

Ana Teresa Pereira



© JOÃO MIGUEL RODRIGUES

Ana Teresa Pereira was born in Funchal (Madeira island) in 1958. She went to Lisbon to study Philosophy but she didn't finish the course and returned to Funchal to dedicate herself exclusively to writing. She started in 1989 with a thriller and since then she has been publishing novels with impressive regularity. Her work is somehow atypical of the mainstream Portuguese literature, much of her inspiration coming from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Her books are very cinematographic and are constantly appealing to her references in terms of paintings, films and literature - Iris Murdoch being one of her favourite writers ever.

SYNOPSIS

Byrne is a fifty-two year old Irishman. He returns to London to write a book about Iris Murdoch. His friend Ed finds him lodgings with Ashley, who is usually away. Byrne will fall in love with Ashley without ever meeting her - all he knows of her is what is left in the house - a picture on the wall, a book - everything is a pretext to imagine and invent the other.

COPYRIGHT

Relógio D'Água Editores
Francisco Vale
Rua Sylvio Rebelo, n° 15
P- 1000 - 282 Lisboa
phone: +351 21 8474450
Fax: +351 21 8470775
relogiodagua@relogiodagua.pt
www.relogiodagua.pt



Se nos encontrarmos de novo

[IF WE MEET AGAIN] pp. 154

Relógio D'Água, 2004

"My house, I say"

*My house, I say. But hark to the sunny doves
That make my roof the arena of their loves,
That gyre about the gable all day long
And fill the chimneys with their murmurous song:
Our house, they say; and mine, the cat declares
And spreads his golden fleece upon the chairs;
And mine the dog, and rises stiff with wrath
If any alien foot profane the path.
So, too, the buck that trimmed my terraces,
Our whilom gardener, called the garden his;
Who now, deposed, surveys my plain abode
And his late kingdom, only from the road*

Robert Louis Stevenson >>



MINISTÉRIO DA CULTURA



INSTITUTO PORTUGUÊS DO
LIVRO E DAS BIBLIOTECAS

Chapter 1

Perhaps it is possible to love a woman because of a book, a poem that has been underlined, a black and white movie, a house, the look in a man's eyes when he talks about her, the way her dog waits for her. Because of a Mondrian print on the living room wall.

Byrne moved away from the half-open window and sat down on the bed. He looked around, feeling a little lost. It was Christmas Eve and it had begun to snow two days before. The tree in Trafalgar Square, the lights in the streets, a bitter cold that seeped into the house; on top of the desk the whisky bottle and glass, two books by Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* and *Nuns and Soldiers*, an ashtray and the brown cigarette case. The attic ran the length and breadth of the house, the ceiling was a little low but there was plenty of light: two windows looked on to the garden, another two gave on to the street. At one end was the bed, covered by a blue eiderdown, the bedside table and a mirrored wardrobe, at the other a desk and a bookcase, and old black leather sofa where he liked to lie down and read, smoke or stare up at the roof, some reproductions of paintings he had bought in the Tate. A wooden door led to the bathroom. It was one of the most agreeable places in which he had lived, and he had lived in many. If he opened one of the windows on the street side, he could hear the sounds and bustle of New Row, the cafés, restaurants, discothèques, chestnut sellers; if he opened one of the others he could see the backs of the buildings and down below the snow-covered garden, the trees, shrubs and the pavilion at the bottom end. He liked the silence of the house where no one else lived, though at times he had the impression that he could sense a presence, an impression so strong that it made him turn back in the darkness of the corridors, raise his eyes from the newspaper while he was having breakfast at the kitchen table. The kitchen was one of the ground floor rooms that he used. Wide and welcoming, it had a door and a window that looked out on to the garden; on the window sill dried branches could be seen, perhaps they were lilacs. If he was still there in the spring it would be good to smell the fragrance of flowers mixed with the cold drifting in through the open window.

He always got up early, even when he had drunk too much the night before, an old habit from his Oxford days. Still befuddled with sleep he would go out and buy the newspapers and fresh bread, made coffee in the kitchen, sit down at the table covered in a red and white check tablecloth that reminded him of Bonnard's paintings. He'd eat breakfast and leaf through the papers, then stroll down to the river, look for a bench when it wasn't raining, a café when it was, a read for a bit. He was re-reading all Iris's books, in a very personal order. He'd begun with *The Time of Angels*, which he had already read again in the meantime. It was one of the most

important, then he'd continued with *An Accidental Man* and *The Philosopher's Pupil*, two books which were connected to one another. He would get a bite to eat in a pub and return home before two in the afternoon, write a little seated at the kitchen table with the window open, then lie down on the sofa in the attic and carry on reading until around seven o'clock. Then he would go out to dinner and have a few more drinks, meet up with friends, and return very late.

