the real one, he had said, not like the others. Though she had been burned before and though she knew he was careless of women, she became his wilful accomplice. He had released her, thrillingly, from her self-imprisonment. She had surrendered to his promises and been helpless when they were broken, brutally broken. She had felt herself break with them. If she looked long enough, hard enough at the portrait maybe she would understand and begin to find a way out of this darkness. Her watch told her she had been in her room for less than ten minutes. It already seemed half the night and yet she wanted only to be here in the slow time of her lair, humiliated, hurt, adrift, looking for a place she could neither see nor reach.

She had called him Robert in the French way. At first he had liked that; then he had come to hate it. Perhaps she ought to have dropped it sooner and not teased him. He did not like being teased but she liked the reaction it provoked and the animation of anger. She brooded on the portrait, looking for explanations, looking for comfort. The faint light enriched the painting, she thought. She looked at the dark window panes that needed to be cleaned. Beyond the window were slated rooftops and below it the garden adjoining other gardens, winter dead, sealed in the city of learning sunk now in sleep inside

its beautiful and ancient walls of scholarship. Robert had involved her in that, too, with Jonathan, and a few American academics who threw around their ideas with a vigour that could make Natasha want to applaud. That group had gone out of her world now. Save for Jonathan, none of them had been seen since Robert had left her, without warning, just a note, a note, not even a letter.

She turned away from the portrait, put her face to the wall and huddled under the bedclothes, legs drawn up to try to squeeze out the misery by going back to unthinkingness, rocking herself slightly. There were no resources left. Misery was in every cell. Misery was her condition. It was beyond pointlessness now, even more than before. She wanted sleep. But even there, he would be waiting.

Joe walked quietly even though Don's loud snoring signalled deep sleep. Odd it did not wake up Don himself, Joe thought: he had been disturbed awake by the dawn light through the open window and the snoring had made it impossible to go back to sleep. It was an entertaining noise, though perhaps just for a short time. Don lay splayed on his back, mouth gargoyle open, blond hair mussed over his forehead, somehow incongruous that he was snoring, too young to snore.

The drawing room was a mess and Joe was glad to tidy up, to earn his stay, take away the glasses and wash them, empty the heaped ashtrays, clean out the grate. He liked being in a room so uncramped: it emanated ease and quiet wealth.

'Coffee?' Don was in the kitchen. Joe had put on the kettle for tea but he complied.

'Thanks, yes. Toast?'

'Sure. You done all this?' Don indicated the wine glasses washed and dried and set out neatly on the kitchen table. 'That's Northern British, isn't it? Like your accent. Not really English at all.'

Joe was unaccountably nervous and he did not know whether to be flattered or piqued.

'You guys are Celts,' said Don, 'so it isn't your fault.' He paused. 'You have a nice smile.' Joe felt it slide off his face. Don laughed and handed Joe the coffee. 'Let's go look at Ole Man River.'

They took the bus into Oxford at midday and Don insisted he came to see the poky, raffish Ruskin Art School tucked away in the back of the Ashmolean Museum. The American walked through the museum as if he owned it, Joe thought. He himself felt it was a waste not to examine some of the paintings and statues especially when he was with a real artist who could tell him about them, but Don ignored everything.

Don had produced Natasha's address and after a pie and a pint in the Lamb and Flag, Joe went to her house which was just a few hundred yards away. He had known since he left her that he would seek her out; their loneliness was a mutual field of force. As he walked out into the grey, low-cloud winter afternoon, enjoying the bite of the cold, he sensed that she would be there waiting for him.

The shrill doorbell startled her awake but she would not go down. It would not be Robert and she wanted to see no one else. When she was sure the visitor had given up, she did go down – to the kitchen where there was food. They had asked her to give the house 'a good clean' while they were away and they would be back in two days. She would start after a cup of coffee. But after the coffee and she looked through the window it began to snow and the prettiness of it, the lingering flakes of white, the sweetness of the snow, the pure white life in those unstained innocent flakes made her cry and cry so hard she could do nothing until night came back.

