

Myra Is Dying

It is months since I have known, so what is the use of standing on the steps to the doctor's office, saying: I don't believe it, no, I won't believe it!

I believed it the moment he told me. My premonitions were squeezed dry of their last drop. My head fell, detached itself from my body. I straightened my gloves on my lap and determined not to make a fool of myself. A rod of uprightness made me thank him for his communication. Myra, my darling, my daughter. How shall I replace you when you are gone? I am too old, too old to lose you.

"Mrs. Llandrey, you mustn't lose hope. Medicine has advanced a great deal in this area."

Thank you, doctor. Thank you for your effort.

Myra sat in the outside office, so modern looking, an American girl. How curious! To look so American. Dungarees. Baby-silk hair. I mustn't begrudge her accommodations to this country. It is after all what we came for.

"Well?" John said, impatient with my strained expression, his face and hands still sooty from the mines.

"Let us walk a little," I said. "Some air would do us good."

Myra sat, controlled by her American cleanliness, knowing. Bright, she looked, in her distress of knowing. All the sickness was inward. Her hair, a Welsh inheritance, her brown eyes, her golden eyelids. Myra, it is not true, I wept. It will never be true.

My mother, my darling mother! I am dying.

Myra! Look at me. Child of hope. I will not let it be true. Let us walk out of this office and walk around the world. The further we walk from this office, the less true it will be.

It will always be true. It will be true wherever I am.

Myra, we gave you everything. We came to this country to give you everything. How can you be so knowing and undreaming?

"Will you tell Ian?" John asked.

"No, of course not. What good would it do? Why should we tell anyone anything. It's only one doctor's opinion."

Myra's lips were pressed together. I have already told Ian, she said. We meant to protect you. I am capable of that. I went to see a doctor on my campus. He told me to see my family doctor. I asked Ian if I should tell you. My step faltered. I came home, I never meant to cause you death.

"What shall we do?" John asked. His eyes looked furious, a coal miner's eyes, ringed with miner's dust. Came on his lunch hour, his hands still black, and ate his sooty sandwich, waiting in the office.

"I have a dentist appointment at three," I said, looking at my watch.

How long? his eyes asked. Otherwise, he was quiet. Quiet John. He wouldn't ask a question like that, head on. I asked the question. "How long?" I asked the doctor. I had rehearsed the dialogue from others, I knew my part from history. John was only, what we called in my country, a good provider. When such men stop providing, they die. I used to see the dead ones every evening at twilight, when I was a little girl, coming down the cobblestone streets from school or market, with the smell of Tremadoc Bay in my nose. They lay in the doorways and by the side of the street, used up miners thrown upon the town like slagheap. It was an awesome sight for a little girl, despair so public. I assured myself that I was excluded from it. It would never happen to me.

"Their souls have departed from them," my aunt said. "Zombies. They have no sense of direction. They do not know where they are."

"Godless," my grandmother hissed with certitude, "worse than a dog."

Help me, I said to the night. Keep me strong forever. The boats plied into the harbor in Tremadoc Bay with lights and glitter and promises, and the anguish of the future.

John walked down the ramp, cap in hand, whistling.

"Marry him," my uncle said. "He'll make you a good provider."

Will he sing under my balcony at night?

Stuff 'n nonsense. He'll make you a good provider. .

I would, for this year, if it please you, uncle, not be provided for, and run with him in the meadow.

Marry him before the heat gets you and you come to the altar with a high belly like an uneducated village girl.

Tra-la-la-la-la. My John walked that summer from Swansea Bay to Pwithiel and never a moon set or the sun rose that we did not see it, and the hay and John were between my legs, and already the rings were around his eyes. A miner's son, he took his place in the mine beside his father.

"What would you have him do in Wales?" my uncle said, "pan for gold?"

I aspire to higher things. There is nothing glamorous here in this town. There is little work here for a working man.

He was good enough for you to lay with, my uncle said.

I never lay with him. I lay with the night and the heat, with dreams of my future.

You never loved him! my uncle cried.

John had a look himself of heat that tore me from my shoes. Shall I marry him for that?

"He'll make you a good provider," my uncle said, and saw us down to the boat. "Kiss the new world for me," he shouted after us.

It was I who grasped our new lives, my nights of staring into the bay across the waters, dreaming of love and children and a new world. I cut the anchor and plunged into the lights. Then I grasped the beginning and the end of John, my husband, when he took me to the hospital to give birth to Ian and then to Myra.

"What shall we call them?"