Byrne often went to the National Gallery to look at Iris's favourite paintings: Titian's *Death of Acteon*, *Bacchus and Ariadne* and *Noli me tangere*; Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*; Rembrandt's *Hendrickje Bathing in a River*; *The Painter's Daughters chasing a Butterfly* by Thomas Gainsborough, *The Baptism* by Piero in the basement. And there was Andrea del Sarto, and Turner. On Sunday mornings he would go to the Tate to see Turner's sketches or the Tate Modern to see the Bonnards and Mondrians; he didn't know what she made of Mondrian. And, from time to time, he would go on a pilgrimage to visit the portrait of her in the Portrait Gallery; he liked to see himself reflected in the glass of the painting, Iris and Gabriel, both had messengers' names and intensely blue eyes, both were looking for something, he sensed that they were looking for the same thing, to which she had been very close. And the gods had not allowed her to continue. But if he reached the point she had reached, and took one more step... The thought made him smile, the man of fifty-two wasn't so very different from the boy of twenty who had begun to study philosophy, or the twenty-five year old who had left London in search of ... or the man of forty-five who had come back, wearied, to England, gone back to his university career and now taken a year's sabbatical in order to write a book about Iris Murdoch.

From the beginning he'd been determined to write the book in London, he'd thought of renting a flat, then Ed had spoken to him about the house. It was almost impossible to find a place to live in those streets, where there were only businesses and restaurants, close to the National Gallery, the theatres, the second-hand bookshops. The house belongs to a woman friend of Ed's, he would take care of everything himself. So Byrne had moved in almost unable to believe his luck. The house was perfect and he didn't have to share it with anyone, at least no one had turned up so far. On the first floor the rooms were closed up, on the ground floor he could use the kitchen and living room, which looked out on to the street. It was a rather dark room, the carpet had little, faded roses, the shelves were untidy, books and stones, some sea-shells, the sofas were old and comfortable, the curtains of plum-coloured velvet; the Mondrian print on the wall, two paintings, two snowscapes with an illegible signature that struck him as very good. It was in the living room that he found most traces of the owner of the house. Ed had told him her name, Ashley, Ashley Gray, and Byrne hadn't asked any questions he'd imagined an elderly woman, he didn't >>

know why, it wasn't very important. But then he'd begun to grow interested in her, the Mondrian alone on the living room wall, that strange presence in the house, as if the woman were dead and haunting the place. And the books: nineteenth-century novels, Dickens, James, the Brontës, art albums, Italian painter and Impressionists, some volumes of poetry, Donne, Milton, the poems of Rupert Brooke, a poem that had been underlined – "the great lover". Beside the television set there was a shelf with videos, documentaries about painters, some old films, a black and white film by Vincente Minelli with Katherine Hepburn and Robert Mitchum. Perhaps it's possible to love a man because of a book, a poem by Stevenson, "our house, they say", the look in a woman's eyes when she talks about him, the way his dog waits for him.

Ed was in London at the end of November and they had a drink in a pub. Byrne said that he still hadn't seen anyone in the house and observed with interest the surprise in his friend's blue eyes, those eyes which had aged so much in recent times.

"Ashley disappears from time to time and turns up when you're least expecting her", said Ed in a neutral tone. "She had a dog which died some months ago, now she's on her own."

And he changed the subject, but Byrne understood that Ashley Grey mattered to him, so much that it hurt him to talk about her. They stayed drinking until very late and Ed spent the night on the living room sofa. When Byrne woke up on the following morning he'd disappeared, he'd gone back to Oxford without saying goodbye.

