

*Love in the Tall Grass*

Cordelia wakes on a white-cold afternoon, watches woodsmoke pluming beyond the trembling hedge. She rises, opens the window outward, hears the swoon of matinee music in the road. Winter air teems in on this, the last day of the twentieth century. Cordelia strips naked, pours water from the steel jug, half-fills the basin, wrings out the wash-cloth, soaps her hands, her face. When the pipes burst in late November, she never got the plumber in, broke the ice in the rain-barrel under the shoot and dipped the bucket down. This water is colder than a broken dream. She dries herself and dresses, slowly, in a green dress, fastens the clasp of a platinum locket around her neck. She bends and laces up her flat black shoes, knowing that when this day is over, nothing will ever be the same.

In the kitchen she lowers a little brown egg into an old saucepan, puts the kettle on, takes out the stainless-steel egg-cup, its tarnished spoon, the stripy mug and plate, and waits until it's ready. Somewhere somebody is chopping wood. This kettle always sings before it boils. By the open door she sits. She's slept, now she must eat. She spreads a tea cloth across her lap and breaks the shell, salts the egg, spreads butter over bread, pours tea. Withered leaves skid in across the marbled lino. The Burmese believe that wind carrying betel leaves into the

bride's house will bring bad luck and unhappiness to the married couple. So many small, useless facts rattle around like old currency inside Cordelia's head. The clock on the mantel ticks happily. Not long now, it seems to say. Not long now. When she's finished, she turns the empty eggshell upside-down, a trick she played in childhood that turned to habit. She takes a handkerchief from her sleeve and wipes her mouth. It is time. She undoes her braid and brushes out her hair. She knows no other woman whose hair's turned white at forty. Lastly, she takes her good black coat from its crook on the back door, opens the latch and goes out into what's left of the December wind.

It is almost nine years since Cordelia has walked this road. It dips down between new bungalows into the village. The Silver Dollar Takeaway stands in darkness; a neglected ice-cream van's wheels sag from the weight of winter neglect, its HB sign well faded, but there's a light in the Lone Star Guesthouse and the little souvenir shop's door is open. She suspects that after the new century's ushered in, they'll clamp closed once again, wait for summer's gaggle of tourists, the trampoline of kids. She becomes aware of faces behind net curtains. She stops at the chapel, slides back the glass porch door, blesses herself with water from the font. Inside, the chapel's empty, the marble altar-railing she remembered, gone. A statue ornaments each side of the altar: the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. One in brown, the other blue. Why is Mary always blue? she wonders. She

lights a candle at her feet, she looks so lonely. Near the altar stands a coffin covered in cloth, burgundy folds, such a small coffin, but then she realises it's the church organ. She backs down into the empty confession box, slides the grid across and whispers:

'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.'

That takes her back. A sudden draught travels through the chapel, sounding strangely like a motor race, a high, revving wind. She sits in the bottom pew and opens the missal at random, reads the lesson from Palm Sunday and thinks Judas Iscariot a beautiful name.

Cordelia continues the steep descent. She stops and sits by the roadside, empties a pebble from her shoe. Gorse shelters this road, green, shuddering gorse that bursts into relentless yellow for half the year. It is getting dark; she feels the light draining, watches the blue dusk deepening in the west. She gets up, puts one foot in front of the other. A shroud of mist thickens fast over the barren dunes. She feels her heart beating, feels tired, bone tired, and evening deepens all around her quickly, so very quickly. She still has far to go, two miles or more. She must get there before dark or be lost. She remembers the waiting room, the gleam of the stethoscope on the doctor's table, the promise spoken, the sincerity in his voice, and hurries on.

So too was it dusk when Cordelia met the doctor, a late September dusk of fallen fruit. Exasperated, she had taken a mallet from the shed and driven a staked sign

down outside the front gate. APPLES, the sign read. Gale-force winds had shaken the trees bare overnight. She'd woken and found the orchard grounds carpeted: Cox's orange pippin, Golden Delicious, Bramley, Red Janets, crab apples. They all lay abundant and bruised in the long grass. She filled buckets, basins, big saucepans, the old Moses basket – but the surplus abounded beneath the trees.