"The boy will be Ian and the girl will be Myra."

"Welsh names?"

I moaned with homesickness. "It is harder than I thought it would be, giving birth so far from home. "I am glad you have chosen Welsh names, but it should be Moira."

"In our hearts it will be Moira."

I grasped it then, the rolling ocean and John who tried to be anything but a miner's son, and one day said foolishly to me, "Well, I have taken a job in the mines," and looked out at the blue mountain as if it were a woman he must lay with or die.

"No matter," I said bitterly. We both remembered his father's death by suffocation and how the mine blew up in his uncle's face, and we did not look into each other's eyes.

How I grasped that! "This is not Wales," I said.

Indeed not, and we went back that summer with our two handsome children to show them off to the old world. My uncle was blind and my aunt hobbled about him. We are getting old, old, she shrieked. Do people get old over there?

"Aunt is getting senile," John said.

"And the town is getting poorer." What happened to the huge white ships that used to come into the harbor and all the people on board who shouted for joy.

"There is oil slick everywhere," John said, peering over the wharf.

Where is the meadow, John, where you and I used to—. I cannot find anything.

"Let us go back," he said.

Let me visit the graves of my mother and father and tell them I shall not return again.

Pity they didn't live to see you grow up, my uncle said, and go to America.

John, I screamed at him on the steps of the building, Myra is dying. Our child. Our daughter. What shall I do in this country without her?

Let us go back, he said, because here I cannot even find a job. And a man without work is a eunuch.

Let us go back quickly to the place where our children were born. Now we know it is our home too.

And we sailed back, and took John's old mother with us as a souvenir.

"You mustn't tell her," John said. "She's too old."

"Of course not. What use would it be?" I cannot find a useful virtue to practice.

I am very frightened, John said, more frightened than when I could not find work. Why is that? Why am I frightened and you are not?

My pain is more terrible than fear.

"How long?" I said to the doctor. The words were part of my performance.

"Not a year," he said.

I straightened out my gloves on my pocketbook. In Pwithiel, when I was growing up, all correct young ladies carried gloves. Though we lay in the meadow at night, we carried gloves and no one called us indecent.

"She'll be twenty," I said. He looked away from me, as if I had accused him of this. His eyes said: go home, I have nothing else to say.

"Thank you," I said, and got up from my seat.

"What did he say?" John said in the outer office, his eyes so ringed and desperate.

"Come, John," I said, "let us walk. A little air will do us both good." Old remedies. Hang your soul out in the sunshine to dry. Let the wind clean it of its thoughts. Myra is dying, and for all I care, John, you may die too!

You deserted me, finally, and I always knew you would go, one way or the other, drink or the mountain between your legs.

I did not go for the love of anyone else. I went into emptiness. I put my hat on my head and walked out. You knew where you could find me.

Yes, up three flights of steps in an old boarding house. I always knew you would wind up like those men in my nightmares, suffering the fate of drunkards and miners.

How could you stay? John said. How could you watch her?

My toes gripped the earth on the cemetery. How shall I stand? I thought. So he has come home to bury her. I despise you, John! I despise the fear that was always there in your eyes. I despise your uncertain laugh. I despise the way you wipe your hands on the back of your pants, and how unsure you came to be in love. Myra is dying. No man will ever touch me again.

After they were born, you treated me like a wild animal.

And so you were. You could not see that if they were sick or crying, my mind could not be on you. Let them cry, you said. I shall never forgive you for that.

We walked from the doctor's office, your cap in your hand, your lunch box under your arm. You tried to touch my hand. I humbled you

with my silence. My daughter is dying. It is a fact. The whole world knows it. The air, the automobiles, the dogs, the children, the trees. It is not just a doctor's opinion. It is a fact. Everyone is saying it. I will always despise you because you did not let me go to her when she cried.

"Myra will get better. You'll see, she will get better."

No, no, John you are only saying that to ease your conscience. You have not the strength to live hopelessly. I have been watching her all this while, wondering if she will die in the winter or in the spring. How will it be? I ask myself. I cannot fathom the emptiness, the empty place in the world where Myra has been. My soul was so filled with her this year, her pain, her patience, the needlework hour after hour, the idleness of waiting to die, the threading together of talk, her panic if I left her to shop, and her conquest of it. Myra, you are my whole life, I said to the coming void. Do not go.

She looked up from her chair in the backyard and caught me spying on her through the kitchen window. Wise, wise with the knowledge of my suffering. She waved her hand in the sunshine, greeting me.

