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# 1

## The Picture

The last few miles of our journey took us through a region of fields of golden wheat, now being harvested as we drove past. The sky was golden too, ramparts of cumulus catching the late afternoon sun.

As we moved south the colours in the sky changed. Dark grey infused the clouds, and a corona of yellow light formed around their edges. A wind got up, bringing down a first handful of autumn leaves, and I could feel the vibration of distant thunder. That should not have been possible from inside a car, but I felt it all the same: a sense of huge charges of electricity building in the upper atmosphere, an intensity to the light where it gleamed between the darkening clouds. My perceptions had become so much sharper in the last few weeks; it was as if I was rediscovering the world.

I felt certain that a thunderstorm was coming, but it did not come that afternoon: it remained somewhere grumbling in distant valleys. It was late August and we had been invited to stay for a few days in a country house in Ireland. The house was an attractive example of the Georgian period, with large bay windows and walls covered in creeper, now turning from green to red. It stood in parkland of a hundred acres or so, and beyond the pastures lay dark woods on every side. Behind the house, beyond the walled garden, were the remains of a tower house, roofless and ruined.

We had never been to the house before, and I did not know the owner very well. We were members of the same club in London. Somehow my wife and I had received an

invitation to come and play golf on a well-known course not far from the house. Of course I accepted.

I had just finished dressing for dinner. While Elizabeth sat at a table, examining and adjusting her appearance with the help of a cheval mirror, I stood at the window and looked out. The room was at the front of the house and had a view of green pastures and mature trees: antique oaks and limes of great size and girth, their trunks gnarled by age. The leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn and the air was soft, but with that first chill of autumn that comes as the sun sinks lower in the sky. The threatening clouds had now lifted and the pale blue evening sky was streaked with pink, a promise of fine weather for the next day.

As we walked I looked at the pictures out of idle curiosity. We had been in the house only for an hour or two and I had not had time to examine any of them yet. It is just a habit of mine: I know nothing about pictures, but I gaze at them all the same. They are windows into other worlds: if I stand in front of a seascape of a breezy foreshore, I can almost feel the wind on my face, the faint pinpricks of spray on the moving air. This house was full of pictures: scarcely an inch of wall space remained uncovered.

There was the usual collection of brown paintings, badly in need of cleaning or restoration; landscapes that suggested classical antiquity; one or two Venetian scenes; farther on, a few portraits of the owner's ancestors, gloomy-looking men in black coats or frowning females clad in dresses of dark stuff. Large canvasses filled the spaces between elderly glass-fronted display cabinets containing dusty Dresden shepherdesses, but slightly lower down there was a smaller picture that caught my attention.

The painting was of an interior that showed a shadowed landing. On one side of the landing was an old linen press;

its drawers and doors were clearly drawn. On the other side, the only object of note was a white marble statue of an angel, mounted on a column of black basalt. The angel's wings were unfurled, as if it had just alighted in that position. Its chin was poised upon the palm of its hand, and one elbow was resting on its knee. The whole aspect of the angel was curious: it might have been weeping, or it might have been watchful, admonitory.

The landing ended in an archway that led to another landing, the vaguely sketched outlines of which receded into the hinterland of the picture. This second landing was bathed in a silvery light, as if pictured by moonlight. If there were windows, the artist had not bothered to define them. One simply had an impression of a transition from darkness into light. Here, at this junction, was a female figure clad in a green dress. Whether it was a girl, or a woman, was hard to say. The artist may perhaps have been idle, or maybe it was a question of technique. The foreground of the picture was drawn with great precision and attention to detail: the bare floorboards of the landing denoting austerity, if not actual hard times; the faintly asymmetric linen chest suggesting its origins in the best sort of domestic cabinetmaking. The farther into the background the artist went, however, the less he appeared to care about detail. The female figure was merely sketched in and she was dark, so dark one could make out only the merest suggestion of a face, but she was surrounded by a nimbus of light. A mass of sombre colour behind her hinted at a large vase with a fan of branches in it. As I looked into the picture I could imagine the rustling of silk as the girl continued her walk along the landing towards the vantage point of the artist.

'Darling, are you coming?' asked Elizabeth, in the exasperated tone of someone who had taken nearly an hour to get changed for dinner while I had stood looking out of

the window. She was waiting for me at the top of the staircase, reluctant to go down and meet these people we hardly knew without me beside her.

'Just a minute,' I replied. 'There's rather an odd picture here.'

There was a faint snort in reply, but she made no attempt to come and look, merely tapping her foot as she stood and waited.

I decided the figure was a girl, rather than a woman: there was something in the slim erectness of her posture that suggested a person not yet challenged by age or child-bearing; an undefeated attitude, I thought. Was she looking at the angel? The juxtaposition of the two figures was curious, even unsettling.

I decided to come back and take a look before breakfast the next morning, when maybe the light in the corridor would be stronger.

I straightened up and went to join my wife. We descended the stairs together in sedate silence.

It was so quiet. The nearest main road was miles away. The house lay among woods and small rivers that drained into the larger valley where we were playing golf the next day. The fields of wheat that were being harvested as we had turned off the main road were some miles distant and the tractors and the combines we had seen on the way could not be heard. Around the house, the only sound was the cawing of rooks that fluttered into the sky - wheeling in strange patterns - before settling back into the branches again.

Elizabeth completed her preparations and then came and inspected me. With a look of dissatisfaction she adjusted my bow tie and flicked invisible dust from the lapels of my smoking jacket. We set off down the corridor towards the great staircase that led to the ground floor.

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as if Rupert had, quite literally, dug his toes in when he stopped here last night. Something had disturbed him.

That visit to Ireland was a while ago. I still remember the melancholy woods around the house, the flocks of rooks fluttering among the trees, or wheeling in great arcs above the dewy pasture of the park. I can remember how I lay awake that night, unable for some reason to sleep, listening to the harsh screeching of an owl, perhaps in the ruined tower. A wind got up and the house creaked, as old houses do, and I imagined, half awake and half asleep, that people were passing up and down the corridor outside. I looked at my bedside travel clock and saw that it was two in the morning. I willed myself to ignore the sounds of the strange house. I fell into uneasy dreams, while Elizabeth breathed steadily beside me, sound asleep. Just before dawn I sank into a deeper slumber, and awoke later than I had intended. We had to rush to catch the ferry back to England.