When the doctor's car turned into her driveway, Cordelia was sitting on the steps outside the front door, turning the Jams & Jellies pages of her cook-book. On the window ledge above her head stood jam jars of drowned wasps, their striped bodies floating on the cloudy water. The doctor threw a tall and steady shadow over her. He looked like a man who could jump a fence and climb a tree. She led him up the orchard path, where he took his hands out of his pockets and shook his head.

'Do you have a spade?'

He took his jacket off, rolled up his sleeves. His arms were pale for summer, the pale blue veins in his wrists, his inner arm like a blue branch a child might draw on a white page. But his hands were brown to the wrists, as if he had dipped them in permanent ink that could not be washed off. While the sun burned an orange hole in the sky, the doctor dug a pit in Cordelia's orchard. They lined the pit with straw and carefully laid the apples down so they would not touch.

'There,' he said, 'apples all year round.'

'Come in and wash your hands.'

Her kitchen was dark and cool and smelled strangely of must and something else the doctor could not place. Cordelia gave him the bar of carbolic soap and he washed his hands. She filled a cup with milk, which he drank before he left with a shallow enamel basinful of apples. Cordelia gathered her skirt into a pouch and filled that too. The doctor noticed her knees, marked where she had knelt on the grass, her brown thighs, and thought of them as he drove back home to his wife and children, the fallen apples from Cordelia's orchard rolling around on his back seat.

The doctor came back. He returned the basin, refilled it at Cordelia's insistence, and returned again. It became habitual, on Thursdays, for the doctor to stop, and if the weather was warm, Cordelia and the doctor drank tea outdoors. They leant against the tree-trunks in dappled shade. The doctor dawdled over his tea, sipped it like a girl while the afternoon sun shone bashfully through the trees. Cordelia asked him about medical school, the surgery, and listened. She listened to the words and the accent and the tone, the silences, the hesitation. She noticed he did not mention his wife. Up close, she smelled mothballs in his winter jacket; he smelled like an old drawer that hadn't been opened in a very long time.

On her thirtieth birthday, Cordelia sat with her feet in a basin of hot water all morning and listened to a thunderstorm. She drank three big vodkas with shaken orange juice and tied a ribbon in her hair. When the doctor

arrived, she took his hand and led him out under the chestnut tree whose limbs drooped low to the ground. Cordelia used to sit there as a child and imagine she was sitting inside a giant's green skirt. Overhead a patch of blue sky showed through the leaves like a bruised knee.

That afternoon the doctor did not ask for tea. Instead he wound her long yellow hair like a bandage around his hand, and kissed her. It turned dark as night under the tree, so when he looked at the time, he had to put the face of his watch up close to his, then rushed off home, leaving skid-marks in Cordelia's drive.

That night Cordelia lay in bed above the green-dark orchard while drowsy bluebottles struggled against the window panes. She watched the sudden, fast shadows of swallows who flew past her window in fleeting pairs, subtracting light from her room, and marvelled how living things could suspend themselves in mid-air. She lay and listened, imagined she heard the last of the overripe fruit, the latecomers, falling in the slightest breeze. She did not have the heart to pluck them. She heard them falling, imagined the stem weakening, the fruit clinging to its source, losing, loosening, letting go, falling, falling.

The doctor told his wife he was out on house-calls. Because his car was so conspicuous, they started to meet in the sand dunes at Strandhill. They brought drumsticks, flasks of coffee, cake and bars of Belgian chocolate because the doctor had a sweet tooth. On warmer days, he opened his shirt and she kicked her boots off and let her hair down. But mostly they just lay there

with Cordelia's big black coat over them, listening to the tide, he with his head hidden in the reeds. Sometimes they fell into shallow sleep, but always Cordelia was aware of the irreversible ticking of the doctor's gold watch: Tick, tick, tick. Not long now, it seemed to say. Not long now. She hated that watch; she wanted to stand up and throw it in the ocean.