I took the prescription and went to the drugstore. I told John's mother to prepare lunch. We tried to spare her. We told her nothing, and she knew. "I shall be back this afternoon in time for supper," I said, but never intended to stay away that long. "I'll only attend to the few errands I must."

Mr. Morse pursed his lips, his habitual sign of pity. Forty years in the drugstore had left him with only this expression. He knew what the medicine was for.

"Twelve dollars," he said apologetically. His soul sniffled as he rang up the cash register.

Mr. Morse, I said, you know your medicine is worthless and you are robbing me of my money.

Go home, Mrs. Demeter, he said, and grasp her hand and do not leave her side.

Yes, Mr. Morse. I have shopped here for twenty-six years. I was always a good customer to you and of what use was it.

I took the medicine and went back, crushed. Everyone knew, and their sympathy was portentous. My neighbors treated me with reverence and turned away from me, an object of superstition to be handled

with respect at a distance, with caution and cleverness. Mrs. Tragedy in a housewife's apron.

When she could not sit anymore and could only lay in bed, they came to the door and asked in hushed voices, "How is she?" Kind and careful.

I measured my civility. I never told them the truth.

"Now, see here, Myra," I said, taking the good, old tone of authority, used up and sagging, "you must sit up and get some sun. You must find the willpower to fight this."

"I have been enjoying the quiet," she said.

"Goodness!" I said, without point, punishing her for my pain.

She put her head on a side thoughtfully. Yes, her expression said, you cannot imagine that I am grown up and ready to die. She picked up my hand and kissed it. She turned back to the needle and sampler by her side, and tried to fix her attention on it, so hard to do laying on one's back. God forgive me, John, how can I forgive you for leaving?

I picked up my pocketbook and said, "Myra, I have a dentist's appointment and must go out for a while. I'll bring you back some oranges." How my tongue moved, I don't know. I floated above my sorrow. I went down to the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows and let myself in through a side door. Though it was not our church, John, I knew my way around it as if I had been there a thousand times. There was nothing unfamiliar to me, and I felt no strangeness in my assault. Help me, I screamed to the stones. Mary, mother of Jesus, hear me, help me, save me. You who lost a son, intervene for my daughter. Mother of sorrows. Take me. My life is worthless without her. I assure you I will go. Do not give me this terrible destiny. Do not make me stay by her side and watch her die.

You asked me how I stayed, John. I stayed because you went. I stayed to talk the long, empty hours away with her. I stayed to comb her hair when she could not raise her hand anymore.

I remembered to go to the fruit store to make good my excuse. I saw, as soon as I entered the store, that the Klausners would have been happier if I had not come. Mrs. Klausner stood behind the shelves of oranges as if she were hiding herself, her hands stuck into the folds of her butcher apron, her face bloated with sorrow, her eyes watery with circumspection. She shrank back as soon as I entered, as if she were

warding off the blow of my presence, and Mr. Klausner stepped out in front of her.

Here's a curiosity. Usually it is she who is forward and sharp and he who turns his back, hoping not to hear anything he might have to contend with. But he stepped forward to protect her, forewarned by the arrangement of their marriage how courage was distributed between them.

"Yes?" His eyes hung above my head, searching the door and hoping another customer would enter.

No one likes death, I said to him.

Mrs. Klausner sank further back behind the oranges, her small eyes watching me for signs of hysteria.

Your tragedy is stale by now, I said to them. They had lost two sons in the war, before I had come to this town. I could not know how it hurt them. I looked at Mrs. Klausner to see if her loss was still part of her life.

Her face was hardened with emptiness. She hid behind the oranges, behind her husband, though her tragedy was stale by now and she could not claim respect from anybody.

I could not know this, I said to her, what you had suffered. I could not know at any time until yesterday. Death was always the past to me, a matter of old people.

Mrs. Klausner stiffened: It is the death of children that is truly death.

No other death matter, does it, Mrs. Klausner? I said.

Mr. Klausner heroically weighed up a bag of oranges for me. Go home, Mrs. Demeter, he said. Go home, for at any moment it becomes too late. He refused payment for the oranges.

"Don't be silly," I said to him. I will not let the universe break down.

He held up his hands. He needed to be generous. "A gift," he coughed.

"Thank you." There is a harmony between our souls. I shall know now forever what you have lost.

Go home, Mrs. Demeter, Mrs. Klausner said hoarsely.