One day, when he was leafing through one of the novels in the living room, the story of Emma and Mr Knightly, he found a photograph, not very recent, of a fair-haired man and woman, at least in the photo, they seemed to have the same colour of hair, on a beach, the water up around their knees, their clothes soaking wet and clinging to their bodies; they were locked in a tight embrace and kissing one another on the mouth. It was a bad photograph, perhaps snapped with the automatic, but the way the two bodies were clutching each other was disturbingly erotic. He couldn't make out the woman's face, but if that was Ashley, he wanted to know her as well. She was wearing blue shorts and a white shirt, she was slim, and almost penetrating the body of the man who was well built and slightly taller than her. He put the photograph back inside the book, but days later went and got it and took it up to his room. And he began to dream of the woman, almost every night, she was walking alone along a deserted beach and the birds took flight as she passed by, she climbed the stairs of a tower, he took her in his arms and pressed her to him, ran his fingers through her golden hair, and they were both afraid, the tower was surrounded by monsters and her life was endangered; he would wake up a little scared and full of desire for a woman he didn't know, who might never return from wherever she was, who might

perhaps have died. But if she returned... He was in her house. Like the house, like the books, he was waiting for her.

Byrne ran his hand over his forehead. It was Christmas Eve but he didn't keep Christmas. He'd already drunk a lot, on the desk was the half empty whisky bottle, the ashtray, the two books by Iris. If he opened a window that overlooked the street, he would hear the Christmas bustle, there were a lot of people outside, lighted lamps, a little further along the tree in Trafalgar Square. But he went over to one of the windows on the other side of the room and contemplated the snow-covered garden. The blond woman in jeans and blue jacket was no longer there. It was too dark to see if there were foot-steps in the snow, but not so dark that he couldn't make out the tall figure, its back turned, the blond hair tumbling on to its shoulders, motionless as a statue, like an apparition. "And when you stand in the snow you look like an angel". Byrne smiled. He'd drunk too much and alcohol is good for summoning presences, the woman on the beach, the woman in the tower...

At the moment the light in the pavilion at the bottom of the garden came on. Byrne felt the icy air on his face, he looked up, the snowflakes were falling gently, he remembered a fresco he had seen in an old monastery in Russia years before. It was as if the angels were unfolding the sky before the impassive face of God.

Chapter 2

And he has your face, your eyes, your voice, and he's Irish, and is fifty-two years old.

Ashley had felt cold throughout the journey, she was only wearing a white cotton tee-shirt and jeans, the dark-blue jacket wasn't very warm. She had got off at a little station to have a coffee. When she returned to the platform she'd stepped in a puddle and her boot had been soaked, the dampness reaching her toes. Of course, she could have pulled her rucksack down from the luggage rack and put on two or three pullovers, a pair of socks, the compartment was empty, but she felt sluggish, tired, and perhaps the cold gave her some obscure pleasure. When she went into the sea and the water was at a very low temperature, she gathered her strength and swam far from the coast, and the cold made her feel alive, strong, perhaps indestructible. The same thing would happen when she was a little girl and stole away from the school dormitory in the very early mornings to run through the fields and swim in the pool amid the rocks.

Charing Cross Station had a festive air, with the lights switched on. Ashley set her rucksack on her shoulders and grasped the big waterproof bag in which she was carrying the canvases. There were six or seven of them, those which meant most to her. She thought, bitterly, now she was painting like a second-rate Monet who was also beginning to >>

go blind, the landscapes almost blurred, the seabirds that merged into a single bird, the wings that looked like waves and the waves that could be wings; for a moment she felt like leaving the bag on the train, losing it, but then she grasped the handle even more firmly and jumped down on to the platform. She was in London, she suddenly realised, she'd returned, a very strong impulse had grown inside her in recent days and she'd had to come back. She didn't know what for, it had something to do with the paintings in the National Gallery, with the bookshops, with Marchpane's and children's books, it had something to do with the snow in the streets and the Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square.

Minutes later she sat down on a bench and stared at the illuminated tree with a child's delight. She'd always loved Christmas, even when she spent it in the boarding school; she'd watch her schoolmates leaving with their parents but didn't feel sad, the books that Tom sent her from the United States had just arrived, and with them strange worlds, stories that warmed her inside. The teachers didn't set her any work during the holidays, and the enormous building that she knew so well became almost her own, the numerous empty rooms which no one entered, the abandoned dormitories, the gymnasium, the library; she'd go in the morning to the natural pools, and although it was cold even for her, it was good to be there, reading an adventure story, drawing the sea and the rocks, and the little plants that grew between the rocks, in her sketchbook. From early on she liked to be on her own, perhaps because she couldn't be with him, and other people didn't interest her much. She also spent some Christmases with Miss Winter, in country houses surrounded by snow in the north of England, but being with Miss Winter was like being alone. They had that tacit agreement to set off every morning each going her own way with her drawing or painting materials, and meet up at mealtimes. They spoke little but liked one another. Miss Winter had taught her everything she knew and when she realised that she had nothing more to teach her she let her work quietly.