Cordelia dreamt of them together in a room with a green, flapping curtain she could not pull back. She could see out, but nobody would ever be able to see in. When she told the doctor of this dream, he started talking about his wife. Cordelia did not want to know about his wife. She wanted him to bang on her door in the middle of the night with his fist, to come in with a suitcase in his hand and call her by her name and say, 'I have come to live with you at my own peril.' She wanted him to carry her into a strange house and close the door. The doctor said his wife went to bed early, well before him. He said on fine nights he sat out on the step behind his house and smoked a cigarette. From there he could see the headland further up, see where the road curved down towards the lights of her village.

They gave each other things. That was their first mistake. He took a small pair of surgical scissors from his pocket and snipped off a lock of Cordelia's hair. He kept this lock of hair between the pages of a book named *Doctor Zhivago*. Another time, having lain out in the dunes past dark, they accidentally wore each other's scarves home. He gave her old books whose pages were

edged in gold. And Cordelia wrote long, lavish letters on thick notepaper, pasted petals on the headings. In the middle of the night, while his wife and children slept, the doctor climbed high up above the drawing room, pushed the attic door open and placed the things she gave him under asbestos insulation between the joists. He knew they would be safe there, for his wife was afraid to climb.

But the doctor never wrote a line to Cordelia. When he went away to Lisbon on vacation with his wife, Cordelia received no word from him, not so much as a postcard. The only specimen of his handwriting she'd ever witnessed was when he gave her painkillers for an earache. Across the label in an almost illegible hand was written: One to be taken with water (or vodka) three times daily.

Cordelia is almost there. She passes concrete railings at the car park and climbs the steep incline up, up through the dunes, under the shadow of the mountain. She stands to get her breath back, watches the toss and turn of the blue-bellied tide breaking into perpetual, salty lather on the strand. Reeds are bending low to let the wind pass. There's little to show human presence; the wind has rubbed all footprints from the sand. Just a broken plastic spoon, the wrapper off a choc-ice, a buckled beer-can, a child's beaded purse. Cordelia stops and stoops to pick it up, but it's empty, its lining torn.

Lights from the town throw an orange sash across the

east. She hears music, travellers playing Jim Reeves records in the halting site, the systematic purr of a generator. A piebald mare whinnies and canters down along the ocean's edge as if she too has dreamt of a man holding a gun to her head. Clouds accumulate, thicken into darkness. Cordelia finds the mossy patch upon the hill where they first sat down ten years ago. She lies down in the reeds, pulls her collar close around her throat, and listens. She remembers the sound of his car, the veins of his wrist, the wind singing.

The doctor's wife climbed up into the attic. He entered his drawing room one afternoon and found there on the floor the piece of black ribbon he'd taken from Cordelia's hair to bundle up her letters, each one addressed to his surgery and marked 'strictly confidential'. When he raised his head, he saw legs dangling over the edge of the manhole. They were the muscular, white legs of a tennis player, his wife's legs.

'Whose hair is this? Who sent these letters? Who have you been seeing? Who owns this ribbon? Who? I want to know; speak to me. I want to know. Who is Cordelia? Cordelia who?' The doctor kept his hands in his pockets while his wife read aloud from the pages. She began to cry. It was late afternoon when she began. He sat down in the armchair by the fire and through the window watched the shuddering rosebushes. She dropped each page to the living-room floor as she read. The pages floated on the air, cascading down towards the rug, and

by the time she'd finished reading, she had asked for a torch to read by and the rug was littered with pages. At the end of many of these pages was written, in a generous hand, the name Cordelia. The doctor's wife would not come down. For a long time afterwards she sat there, insisting she would jump if the doctor would not tell her the truth.