Their daughter wanted to know more about Shelley. Joe could recite a few lines and recall some of her life, but it was how he looked that she wanted to know. 'Hair swept back,' he said, 'far too long for the close-cropped male of post-war England and the style gave the poet a feminine look and Natasha's

hair was swept dashingly from her face in a similar manner. A broad high forehead. A strong nose, the “Bourbon nose” she was to call it. Face rather long and pale with a look of distinction in the slim lips and the eyes, just a little large, but so voluptuously and teasingly expressive. Even against the fire in silhouette, the candlelight had given me glimpses of the eyes and it was most likely,’ he said, ‘that it was what I saw there which would one day lead me to a life I could never have dreamed of.

‘But there were other photos from around that time,’ he said, ‘and sometimes she doesn’t look at all like Shelley. There’s none of that romantic brooding. She’s just smiling, so lovely, clear-eyed.’

He did not tell her that a disturbing dream had returned since he had begun to write, which had recurred often in his adolescence. In it he saw a dam which he had built across the river with other boys when he was seven or eight. In the field beside the dam a girl was buried, a girl he had somehow murdered, a girl he recognised. The field was always empty but he knew that one day they would arrive and dig her up.

Nor did he tell their daughter that he had sought out photographs recently as a preparation for this telling. They were in a drawer at the bottom of an old linen chest he used for storing finished work. He had not seen them for decades. There were packets of them. Some neatly labelled by Natasha, others not as neatly by himself. After just a few minutes, a look at the merest fraction, he had put them away. They were unbearable. Her look of such life.

CHAPTER TWO

He bought winter roses, deep red. Seven. The man in the market threw in the extra one for luck. The boy looked so spry, so clearly, eagerly, nervously on the gad. Joe walked through the near-empty, pre-term Oxford streets not sure whether it was better to hold the flowers down like a walking stick or up like an umbrella. He alternated. The deep red flowers were like a torch that late slate January afternoon, under the frozen busts which guarded the Sheldonian, past Trinity and Balliol, colleges no as familiar as Wigton pubs, names warm to him at last, in his final year. He turned to pass St Mary Magdalene's of the incense and the chanting in Latin and then the Martyrs' Memorial calm in stone where a few centuries ago red torches had burned men alive for their faith, and he headed for North Oxford and fabled dens of inimitable Oxford dons, including the two at whose house Natasha was the au pair. The Ashmolean was to his left, the Lamb and Flag pub, soon to be their favourite, to his right. On his rose-bearing journey to Natasha through the cold streets, he felt open, free, unencumbered.

His return to Wigton for the Christmas vacation had been undermined by sightings of Rachel. He decided to leave it early to come back to Oxford. To study for Finals was a good excuse, but there was also the tug of the thread of contact with Natasha from that first and only meeting. It had held through the cold break in the North and grown stronger in imagination. A phone call to Don had confirmed that Natasha was still in Oxford and had been ill over Christmas with 'something like influenza, more a depression, I'd guess'. When he pressed the bell he put the flowers behind his back.

This did not deceive Julia, who smiled but did not comment. Her smile widened when she took in his outfit: he had bought himself a canvas jacket with a fake fur collar and a pair of light brown corduroy thin-ribbed and tight.

'He looks about sixteen,' said Julia later in the drawing room to Matthew, who was almost through his annual Christmas read of the whole of Jane Austen. He did not look up. 'Like one of those town boys one sees on Saturday nights on the way to the dance.'

'And very nice too,' said Matthew, his head determinedly bowed.

'Oh, I agree. But for Natasha? Surely . . . ?'

'He can't be worse than Robert.' Still steadily moving through the prose, he added with precise dismissive conviction, 'Robert was a shit.'

'I disagree,' said Julia. 'He was a predator like a lot of men of his type at his age. He wanted an affair and then he would move on, he is a sort of sexual nomad. It was quite obvious to me.'

'From what I gather,' Matthew uplifted his head for a moment or two, 'he gave wholly the opposite impression to Natasha.'

'She always expects too much,' said Julia. 'And she is an adult.'

'I'll stick,' said Matthew, 'with shit.' And his eyes returned to the pages of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Julia picked up her copy of *Death on the Nile*.

Her accent, like that of her husband, was careful, clear, academic in its exactness, eschewing 'upper' but espousing pure. They would have wanted the approval of Jane Austen. Julia looked the part, Joe was to think, as he got to know her, extremely pretty, plainly served, morally earthed, amused.

'May I ask your name?'

'Joe, Joseph, Joe. Richardson.'

'I presume you are a friend of Natasha?'

‘Well . . . not really . . . We’ve met. Once . . .’