The church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, the National Gallery, a National Gallery, the Portrait Gallery, an exhibition of photographs by Philippe Halsman, Charing Cross Road. She loved the little streets where cars couldn't pass and the shops had something magical. Cecil Court: Martin Murray Cigarette Cards, Travis & Emery Music, Mark Sullivan Antiques, The Rae-Smith Gallery Cartoons & Illustrations, the bookshops she knew intimately, Nigel Williams Rare Books, Peter Ellis Bookseller, Marchpane Children's and Illustrated Books, P.J. Hilton Literature, Antiquarian & General Books; she stopped for a moment beside Tindley & Chapman, some books she had at home but she wanted to buy again, *The Grass Harp*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Collector*, *Treasure Island*. A Chekhov play in the Albery Theatre, *The Seagull*, the huge posters, and then her street, she listed under her breath, as if she was praying, those names which she knew so well, James of New Row -

Clock and Watch Repairers, Prime Video, Nigel & Crown, Harry Brown Café, Scott's Café, Waterstone's.

Ashley started when she saw the light on in the attic of the house. She felt her heart beating very fast and the weight of the rucksack and the bag had become unbearable, her body was weak and cold, she almost had a dizzy spell. But then she remembered, it was too late to believe in ghosts. Ed has let the attic to a friend, a university professor or some such. She was overtaken by a strong sense of repulsion, she shouldn't have agreed, to hell with the money, she didn't want some old stranger living in that house which was theirs which continued to be theirs. She looked for the key but couldn't find it, the idea of ringing the doorbell seemed strange, at last she found the key ring at the bottom of her jacket pocket and, her hand trembling, she opened the door and switched on the light. As always Tom was waiting for her, him and the three dogs that she had had during her lifetime, one after the other, there wouldn't be any more, it was too late now. She dropped the rucksack and bag and glanced at herself in the hall mirror, her face drawn, her skin a little burned by the sun, her hair long and unkempt. She was ugly, thin, her lips cracked, her intensely blue eyes shining coldly, like frozen pebbles. She'd always thought she looked like him, they were both tall and thin with straw-coloured hair, really the colour of straw, intensely blue eyes, fair skin tanned by the sun, they spent a lot of time out of doors. He has a little scar on one cheek, and a smile that she often tried to imitate. My love, I'm here, she said in a low voice, my love, now the two of us are here.

She opened the living room door and smiled unconsciously, that space they'd created together, the books and the stones, the dried roses, the little hand-painted Russian box, the two landscapes he liked so much, a little London street covered in snow, the frozen Thames and the boats, their films, she'd learned with him to love black and white films, she who had such a passion for colour, the snow in a black and white film. She picked up a book and leafed through it slowly, *The Golden Bowl*, she brought it up to her face so as to smell its odour; Charlotte Stant in a museum, during the night...'

She went into the kitchen and realised that she was absolutely ravenous. She forgot to eat for days on end, she'd always been like that, and the hunger came unexpectedly; she'd had breakfast in the little town near the beach house then she hadn't eaten anything more, she'd only drunk a cup of coffee. The table has one of her red and white check tablecloths, not very clean; with crumbs. If there were crumbs, there had to be bread, she opened the tin that was on top of a cupboard and saw a dark loaf of bread cut into slices; in the refrigerator she found Cheddar cheese, Cox's Orange Pippin apples, William pears and tangerines.

Ashley didn't keep Christmas. Sometimes she bought a bottle of champagne and strawberries, but a cheese sand- >>

wich and a tangerine did just as well. She ate slowly and drank a glass of water from the tap. Then she drew the curtain back from the window and stood staring at the snow-covered garden, softly lit by the kitchen light and those from the building opposite. She had to go out into the garden and go into the studio, it has to be now, I won't be able to afterwards.

Ashley tightened the collar of the dark-blue jacket and went out into the garden. The snow was intact, the bushes, the little trees and the pavilion roof had a layer of white on top. She took some steps and stopped, what she had felt during the journey was nothing compared to that, the weight on her shoulders her face so cold that she almost couldn't move her muscles, her legs numb, her boots buried in the snow. An ice figure, she thought, an ice angel forgotten in a garden. An ice angel that doesn't survive the first day of sunshine. Suddenly she had the feeling that someone was watching her from inside the house.