'Are you in love with her?'

'No,' said the doctor.

'She's obviously in love with you.'

The doctor did not answer.

'Are you going to stop?'

'Yes.'

'Are you going to leave me?'

'Of course not.'

Eventually his wife was lured down. A splendid fire thrived in the hearth, for the doctor, out of nerves, had thrown shovelfuls of coal on to the flames. Before dawn, in the presence of her husband, she slowly burned every one of Cordelia's letters. The doctor watched as fire devoured the pages, Cordelia's lock of milky hair singeing in the blue heat.

'She's a blonde,' said the doctor's wife and breathed deep the scent of another woman in the cashmere scarf before throwing it to the fire.

The doctor called Cordelia into his surgery and in a low, sensitive voice, informed her their affair was over. He joined his hands and pushed his thumbs round in small, anti-clockwise circles. This must be what it's like

to be informed of a terminal illness, she thought. He talked and talked, but Cordelia had stopped listening. She was reading the eye-test chart behind his head. She could read down to the seventh line. Maybe she needed glasses.

But then the doctor's voice changed. He put his head in his hands.

'Oh Cordelia,' he said. 'I can't leave my wife.'

'How romantic.'

'You know I can't leave. Think of the children. Think of them asking, "Where's Daddy?"'

'Would you leave if you hadn't children?'

'Wait for me,' he said. 'In ten years' time the children will be grown and gone. Promise you'll meet me on New Year's Eve at the turn of the century. Meet me that night and I will come home and live with you,' he said. 'I promise.'

Cordelia laughed outrageously and that was the last she saw of him. She passed patients in the waiting room; was everyone waiting for this man? The snivelly middle-aged woman with the tissues, the pale man with his bandaged arm, the wounded.

Gradually, the bad dream faded. The green curtain and the window furled backwards into memory, but the promise stoked like a bright blade in Cordelia's head. Cordelia coveted her solitude. She started reading late into the night, playing her piano, practising uncomplicated airs. She talked to herself, speaking disjointed



sentences freely in the empty rooms. Slowly Cordelia became a recluse. She covered the TV with a tablecloth and put a vase of flowers there; she threw the transistor radio away. She made lists, paid her bills through the mail. She got the phone in, realised the turfman, the grocer, the gasman, anyone she wanted, would call round and deliver. They left the cardboard boxes, the gas cylinders outside the house, took the cheques from under the stone. She rose late, drank strong tea, made a ritual of cleaning out the grates. She stopped attending mass. Neighbours knocked on her door and peered in through the windows, but she did not answer. A powder of rust-coloured ash fell over the house, accumulated on the sills, the curtain rails. It seemed that every time she moved she raised dust.

Evenings, she lit the fire, watched the whoosh of flame around the turf, and listened to the rhododendron hedge, the leaves of the Virginia creeper rubbing against the window panes. Cordelia imagined someone out there in the dark, licking a finger, a thumb, rubbing a peep-hole in the dirty glass to see in, to see her, but she knew it was the hedge. She had always kept the garden, stayed out in summer with the clippers, trimmed it all back and raked the ear-like laurel leaves off the sandy path, mowed the grass, lit small, inoffensive fires whose smoke poured down beyond the clothes-line. The neglected hedge began to intrude upon the house, grew so thick and close that all the downstairs rooms loomed in constant shadow, and when the sun was going down,

strange, monkey-puzzle shadows poured into the sitting room. Cordelia could sit under the light of the reading lamp in daytime and pretend it was night. Time altered, took on unfathomable dimensions. Sometimes, when the weather was warm and the rhododendron buds opened, she walked naked around the sheltered house, brushing against the smooth, damp leaves, the swollen blooms, and petals fell around her feet. Nobody ever saw her.