‘She’s at the top of the house, the room on the left. Come in.’ She stood aside. Joe blushed as he revealed the flowers. Noting this, Julia said, ‘What lovely roses. I’m sure she’ll approve.’ He was nodded through.

‘I noticed that *Lady Chatterley* was sticking out of the pocket of that dreadful jacket,’ she said. ‘Rather obvious.’

‘Or merely coincidental,’ said Matthew, and read on.

‘I’ve never been in an artist’s studio,’ said Joe.

The bed was unmade as he thought it should be. The floors were bare boards, quite right, and clothes were not in a cupboard but hung on a rail in full view. There were saucers used as ashtrays and paint brushes sticking out of coffee mugs. There were two old easy chairs, one of which looked very unreliable. The sink was stashed with unwashed dishes. The day was darkening and the light was on. The central bulb was bare. Best of all, Joe thought, was the easel, on which was a canvas barely begun. None of the paintings stacked around the easel or on the walls was framed and Joe was soon to be told that none of them was finished.

To Joe the room was exotic. There was even a sloping ceiling. And Natasha fitted the part; a black dressing gown, sloppily tied, no slippers, cigarette, trying to force the stalks of the seven roses into a hastily rinsed milk bottle. Three was the limit. She snapped the stalks off the remaining four and put them in a coffee mug next to the brushes against the bare window. The milk bottle went on the small table beside her bed, displacing the plate bearing the half-eaten sandwich. Joe had never seen flowers look so artistically arranged.

‘They look great,’ he said, ‘don’t they?’

Natasha drew the dressing gown around her as she sat down and turned on a small red-shaded lamp which stood on the floor. In the ruby light the studio, Joe thought, became a set.

‘Look,’ she said, pointing to the mug of amputated roses next to the window. ‘They transform the balance of the whole room.’ She turned. ‘And those three . . .’ She looked at the three blood-headed roses in the milk bottle, arrested, for a moment, by the fact of them. The velvet heads still upright, green stalks in clear water. She could understand why painters would want to capture them though still lifes were not for her. ‘Yet you think – they’re dying. Once they are cut they begin to die,’ she murmured.

The soft rosy light from the lamp had recaptured some of the silhouetted beauty he had nursed throughout his absence. When he had come into the room he had been rather thrown by her pallor, the sweat-flattened hair, the listlessness. Now that very evidence of illness, softened and made beguiling by the low seductive light, attracted him afresh, gave him an impetus of concern.

‘Don said you hadn’t been well.’

‘Did you see Don?’

‘No. I phoned him.’

‘You spent that night at Shillingford?’

‘Yes. He put me up. It was very good of him.’

Natasha smiled at the tone: so innocent. But did that mean it was to be believed? Joe felt the appraisal.

‘I like that,’ he said, pointing to the portrait of Robert. ‘I really like that.’ He fixed his gaze on the portrait, trying to squeeze as much out of it as he possibly could. Natasha glanced at him as he stood

unawares, and caught her first glimpse of an energy and an intensity which had so comprehensively drained out of her.

‘He must be a friend,’ said Joe, and there was an intimation of jealousy. ‘A good friend?’

‘He was.’

Natasha went across to the bed and sat against a heap of dented pillows.

‘Not any more?’

She looked at him and for a moment or two everything was in the finest balance. She thought she might throw out this unfeeling stranger in his stupid jacket or just cry: but she could not impose that on him. The three roses stood between them.

‘There’s some wine in a bottle by the sink,’ she said, eventually, and Joe was relieved, though he did not know why. ‘Use teacups.’

He washed them carefully, delighted again, and sat on the armchair nearest the bed. They smoked. For some time Natasha said nothing. She had pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them, the motion of smoking being the only movement. She wished he would go away. Tiredness was pulling her into unconsciousness like a relentless undertow and she did not want to find the means to resist it.

Joe had felt a strong scent of danger when the portrait had been discussed. It was better to say nothing. It was as if Natasha had imposed on him a sudden glimmering of wisdom. Before this encounter he would have rushed to fill every void with words. Now he sensed that he scarcely existed for her and that realisation made him breathe softly, stay still, just stay. Staying was the best he could hope for.

She looked around for the saucer to offload the collapsing column of ash and noticed him.

‘Why did you come?’

‘Don said you hadn’t been very well.’