But she didn't turn round. She looked straight ahead, and the pavilion covered with snow was the only reality, an almost sacred place, outside the world. The place where he worked, day and night. The image was very strong, Tom sitting at his desk, bent over a book or a notebook; beside him a lighted lamp, a glass of water, a brown cigarette case and an ashtray. His straw-coloured hair, really the colour of straw, his dry face burned by the sun, his blue eyes, the scar, the hands with long, nimble fingers, the motionless body.

She found the key, opened the pavilion door and switched on the light. The room was as cold as the exterior. The two windows, the curtains which had been dark-blue, the desk on which lay scattered notebooks and individual drawings, the case full of books, the easels, the canvases propped against the walls, the rolls of paper on the floor, the old sofa where, at different times they had lain down to smoke or listen to Bach or Mozart, Hayden's *Creation*. Because we live together, we've always lived together, separated by time. Alone.

Then she remembered the man who had come into their world. She went up to the window and looked at the familiar shadow of the house, the light on in the attic. A shadow at the window. She drew back a little, so that he couldn't see her, and at that moment it began to snow, the flakes fell slowly, taking the deepest silence, and she smiled, I'm alive, she thought, somehow we're alive, and the world hasn't yet ended, the end of time hasn't arrived and the angels aren't folding up the skies. My God, it's snowing.

Chapter 3

Byrne lit a stick of incense in front of the icons he'd bought in Russia many years earlier. A reproduction of Rublev's *Trinity*, a *St George and the Dragon*, a *Virgin* by Vladimir. He'd been in Russia following Rilke's trail, he said that it was the place where God still kept a connection with

mankind. He hadn't stayed there long because his money had run out. He remembered the snow and towers, the long train journeys, monasteries in ruins or transformed into museums where he'd discovered frescoes by the old masters, some by Andrei Rublev. He who didn't believe in God had never been separated from those icons, blessed by a monk; from time to time he burned incense in front of them.

The icon of St George made him think of his times as a boy, when he dreamed of being a warrior, living always close to death, practising death, vague studies of Plato. The Virgin was associated with the phase in which he decided to be a saint. Byrne gave a bitter smile. The man who wanted to be a saint. "There is only one sadness – not to be a saint", a phrase by Léon Bloy. It was merely an idea when he was at university, he was one of the best students and the one who went to bed latest, long nights of alcohol and sex, above all sex, he fallen in love innumerable times, with men and women, he'd had various relationships at the same time; being a brilliant student was part of the game, he was the last to go to bed and the first to begin work in the morning, a university career before him, philosophy books, a place in Oxford for the rest of his life. Then the idea became stronger, he didn't want to be a warrior but a wise man, he wanted to be a saint. So he went from promiscuity to asceticism, left London with a suitcase and a vague contract with a magazine and began what he thought would be a long pilgrimage, a long spiritual quest. At that time he was very interested in Buddhism (he still meditated from time to time), he'd continued to be interested in Christianity, only later did he realise that it was a Christianity without God, when he'd been in Russia he thought it was the place where God kept a remote connection with mankind, it became easy to believe in the ontological argument, how was it possible that God didn't exist when the icons, the almost ruined frescoes of Andre Rublev, and the snow existed. For him the snow was related to God, even today he had that impression when he walked the streets of London in winter.

It hadn't taken him much time to find out that he wasn't a saint, the violence and passion were part of his nature, he enjoyed sex too much, and he wasn't good, he wasn't a good man. That was what disturbed him most, he wasn't a good man. Although money and power didn't interest him and he had an unlimited love for nature, animals, plants, he couldn't bring himself to pray for all people (for all living beings, but not for all people), he would be capable of killing some of those who crossed his path. And one day he'd returned to London to stay, he'd gone back to teaching, first in a private school, then in Oxford, he'd met old friends again. Ed was one of them, he lived in a house in Oxford with his daughter, a girl with greyish hair and eyes of an indeterminate colour, somewhere between green and blue; she was called Rose.

