

The Last Time

The last time I saw him was in Ballinasloe station, 1953, his long figure hugged into a coat too big for him. Autumn was imminent; the sky grey, baleful. A few trees had become grey too; God, my heart ached. The tennis court beyond, silent now, the river close, half-shrouded in fog. And there he was, Jamesy, tired, knotted, the doctor's son who took me out to the pictures once, courted me in the narrow timber seats as horns played in a melodramatic forties film.

Jamesy had half the look of a mongol, half the look of an autistic child, blond hair parted like waves of water reeds, face salmon-colour, long, the shade and colour of autumnal drought. His father had a big white house on the perimeter of town—doors and windows painted as fresh as crocuses and lawns gloomy and yet blanched with perpetually new-mown grass.

In my girlhood I observed Jamesy as I walked with nuns and other orphans by his garden. I was an orphan in the local convent, our play-fields stretching by the river at the back of elegant houses where we watched the nice children of town, bankers' children, doctors' children, playing. Maria Mulcahy was my name. My mother, I was told in later years, was a Jean Harlow-type prostitute from the local terraces. I, however, had hair of red which I admired in the mirror in the empty, virginal-smelling bathroom of the convent hall

where we sat with children of doctors and bankers who had to pay three pence into the convent film show to watch people like Joan Crawford marry in bliss.

Jamesy was my first love, a distant love.

In his garden he'd be cutting hedges or reading books, a face on him like an interested hedgehog. The books were big and solemn-looking—like himself. Books like *War and Peace*, I later discovered.

Jamesy was the bright boy though his father wanted him to do dentistry.

He was a problem child, it was well known. When I was seventeen I was sent to a draper's house to be a maid, and there I gathered information about Jamesy. The day he began singing 'Bye Bye Blackbird' in the church, saying afterwards he was singing it about his grandmother who'd taken a boat one day, sailed down the river until the boat crashed over a weir and the woman drowned. Another day he was found having run away, sleeping on a red bench by the river where later we wrote our names, sleeping with a pet fox, for foxes were abundant that year.

Jamesy and I met first in the fair green. I was wheeling a child and in a check shirt he was holding a rabbit. The green was spacious, like a desert. *Duel in the Sun* was showing in town and the feeling between us was one of summer and space, the grass rich and twisted like an old nun's hair.

He smiled crookedly.

I addressed him.

'I know you!' I was blatant, tough. He laughed.

'You're from the convent.'

'I'm working now!'

'Have a sweet!'

'I don't eat them. I'm watching my figure!'

'Hold the child!'

I lifted the baby out, rested her in his arms, took out a rug and sat down. Together we watched the day slip, the sun steadying. I talked about the convent and he spoke about *War and Peace* and an uncle who'd died in the Civil War, torn apart by horses, his arms tied to their hooves.

'He was buried with the poppies,' Jamesy said. And as though

to remind us, there were sprays of poppies on the fair green, distant, distrustful.

'What age are you?'

'Seventeen! Do you see my rabbit?'

He gave it to me to hold. Dumb-bells, he called it. There was a fall of hair over his forehead and by bold impulse I took it and shook it fast.

There was a smile on his face like a pleased sheep. 'I'll meet you again,' I said as I left, pushing off the pram as though it held billy-cans rather than a baby.

There he was that summer, standing on the bridge by the prom, sitting on a park bench or pawing a jaded copy of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*.

He began lending me books and under the pillow I'd read Zola's *Nana* or a novel by Marie Corelli, or maybe poetry by Tennyson. There was always a moon that summer—or a very red sunset. Yet I rarely met him, just saw him. Our relationship was blindly educational, little else. There at the bridge, a central point, beside which both of us paused, at different times, peripherally. There was me, the pram, and he in a shirt that hung like a king's cloak, or on cold days—as such there often were—in a jumper which made him look like a polar bear.

'I hear you've got a good voice,' he told me one day.

'Who told you?'

'I heard.'

'Well, I'll sing you a song,' I sang 'Somewhere over the Rainbow', which I'd learnt at the convent.

Again we were in the green. In the middle of singing the song I realized my brashness and also my years of loneliness, destitution, at the hands of nuns who barked and crowded about the statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague in the convent courtyard like seals on a rock. They hadn't been bad, the nuns. Neither had the other children been so bad. But God, what loneliness there'd been. There'd been one particular tree there, open like a complaint, where I spent a lot of time surveying the river and the reeds, waiting for pirates or for some beautiful lady straight out of a Veronica Lake movie to come sailing up the river. I began weeping in the green that day, weeping loudly.

There was his face which I'll never forget. Jamesy's face changed from blank idiocy, local precociousness, to a sort of wild understanding.

He took my hand.

I leaned against his jumper; it was a fawn colour.

I clumsily clung to the fawn and he took me and I was aware of strands of hair, bleached by sun.

The Protestant church chimed five and I reckoned I should move, pushing the child ahead of me. The face of Jamesy Murphy became more intense that summer, his pink colour changing to brown. He looked like a pirate in one of the convent film shows, tanned, ravaged.

Yet our meetings were just as few and as autumn denuded the last of the cherry-coloured leaves from a particular house-front on the other side of town, Jamesy and I would meet by the river, in the park—briefly, each day, touching a new part of one another. An ankle, a finger, an ear lobe, something as ridiculous as that. I always had a child with me so it made things difficult.

Always too I had to hurry, often racing past closing shops.

There were Christmas trees outside a shop one day I noticed, so I decided Christmas was coming. Christmas was so unreal now, an event remembered from convent school, huge Christmas pudding and nuns crying. Always on Christmas Day nuns broke down crying, recalling perhaps a lost love or some broken-hearted mother in an Irish kitchen.