Why had Don not come? Or any of the others who were in Oxford over Christmas? But these were weary questions, not seeking an answer. She thought less of herself even for letting them crawl across her exhausted mind. She was truly glad they had not come. She wanted none of them. But this stranger who had walked in, why had he come? Was it not just naïf, unthinking, without a history? Or had she been made sentimental by the gift of the blood-headed winter roses?

‘Thank you for the roses,’ she said and in such a way that Joe stood up to leave.

He tried to think up a telling, witty last line, but blurted out,

‘It would be great to see you again. We could go to *Wild Strawberries*. Ingmar Bergman. I get two complimentary tickets because I review films for *Cherwell* – it’s the university newspaper. Same time tomorrow?’

He would spend some time throughout the rest of the evening burning with retrospective embarrassment, closely analysing those clumsy sentences and finding every single component wrong, wrong, wrong.

Natasha made a small gesture with the cigarette. Contempt? Tiredness? Certainly it said, ‘Please go.’

He closed the door quietly and though a burden was lifted from her when he left the room, there was also the faintest regret, for his openness, the excitement he tried to conceal with such limited success. That truly terrible jacket.

She took the flowers across to the bin beside the sink but then decided to keep them. Watch them die.

The smell of them brought no memories, filled her with no sweet sensation of that natural benediction which came from herbs and flowers. Freshly cut lavender was the only potion which could move her. There was that photograph of her mother holding a large bunch of lavender, smiling over her shoulder, dressed like the peasant women in Provence before the war. Natasha looked at it only rarely. It was too hard.

The sink was such a mess. She turned on the unreliable hot water tap, and looked around for washing-up powder. She had let the place go. As the water ran, she began to tidy up, slowly, moving like an old woman, prepared to quit at any time.

Much later, when she was brooding yet again on their beginnings, she came to believe that Joe's first awkward visit may well have helped save her.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Just as shiny-faced,’ Julia reported, ‘and still that dreadful jacket.’

‘I must,’ said Matthew, who was preparing himself for *Emma* which he always kept until last, ‘catch a glimpse.’

‘You must. I have never seen such an appalling garment.’

‘I meant of him,’ said Matthew. ‘Dick?’

‘Joseph she calls him.’ Julia frowned. ‘Joe is much more appropriate.’

‘How would you defend that?’

‘You know perfectly well what I mean.’

Joe was relieved that Natasha’s room was tidier. The more he had thought on its bohemianism, and the more he had thought of their meeting constantly, the thinner the scruffy glamour had worn. Disorder excited him but only in small doses. There were still the unfinished canvases and the easel, the unorthodox wardrobe and what he had named ‘the forbidden portrait’. It was still properly artistic, he thought, a real studio, but no longer a mess. The bed was made. The seven roses were reunited, all shorn now, in a large jam jar beside the tubes of paint.

He had taken down the number on the phone in the hall on his way out the previous evening and called just before lunch to leave a message that he would be there at five. To be fair and give her the chance not to be there? Or pretend not to be there? Or be there? In those first days Joe had not much of a clue as to what he was doing or why. He was like a puppy dog in a wood, blundering after scents which might be dead, might not, just enough to keep it keen. He had small expectations.

Natasha noted that she was pleased to see him. For the company, for the gust of life that came through the door, for the smile which so openly liked her? It was a brief and superficial stroke of pleasure, like a flat stone merely skimming across the surface of a lake. Yet she was honest enough and so acutely attuned to her own depression to notice and to register this positive effect of his presence and be grateful.

‘Feeling better?’

She nodded, not wanting to disappoint him.

‘You look better.’

A long woven wine-coloured skirt bought in the market in Avignon, a clean white shirt open at the throat, a thick college scarf draped as a shawl, the lightest rub of lipstick, the pallor softened as her back was to the window.

‘Which college is that?’

Natasha looked at the scarf as if surprised to find it there. ‘Roland gave it to me,’ she said and shook her head.

‘Who’s Roland?’

‘You are nosy.’ The flickered smile only partly reassured him. She drew deeply on her cigarette and Joe reached for his own. She exhaled the smoke evenly, in perfect lines, Joe observed, like those sharp rays of light that shot down through a mass of cloud, staircases to heaven they had been called, staircases to her lips. He smiled more broadly, encouraged by the warmth which was in him, which came from the force of attention he was paying her, though from a distance, still circling.