In his first year in London, Byrne collected his notebooks and wrote a long travel book; when he was in Oxford, a >>

book of art essays, and two years later a study of Henry James. James was an author to whom he would always return, with the sensation of coming home. When he was a boy, his father had given him *The Turn of the Screw* one Christmas Eve; he'd spent Christmas Day in Bly, enchanted by the reflection of the young governess in the mirrors and window panes. Later on he fell in love with Isabel Archer and Charlotte Stant, and with the nameless woman who placed candles in a church. And one day, when he was reading *The Other House* and letting himself be seduced by Jean and her golden locks, he thought that writing a book was a good excuse for re-reading James, for returning to Venice and the papers of Jeffrey Aspern, to the romance of old clothes, the green room of friends of friends, the altar of the dead and the solitary bench, always the same one, where the writer of *The Middle Years* would sit and the strange couple in *The Bench of Desolation*. On reaching the end he realised with a certain contentment that he hadn't solved the mystery, the books remained intact.

Perhaps the same thing would happen when he reached the end of the book about Iris. But this was a more personal project, taking the path that she had taken, the gardens, streets, houses, towers, galleries, churches, rivers, the waters in which one could die. The company of monsters, the monster gods and those who loved them. He'd read all her books, his was reading them again one by one, but his work would be based on those which he considered most important: *The Time of Angels*, the first one he had read many years before, *An Accidental Man*, *The Sea, the Sea*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Philosopher's Pupil*, *The Good Apprentice*, *The Message to the Planet*. Beyond a certain point the gods don't let us continue. In the last novel she had come close, perhaps too much. Marcus Vallar was one of her most complex monsters: at nineteen years a great mathematician, at fifty a weary man, who was able to raise the dead but had never known love. To reach the point which Marcus Vallar had reached, a mixture of all the monsters and Iris herself. And discover what was coming next... perhaps God, perhaps nothing, perhaps something that he hadn't yet foreseen. After a certain point Plotinus spoke of touching the One, and not seeing it. He was reading Plato and Plotinus again, and Iris's philosophy books, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, *The Sovereignty of Good and Other Concepts*, the essays of *Existentialists and Mystics*. He spent whole mornings in front of her paintings, he leafed through the albums of Piero and Titian to see *The Resurrection* and *The Flaying of Marsyas*, he'd sit beside the river, alone until he felt her presence in the middle of the mist; and he loved her, he'd loved her forever, young and pretty, old and sad, he too was born in Ireland and had come to London with his parents when he was eight years old, he felt the same ambivalence in relation to Ireland, that also brought them closer together, My Lady, he said quietly, let me continue

your work, at the point where you left it, I'm not afraid of the gods, we all end in the same way, and perhaps my life was the path towards you.

Even the house... it was as if it had not happened by chance. Rose began to appear in his classes and at the beginning he didn't recognise her; at the age of nineteen she wore she hair short and her eyes were definitely blue, she had a particular charm. Byrne noticed the brightness of her eyes when she looked for him after classes, the enthusiasm with which she worked for him, she didn't seem to have any interest in her other subjects. And one night he found her waiting for him, sitting on the steps of his house, her arms around her knees, her hair falling over her eyes; he'd gone back his old promiscuity but that girl didn't interest him in the slightest, without wanting to he was excessively harsh, almost cruel. He stopped seeing her in the classroom and months later he learned that she wasn't in Oxford, she'd arranged a job in London. The story didn't concern him greatly, he wasn't responsible for people who fell in love with him.

A certain coldness arose between him and Ed, they deliberately drew apart from one another, and only met again one night in London, in a pub which they both used to frequent, when Byrne had already decided to leave Oxford for a year in order to write the book about Iris. It was a rainy September night and there was scarcely anyone in the streets. Byrne noticed that Ed had aged a great deal in recent times, he was a tall, thin man, the same age as him, but the hair which had begun to thin had now disappeared except at the sides, his blue eyes seemed exhausted. When Byrne mentioned that he was looking for a house, his friend's face became pensive, but only later on did he say that he knew a place close by. They'd walked beneath the drizzle as far as New Row and Ed showed his a narrow building, with red tiles, three floors and wide windows.

"This house belongs to a friend of mine. She told me she wanted to let the top floor."

The building was in the dark and Byrne stood for a moment examining it, it was the only three-storeyed building in that street, the only which didn't have a shop or a restaurant on the ground floor. And right beside a Waterstone's. Ed said that he had a key in Oxford, but the rent was high. Byrne shrugged his shoulders; it was impossible to find a flat in that neighbourhood, let alone a house.

"The room is spacious," said Ed, "you can use the kitchen and living room on the ground floor, and there's a back garden."