Hunchbacked clouds slide across the headland at Strandhill, grey-dull clusters gathering momentum out along the cliffs while behind them night discharges darkness. A mossy parchment with a view of the sea. Nothing and everything has changed. Cordelia feels tired. She feels that she has run a very, very long race and now her heartbeat is slowing down to normal. She puts her hand up to her face, takes comfort in her hot breath. She feels the wind dying, the slop of ocean on the strand. She pulls her coat around her, fastens up the buttons. She waits. Not long now. She closes her eyes, remembers rhododendron petals falling, pale pink blooms and grass, damp, long grass, beneath her feet. The snip, snip of a hedge clipper, his scissors cutting her hair, hot, broken sleep, a green bruise fading on her neck, fallen apples, his hand winding her hair, the pale man in the waiting room.

She wakes to the sound of a small parade, people marching across the hill, holding torches, gearing up for

midnight. Brass, trumpet music. A boy in costume beating a drum. They march in their own time. Girls in mini-skirts, twirling batons, making for the lights of town.

'Cordelia.' The woman to whom the voice belongs stands over her, keeping her hands hidden. 'You don't know me. I believe you knew my husband; he was the doctor,' she says.

Was the doctor? Was?

'I have come here to tell you that the doctor won't be coming.'

Cordelia says nothing. She just sits there and listens.

'You didn't think I knew?'

The doctor's wife is a lithe, small woman with lots of white in her eyes. She pulls the belt of her raincoat tight around her waist as if to make it smaller. 'It was obvious. When your husband comes home from house-calls with sand in his shoes, his shirt-buttons done up wrong, hair brushed, smelling of mints, and a gigantic appetite, a wife knows.' She takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers Cordelia one. Cordelia shakes her head, watches the woman's face in the flame of the lighter. Heart-shaped face, short eyelashes, a determined chin.

'You write nice letters.'

A drum is beating on the headland.

'You know the funniest thing?' the doctor's wife says. 'The funniest thing is, I used to pray he'd leave me. I used to get down on my knees and say one Our Father and ten Hail Marys and a Glory Be for him to leave me. He kept your letters and things in the attic; I used to

hear him up there at night, getting the ladder. He must have thought I was deaf. Anyway, I was sure he'd leave me when I discovered them, when he walked in. If it's any consolation, he was in love with you. I'm sure of that. I didn't have the heart to leave him, nor him me. We were cowards, you see. It's a damned tragedy.'

She looks out towards the ocean and composes herself.

'Look at your hair. Your hair's white. What age are you?'

'Not yet forty.'

The doctor's wife shakes her head, reaches out to touch Cordelia's hair.

'I feel like I'm a hundred,' says Cordelia.

The doctor's wife lies down on her back in the reeds and smokes. Cordelia feels no ill-will towards this woman, none of the biting envy she imagined.

'How did you know I would be here? Nobody knew, only he and I. And I thought it absurd when he first asked me to wait.'

'He has a terrible memory, writes everything down. And he believes his handwriting is illegible. You're pencilled in. "C. Strandhill at midnight."'

'Strandhill at midnight.'

'Not very romantic, is it? You'd think he would remember something like that.'

The parade drifts into town. The travellers have lit a fire in the car park. There's a smell of burning rubber and then the doctor runs up the dunes, breathless and smiling until he sees his wife.



'I took a wild guess,' says the doctor's wife.

He stands there, looking ten years older, looking at Cordelia. In the moonlight, his suit is shiny. He is alive and it is almost midnight. Cordelia is pleased, but nothing is as she imagined. The doctor, stiff with shock, does not reach out for her. He does not lie down in the tall grass and put his head in the crook of her arm as he used to. He stands there as if he has arrived too late at the scene of an accident, knowing he might have done something if only he had come earlier. Behind their backs the perpetual noise of the ocean folds in on itself. Together they listen to the tide, the waves, counting down what time remains. Because they don't know what to say or do, they do and say nothing. All three of them just sit there and wait: Cordelia, the doctor and his wife, all three mortals waiting, waiting for somebody to leave.