‘Roland is the janitor at the college. He finds lost property in the museum and after a few months he gives it to us. Jonathan says that Roland gave him a packet of contraceptives just before Christmas.’

One had been used.'

Joe kept his mouth shut and blushed. In the Ashmolean Museum? Where?

'I've got the tickets.' He patted his jacket pocket, unsure why he needed the reinforcement of miming. 'It starts at six-ten.'

'Six-ten.' She repeated the numbers mockingly, and waited.

'We'll miss the trailers.'

'I see.'

'Which I like. I like trailers . . . usually . . . Not always.'

'Six-ten. Now it is five-fifty-two.'

She stood up and Joe's heart leaped to see her stand, again silhouetted, this time against the window which brought in the last light from a dying winter sun. He saw that she was wearing leather boots.

'You look like a Cossack,' he said. 'Have you read *The Cossacks*? I think it's his best.'

'You are funny,' she said and Joe felt complimented by the first warmth in her tone.

In the cinema Natasha used the celluloid-lit darkness and the comfort of the thin audience to float, to be borne up above the pain, to let the images on the screen give her just enough of a drug to stir into the painkillers taken before Joe came, to numb the ravenous grief. Occasionally her attention would be caught by the adolescent girls in the elaborate white dresses of a distant time, and memories of photographs and of her own childhood would surface to remind her of past losses, missed chances of happiness; or the bewildered expression of the old professor would be transferred onto a recollection of her father and the world of the film would become a dream, welcomed because it eased the pressure of grief at what Robert had done. Without finding the opportunity to object, she was guided to a small restaurant that Joe and Roderick used occasionally. It was cheap but the crisp tablecloths were in a red and white checked pattern and she could see the place was well cleaned. The woman who served was Spanish. On the walls were the accoutrements of matadors and two posters of the Bull Ring in Seville. There was a guitar hanging next to the door to the kitchen. It was the most sophisticated and romantic restaurant that Joe knew.

Natasha's sweet smile as she sat down at a corner table – the place was quite full but this table was produced like a special treat – confirmed to Joe that he had made the right choice. The waitress came and with a flourish she lit the thick red wax-dripped candle stuck in the dead bottle of Mateus rosè. She stood back, her native costume enlivened by the glow, and bowed her head slightly at Joe's beam of applause.

'Bravo!' said Natasha, and the women held each other's gaze for a moment and then, in a slightly different tone which appeased and convinced the waitress, 'Truly: bravo,' Natasha repeated and held out a cigarette to the candle, twirling it slowly in the yellow flame. An understanding had been reached.

After the paella – they had only one course and Natasha scarcely ate – and house red wine, two glasses for Joe, one for Natasha, he sat back proprietorially with coffee and a cigarette, glowing with hope.

'My father teaches . . . like that old professor in the film.'

'My father wanted to be a teacher,' Joe said. 'A village schoolmaster.'

It was as if she had not heard him.

'He is ill now,' she continued. 'He has been made ill!' The snap of the sentence alerted Joe to instant concern.

‘I’m sorry. What is it . . . ?’

She shook her head, chiding herself, not Joe. ‘The film you made with your friends. Was Ingmar Bergman your inspiration?’

‘It was a bit of a failure really,’ Joe murmured. Somehow – he could not work out why – she put a new and testing perspective on what he had done. He had hoped she had forgotten his nervous boasting on the way to the cinema. ‘We thought it was existentialist.’

‘What do you know about existentialism?’

‘English existentialism.’ He tried to grin. ‘We put jokes in. They didn’t come off.’

‘You should see your expression.’

Joe looked around as if for cover.

‘You are so disappointed. Like a little boy. About your film.’

‘That’s what I’m going to do,’ he said, provoked to boast but avoiding her mocking eyes. ‘I’ll make a film. I’ll do it one day. I’ll get the bill,’ he said and Natasha regretted her teasing.

‘We must share.’

‘No. My treat.’ Natasha reached out as if to restrain his arm from going to his wallet. ‘No. I’m flush.’ He looked around for the waitress.

‘She is in the kitchen,’ said Natasha. ‘It is not normal for a woman to be the waitress in a restaurant like this.’