"I'm coming at the beginning of November," said Byrne.

"Perhaps Ashley won't be here, it's impossible to know when she's coming back."

"Back from where?"

"I don't know, I suppose she's at the old beach house, or perhaps she's travelling."

"Ashley. I like that name."

>>

Ed began to say something, but thought better of it. He nodded his head and went off under the rain. Byrne looked at the house again and went into a café, asked for a whisky, everything was going well, a year in London close to the National Gallery, re-reading Iris's books, even if he didn't manage to write anything worthwhile. He asked himself whether the hesitation he had detected in his friend had anything to do with Rose, he hadn't heard anything about her for a long time, perhaps they would meet again. Perhaps she's grown up and turned into an interesting woman, he thought. He needed someone, a more or less calm relationship, no great emotions while he was writing. He went out into the street where the rain continued to fall.

Chapter 4

At times Ashley thought of herself as a ruined aristocrat. She'd never given any importance to money, her parents had left her some, and Tom had made her his sole heir. The two houses, the one in London and the one at the beach, a good amount and the rights to his books, which hadn't been re-edited for a long time. It wasn't a fortune, but it let her live life her way, she'd never worked for money, it had simply never occurred to her. But in recent years the money had grown less, and she was resisting the idea of selling one of the houses, she'd thought vaguely about renting out Gull Cottage during the summer and part of the London house. She'd talked about this to Ed, the only person with whom she would discuss her financial problems, but when she received his postcard (of Whistler's *Nocturn*) informing her that he had rented the attic to a friend, she hadn't paid much attention then forgot about it; in any case at that point in time she had no intention of going back.

At the beach house Ashley would awaken very early, still with the horrible feeling of not having the dog lying on her feet, and would drag herself into the kitchen to make coffee and eat a slice of bread or cake, sometimes extremely dry. Only when she didn't have anything in the pantry did she get her bicycle and go shopping in the nearest town. In the mornings she walked among the rocks, swam a little and went back to house chilled to the bone, had a hot bath and worked for some hours, or lay on the floor of the tower room, among the rolls of paper, the canvases and the books that no one had read for a long time, listening to music and looking at the sky outside, the rain and the sun, the flight of the birds. And when she felt strong enough she would go to the boat-house, turn on the engine and wander a little, approach the island, but only twice or three times did she seek the narrow passage between the rocks that led to the beach. The cabin was in a bad condition, perhaps it wouldn't stand up to the winter, and the birds seemed more confident than ever, she could walk among them without their taking flight. The

island was theirs once more, when the cabin fell done no signs of human life would remain, no signs of her. Which was right.

The cabin already existed the first time Tom took her to the island. She was eight years old and in a boarding school; he went to collect her from the school at the beginning of September and Ashley took an instant liking to that tall, fair-haired man, with intensely blue eyes, who reminded her of her father. They spent some days in the New Row house, wandered through parks and galleries, bought books, then he took her to Gull Cottage, he told her that the name of the dwelling was different but that he called it that because of a film, only years later she saw *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* by Mankiewicz, and since Tom had already died, the reference became very bitter, and ironic too. Gull Cottage looked like an illustration out of one of her adventure stories. It stood right at the end of a road dug between the rocks, it was an old house with red tiles and a tower on one side. It was very close to the sea, and when there were storms the waves splashed the window panes and made it almost impossible to travel along the road. But it was the beginning of September and the sky was very blue, the sea dark blue and deep, and the man had eyes the same colour as hers, blue as well, the blue of forget-me-nots in abandoned fields.

In that month of September Tom taught her to love books, the strange places, the stories (he told her stories about his journeys, landscapes of snow and ice, sargasso seas, tepid waters that went from blue to green), he taught her to draw and paint, and to swim as if water were her natural element. Ashley was perfectly aware that these had become her religions: reading, painting, swimming. With him she learned to see, to let things exist in full; with him she lost her fear of being alone, he left her alone while he worked in the tower. The tower was a strange place, it wasn't really part of the house, a spiral staircase, a room with boxes and old books, and upstairs the room where he worked, a table and books, narrow windows, the cries of the birds. They sometimes visited the island, the island enveloped in mist where only birds lived, countless birds, the cabin must have been built by fishermen, although there weren't any signs of fishermen or tourists there. The birds were the best proof that no one else went out to the island, they were tame, they weren't frightened by their presence. Tom knew something about ornithology and had brought one or two books, a pair of binoculars; they amused themselves identifying the birds and studying their habits.