Jamesy was spending a year between finishing at school and his father goading him to do dentistry, reading books by Joyce now and Chekhov, and quoting to me one day—overlooking a garden of withered dahlias—Nijinsky's diaries. I took books from him about writers in exile from their countries, holding under my pillow novels by obscure Americans.

There were high clouds against a low sky that winter and the grotesque shapes of the Virgin in the alcove of the church, but against that monstrosity the romance was complete I reckon, an occasional mad moon, Lili Marlene on radio—memories of a war that had only grazed childhood—a peacock feather on an Ascendancy-type lady's hat.

'Do you see the way that woman's looking at us?' Jamesy said

one day. Yes, she was looking at him as though he were a monster. His reputation was complete: a boy who was spoilt, daft, and an embarrassment to his parents. And there was I, a servant girl, talking to him. When she'd passed we embraced—lightly—and I went home, arranging to see him at the pictures the following night.

Always our meetings had occurred when I brushed past Jamesy with the pram. This was our first night out, seeing that Christmas was coming and that bells were tinkling on radio; we'd decided we'd be bold. I'd sneak out at eight o'clock, having pretended to go to bed. What really enticed me to ask Jamesy to bring me to the pictures was the fact that he was wearing a new Aran sweater and that I heard the film was partly set in Marrakesh, a place that had haunted me ever since I had read a book about where a heroine and two heroes met their fatal end in that city.

So things went as planned until the moment when Jamesy and I were in one another's arms when the woman for whom I worked came in, hauled me off. Next day I was brought before Sister Ignatius. She sat like a robot in the Spanish Inquisition. I was removed from the house in town and told I had to stay in the convent.

In time a job washing floors was found for me in Athlone, a neighbouring town to which I got a train every morning. The town was a drab one, replete with spires.

I scrubbed floors, my head wedged under heavy tables: sometimes I wept. There were Sacred Heart pictures to throw light on my predicament but even they were of no avail to me; religion was gone in a convent hush. Jamesy now was lost, looking out of a window I'd think of him but like the music of Glenn Miller he was past. His hair, his face, his madness I'd hardly touched, merely fondled like a floating ballerina.

It had been a mute performance—like a circus clown. There'd been something I wanted of Jamesy which I'd never reached; I couldn't put words or emotions to it but now from a desk in London, staring into a Battersea dawn, I see it was a womanly feeling. I wanted love.

'Maria, you haven't cleaned the lavatory.' So with a martyred air I cleaned the lavatory and my mind dwelt on Jamesy's pimples, ones he had for a week in September.

The mornings were drab and grey. I'd been working a year in Athlone, mind disconnected from body, when I learned Jamesy was studying dentistry in Dublin. There was a world of difference between us, a partition as deep as war and peace. Then one morning I saw him. I had a scarf on and a slight breeze was blowing and it was the aftermath of a sullen summer and he was returning to Dublin. He didn't look behind. He stared—almost at the tracks—like a fisherman at the sea.

I wanted to say something but my clothes were too drab; not the nice dresses of two years before, dresses I'd resurrected from nowhere with patterns of sea lions or some such thing on them.

'Jamesy Murphy, you're dead,' I said—my head reeled.

'Jamesy Murphy, you're dead.'

I travelled on the same train with him as far as Athlone. He went on to Dublin. We were in different carriages.

I suppose I decided that morning to take my things and move, so in a boat full of fat women bent on paradise I left Ireland.

I was nineteen and in love. In London through the auspices of the Sisters of Mercy in Camden Town I found work in a hotel where my red hair looked ravishing, sported over a blue uniform.

In time I met my mate, a handsome handy building contractor from Tipperary, whom I married—in the pleased absence of relatives—and with whom I lived in Clapham, raising children, he getting a hundred pounds a week, working seven days a week. My hair I carefully tended and wore heavy check shirts. We never went back to Ireland. In fact, we've never gone back to Ireland since I left, but occasionally, wheeling a child into the Battersea funfair, I was reminded of Jamesy, a particular strand of hair blowing across his face. Where was he? Where was the hurt and that face and the sensitivity? London was flooding with dark people and there at the beginning of the sixties I'd cross Chelsea bridge, walk my children up by Cheyne Walk, sometimes waiting to watch a candle lighting. Gradually it became more real to me that I loved him, that we were active within a certain sacrifice. Both of us had been bare and destitute when we met. The two of us had warded off total calamity, total loss. 'Jamesy!' His picture swooned; he was like a ravaged corpse in my head and the area between us opened; in Chelsea library I

began reading books by Russian authors. I began loving him again. A snatch of Glenn Miller fell across the faded memory of colours in the rain, lights of the October fair week in Ballinasloe, Ireland.

The world was exploding with young people—protests against nuclear bombs were daily reported—but in me the nuclear area of the town where I'd worked returned to me.

Jamesy and I had been the marchers, Jamesy and I had been the protest! 'I like your face,' Jamesy once said to me. 'It looks like you could blow it away with a puff.'

In Chelsea library I smoked cigarettes though I wasn't supposed to. I read Chekhov's biography and Turgenev's biography—my husband minding the children—and tried to decipher an area of loss, a morning by the station, summer gone.

I never reached him; I just entertained him like as a child in an orphanage in the West of Ireland I had held a picture of Claudette Colbert under my pillow to remind me of glamour. The gulf between me and Jamesy narrows daily. I address him in a page of a novel, in a chip shop alone at night or here now, writing to you, I say something I never said before, something I've never written before.

I touch upon truth.