‘She told me about that. Her husband’s a better cook, she said. And he never wanted to be a waiter. She likes doing it: she says she couldn’t do it in Spain, but I don’t know. They met in Seville when they were at school. They left because of Franco. She’s called Carmen – like the opera. That’s how she tells you – “I’m Carmen-like-the-opera-in-Seville.” She once said she was my Spanish mother!’

‘You know all about these people,’ Natasha said. ‘That is good.’

‘Well,’ Joe threw an explanation over his embarrassment, ‘Roderick and I have been here a few times.’

‘You make it sound like an excuse. Not everybody who comes here will be interested to know what you know. And you know much more. Don’t you? Why is that?’

‘My mother and father . . .’ He changed his mind and said no more.

As they were about to leave, Carmen came to the door with them. To Natasha she presented a small faced white carnation. To Joe she said, most solemnly and in a stage whisper, with a possessive hand on his arm, ‘She is grand, Joseph . . .’ And looked deeply into his eyes.

Grand? Missing its Spanish meaning, Joe rather jibbed at the word. Grand was nowhere near right. They went out into the cold.

‘I can walk by myself from here.’

‘I’ll set you back.’

‘“Set” me?’

‘Take you.’

‘“Set” is better. But no. Please. And thank you for a lovely evening . . . Please.’

Suddenly she had to go. The front of manners fell away. Weariness engulfed her.

She left him and he watched her walking through the yellow pools of lamplight along the empty Oxford pavement, the clicking of her boots finally fading away and still he stood for some moments, relishing her absence.

He was confident that they would meet again: she had already become such an essential presence in his life. He would make it happen.

Over the next few days she would not see him.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Julia, ‘but she’s not at all well.’

All the more reason to see her, Joe thought, all the more reason to be with her.

‘I’ll take those up to her.’ Joe handed over the six red roses. ‘You’re very sweet.’

He did not want to be sweet but let it pass.

‘Will you tell her I’m asking after her?’

‘Of course.’

They stood as if they were on a vital narrow bridge challenging each other to see who would give way first. Noises of children from within the house settled the matter.

‘They’re back from their grandmother’s,’ said Julia. ‘Peace is at an end. I must fly.’

Although she shut the door gently, she had a twinge of conscience as if she were unfairly shutting in his face. She was starting to like him although she thought him unsuitable.

‘He does seem devoted to you. I might even say obsessed,’ Julia said to Natasha as she picked up clothes and tidied up the room which had soon subsided into slovenliness. ‘He’s very sweet,’ and she added, with emphasis, ‘he’s becoming a limpet.’

Natasha looked at her and said, ‘Please keep the flowers. I can’t stand them.’ The little outing with Joe seemed to have accentuated and not eased the remorseless gnawing on her wound. The glint of light that evening had been extinguished minutes after she had left the restaurant and she found herself at once utterly consumed by her loss. She knew that Julia was being kind but she wanted Julia gone. She needed all the space around her to be empty to cope with these relentless surging tides of darkness.

‘I’m exhausted,’ said Julia. She and Matthew had come together to listen to the headlines of the news on the radio, to have a final (and in Julia’s case her first) drink of the day and to discuss what, as atheists, they liked to call their parish notices. ‘One doesn’t anticipate the au pair becoming more of a burden than the children she has been employed to help organise or the house she is supposed to keep clean.’

‘Natasha is not one of nature’s skivvies,’ said Matthew, taking care not to over-soda the whisky.

‘I appreciate that.’ Julia filled up her tumbler with a quantity of tap water guaranteed to drown the modest tot of scotch. The coal fire was low but still warm; the yellow side lamps threw cosy shadows across the well-proportioned room; the few paintings and the regiments of read books were a reassurance of arrival. Academic North Oxford was Julia’s Arcadia.

‘We are in *loco parentis*’, said Matthew, removing his spectacles to mark the end of another day’s hard reading.

‘Others did not think as we do.’ Julia had protected him from Natasha’s more lurid stories of a bleak life below stairs as au pair to other Oxford intellectuals of modest means who aspired to the post-war luxury of servants through the cheap and exploited labour of young foreign girls ‘learning English’.

‘That makes it all the more incumbent on us,’ said Matthew.

‘Quite frankly I’m worried about her,’ said Julia. ‘She’s been in Oxford for ages. She won’t take any of the exams at the Ruskin. She shows no ambition and no sense of direction and the small sum she gets from her parents barely keeps her going.’

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