

Once the trembling arrived in Clarice's body, it did not leave. It dwelled there. Sometimes it was slight, hardly noticeable, but not so she could forget it; other times, it was as if she were just then emerging dripping from the bay on untrustworthy legs. It was always there, thrumming in counterpoint to other pulses that threaded through life and were its secret vital energy. Her shaking affected things around her in such a way that nothing was left still or slack. It gave a breathtaking momentum to certain ideas.

The light was excessive when Percy did the honours and took the photograph of the Meldrumites. He was thoroughly one of them by then. The artists were uproariously arrayed on the lawn of their ardent admirer, Mrs Hamlin. Under the sun, a tablecloth, a handkerchief, a woman's high-collared shirt, a rather incongruous goat were all celestial; Clarice was dazzled by so many white forms, containers of light. There was the dizzying suspension that precedes an Event and it cost her a great effort to control the trembling. She concentrated hard, gritting her teeth, to stop it from showing.

After the picture was taken, wine was drunk. There was much amusement. It was music that persuaded her to drink, divine coils of Debussy unspooling from a Victrola through an open window. The Debussy was followed by music that was new to her—faintly but persistently troubling, liquid; it released something in her that had its own obscure progression. And the crimson wine, too, spawned awkward impulses that had something in common with the unsightly, indelible rings it left on the tablecloth and the dark, ambiguous mark at the corner of her mouth that she would notice soon after in a dressing-table mirror. She had drunk two or maybe three whole glasses to soften the idea of Mum at home, having a bad day without her daughter. The wine probably induced the migraine, though the beating of her head took time to

distinguish itself from excitement. It was a marvellously bohemian afternoon, pain holding her skull like a large, bold hand.

Meldrum, dressed in his usual dinner suit, held court on the lawn. The company seemed by turns a circus troupe under the direction of their ringmaster and the devotees of a sage. He was indulgent, the benevolent patriarch. It was rumoured that he had a playful, adventurous side, a penchant for climbing trees; she tried to picture him in a tree. Were he a fraction more elastic, less absolute in his thinking, he would have been everything one hoped for in a father. The sea was a deep-blue glory aching to be painted.

The throbbing of her brain became more insistent, as something tightened in her or unravelled, and an impromptu party melody sprang from somewhere. It was a gentleman she did not know, playing Irish jigs on a fiddle; the goat was worried. At a later stage, Percy told a story about a drunken novice's attempt to shear a sheep. Everyone was in stitches and Clarice's belly hurt, too, as she watched his fine hands embellishing the story.

When Bella came to stand beside him, his eyes fled up to the clear sky.

The sugary scent of perfume was inescapable, as were the lower, robust smells of freshly cut grass and sea salt. The entire afternoon was like the children's game, where one spun around and around, as fast as possible, kept spinning, although a collapse was coming and the degree of its severity steadily worsening. It was curious how eager one was to abandon orientation and balance for speed and its risks; the freedom of lost control was intoxicating, hence one's fateful inclination for it.

'Clarice, are you feeling well?' the hostess asked.

Was she wincing from the headache or smiling strangely? The gaudy brooch that held Mrs Hamlin's dress in place seemed expensive.

‘I think I have a migraine. But what a delightful party! I don’t know when I’ve had such a gay time.’

‘Would you like to lie down inside for a little while? The guest bed is made up. A bit of rest?’

Clarice would sooner not have separated herself from the rare entertainment, but she had begun to screw up her eyes in the forceful sunshine. The hostess saw this mix of reluctance and discomfort and took Clarice firmly by the arm. She was led inside. Mrs Hamlin’s ardour for artists might have been an extreme sort of envy; nonetheless, she was kind and Clarice liked her.

‘Sorry for the trouble. I don’t usually drink. That’s probably it.’

‘Yes, probably. Or the heat. This climate certainly isn’t easy on the nerves. But don’t worry, my dear. A little lie-down will do you a world of good.’

The richly appointed house was a cool blur.

‘Thank you so much,’ Clarice said two or three times, ‘I’m really so sorry for the bother.’

Mrs Hamlin helped her to ease off her shoes and get settled on a bed.

Following instructions, she took the pins out of her hair, while her hostess went for a damp washcloth and a glass of water. Shortly after, Clarice already in the dark of her eyelids, the washcloth came down soothingly on her forehead.

‘You’re lovely,’ Mrs Hamlin reflected, patting Clarice’s hair. ‘Such skin.’ Then she whispered, ‘You could make a man very happy. Stay here as long as you like.’

A short sleep carried away much of the pain or transformed it into something thicker but airier. Clarice noted this when she was startled awake. She listened.

Waves sounding against the beach, voices that were childlike in their pleasure, the fiddle. She wriggled up, so that she was leaning against the end of the bed.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the dresser mirror, seeing what Mrs Hamlin thought of as good looks: fine features and milky paleness, ravenous eyes giving away an embarrassing, exaggerated sensitivity. Her hand dipped beneath her hair to massage the nape of her neck. She was boiling.

And there he was, finally, in the mirror.

Percy exhaled raggedly.

When he closed the door and faced her, she saw his profile in the mirror.

‘I didn’t mean to scare you. Sorry. I couldn’t find you.’ He seemed winded.

‘Mrs Hamlin said you weren’t feeling well.’

‘It’s just,’ she said. ‘It was just. A little ...’

He gave a slight nod.

Becoming aware, perhaps, of how they looked side by side in the mirror, of her disordered state and his towering over it, he sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her.

‘Are you any better?’ His usual manner was altered. ‘Do you need anything? Can I get you anything?’

‘I’m alright,’ she said, still grappling with the dissonance of waking; it sounded like a lie.

He twisted to look at her. It was a difficult position to sustain. He looked away, and back.

He put a finger briefly to his lips and then used it to wipe away the red residue of wine he had discovered at the side of her mouth.

His hand did not withdraw right away and she turned her head to kiss it. This was not audacity—she had no choice in the matter. She took his hand, as if it were a surprising new invention, and drew him to bring his mouth to the place his finger had just encountered. It happened fast.

The kiss. A surprisingly assertive flavour of tobacco. And immediately after, the taste of his own exotic mouth and his desire for her. It was neither her first nor her last kiss, but she remembers it at the end: the great heat, the unveiling, the blind tunnelling from one interior world to another. Her head drummed gently. They were clammy, anxious and quiet; Percy gripped her hands, her shoulders, her waist. She too wanted to hold him fast.

She cherished the photograph. She thought of the French term *chéri* that began the dear word cherish with its hint of bed-warmth and sweet red fruit and love's kisses. The photograph had been her comfort on many nights, so many that the others were the exception to solitude's rule; the hard-edged square of paper was too often the only material embodiment of Percy to fill her hands. She was not overly attached to the physical world, fortunately. Or rather, she was so deeply enmeshed in it that on some precious occasions she could look quite through it.

It was appropriate that Percy did not appear in the photograph. He haunted it in the haunting way of absence, as intimately and invisibly as a maker haunts his creation. He was its gaps and hollows, its longing emptiness.