The month of September was very long, perhaps because many things happened, he was Prospero and Ferdinand, and she an eight-year old Miranda lost in an amazing new world. It was strange going back to a boarding school. Tom has chosen another school, close to the sea. He knew one of the teachers, Miss Winter, a tall, dark, pretty woman, who taught drawing and painting. He had to go back to the United >>

States, he was a philosophy teacher and had written a book about Kant, he was working on a book about Plato. Ashley didn't ask him when he was coming back, she spent Christmas in her school, alone with her adventure stories and the sketchbooks; she hoped that he would come in the summer, but just before the end of classes Miss Winter told her that they would spend the holidays together in a mountain inn. The inn was in a pretty area, the owners were pleasant and the food excellent. Ashley and Miss Winter had breakfast then went walking; they'd pick an interesting place and work for hours. With time, in other summers, they stopped going out together, worked alone, in the tacit agreement there was between them, that complicity that didn't lack affection. Ashley remembered images that she could no longer place: ruined castles, sacred stones that inspired fear, poppy-covered fields, forget-me-nots growing beside brooks, nightfall on a cold beach, the water dragging the stones back down to the bottom, dawn coming up beside a stream, the dense mist, the blurred shapes of the trees. In the meantime, Tom continued in the United States and Miss Winter ceased to be pretty, she began to look like the other teachers. Ashley sensed that she was in love with Tom, something in her dark eyes when they talked about him, something in her dark and empty eyes when she thought she was alone.

Tom continued to send her books, especially at Christmas, and it was he who chose the place where she spent the holidays. In the penultimate year she went to Paris to see the Impressionists' paintings; she loved Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, in Paris she fell in love Van Gogh and Degas (she visited the little room in the Louvre where the Russian icons that Tom had mentioned in a letter were to be found, one of them represented the angels who folded up the skies at the end of time). It was the first time she had left England, she spoke good French, wandered around Paris on her own, walked along the Seine, bought books on the left bank, watched the street artists at work for long periods of time, went to the theatre. She met a boy who wanted to be an actor and went out with him several times, discovered that she didn't know how to kiss and that she liked to feel a man's hands on her body; they made love in a room with a sloping roof and film poster on the walls, *Pierrot-le-Fou*, *À Bout de Souffle*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, *Le Portrait de Jennie*.

Tom was working on a book about Plotinus and decided to spend a year in London; she should go to Oxford and con-

tinue her studies. Ashley wrote to him to say that she'd obtained a scholarship for the Slade and was thinking of living in the house in New Row. The house was near the National Gallery, a place that matched her idea of paradise; when she saw men and women taking children by the hand she asked herself whether her parents would have taken her there when she was small. She remembered wandering around the galleries beside Tom, he would say things that she didn't understand properly, a work of art may reveal another plane of existence, but you have to learn to see, like on the island, like the water and the birds and the rocks, and the flowers that grow in the rocks.

And she remembered diving and swimming underwater towards him, at the beginning, when she was still afraid, his arms open to catch her. And slowly climbing the stairs of the tower, afraid of what she would find on top, wild birds and monsters. And the stories he would tell, the world slowly took shape to the sound of his words, the images and the beings emerged from the chaos, and everything had a secret sense, which he scarcely allowed her to glimpse. It was strange that so many things should have happened in that month of September, and so little afterwards, school, her friends, classes, walks and horse riding, birthday parties at night, the long summers with Miss Winter in the country or by the sea, the trip to Paris, a boyfriend, some nights of love, the paintings by Monet and Van Gogh, then once again the school, for a year she'd been a prefect, which secretly amused her because she continued to be the same rebel as always.

But, as in the early years, there was a ritual that she carried out from time to time: she would get up very early, even before the servants, put on her swimming costume, some old trousers and a jumper, and sneak out of the room for two pupils that she now occupied, cross the gardens that were still covered in shadow, jump over a gate and run through the fields, then through the rocks until she reached the natural pools. Sometimes she didn't swim, but limited herself to remaining seated on the rocks, near the sea, her eyes fixed on the horizon, her lips with a taste of salt. And when it wasn't very cold or when it was very cold but the urge was too strong, she'd pull off her clothes and dive into the water, close her eyes and swim towards him, towards his arms that opened in the darkness.

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese
by Patrícia Odber de Baubeta, 2005