I looked at my wristwatch. "Goodness, I almost forgot my dentist appointment." I must keep all my appointments. I must not miss

anything. Their eyes saw me to the door, wishing me gone, conscience-stricken. I walked past the church and did not go in again. My soul was too dry, even for prayer. My face was as dry as Mrs. Klausner's, puffy with tears that would not fall. But I was a model of careful behavior. I carried courage like my white gloves because it was the decent thing to do, because the world could not bear with me. I saw how the children on the bus kept their eyes averted. The future is terrible, my face said to them, and they scrambled off at their stops as quickly as they could.

And the past, Dr. Bloom said. "Would you like novocain?"

"Will it take long?" Suddenly I panicked. I had been gone so long. "Perhaps I'd better come back another time."

"No," he moved the light through my mouth. "It's best not to neglect these things."

There was a dire message in that, the advice of a friend: Take care of yourself, Mrs. Demeter.

Dr. Bloom, I said to him, I could not know when I was so young what the war was like for you. My mind mused over his past. "Let the novocain go," I said.

He winced on my behalf and peered into my mouth. "I shall be as quick as possible."

"No matter," I said, suddenly relaxed. I am very happy to sit here in this chair. "Please, take your time."

Mrs. Demeter, you have a cavity.

My head swelled up with a terrible pain. The tears of months fell. "I am so sorry, Dr. Bloom."

He pulled over his stool and gave me a box of tissues. "Sorry?" he said. You have every right to cry, Mrs. Demeter. "Please!" He pleaded with me not to apologize.

I was composed within seconds. "I shall never do that again," I said.

"Please," he said again, warding off my confession, and he pushed himself away into the shadow of his office and arranged some equipment on a shelf.

I got up off the chair to leave. He looked at his watch. "I have no more patients for today. Let me walk you to the bus."

You think my step will falter, I said grimly. "Thank you. No need. I assure you I am fine."

He smiled weakly, apologizing for his concern, and took off his smock. "I would like to go for a walk myself. Sometimes I come in here and forget what the weather is like. Out I go at night, and to my surprise it is winter."

Your talkative compassion is a terrible problem to me. It makes me feel guilty. I know so little about you.

He pushed the button for the elevator. "I was once in Wales," he said.

"Were you?" I said, taking my cue for conversation from him, though it was curious to think of him as having been in my country.

"Yes. After the war. They sent me to England and then to Wales. A lovely country."

I acknowledged his politeness. The elevator came. The sun outside was startling. I had never seen Dr. Bloom outside his office. As we waited for the bus to come, he held my bag of oranges for me, stupidly, as if I were a schoolgirl, and I realized how he indeed came from Europe.

Take care, Mrs. Demeter, he said urgently. Do not let small discomforts mount. Attend to daily needs.

Is that all the wisdom you have? I screamed at him. I was suddenly in panic at how long I had been gone. My attention strained towards home. My teeth were irrelevant to me. The order of the universe was destroyed. Myra was dying. The bus filled with five o'clock traffic. The noise in the streets mounted. The bus stopped and started, stopped and started, letting off passengers, taking them on. Each face had a design to it, a destiny irrelevant to me.

Take care, Mrs. Demeter. Dr. Bloom's voice shouted after me, do not let the malignancy of the universe become your guiding fate.

You'll never make it in the new world, I shouted back to him. I can't stop it, I cried. I cried on the bus. People made a little space for me, imagining I was drunk or had gone mad, in either case not to be contended with. Myra is dying, I said to them. I stared at the space made for me. My mouth was full of pain. Without language. The politeness of the world mounted. "Steady," someone said. I clutched my bag of oranges and got off at my bus stop.

Your mother sat on the chair by her bedside. "I have called John and Ian," she said.

"Myra!" I screamed. Let my voice go with you wherever you are. Let my love guide you through the shadows of death. I tell you, John, her lashes moved. My good girl heard me. Ask your mother. Yes, she said to me and got up heavily from the chair, you thought death only happened in the old country. Now you know it is everywhere.

I couldn't have known that when I was a young girl.

"Did she ever ask for me, ever?" John said. He whispered it, cravenly, into my neck as we listened to the minister.

Ian would tear from me this hardness against you, which is all the protection I have, something to pit my bitterness against.

That is the way it has always been from the moment we came to this country. You saw when I went back to the mines that things would not be so different. "It is what I know best." I could not transform my fate for you. And when the children came, you wore them like amulets against your disappointment.

Wisely, your mother has removed all expression from her face for the present. But her mood is in her shoulders, in her walk. She comes across the cemetery, glancing from me to you, from you to me. Her mind is made up: he did not leave you for another woman, snatch at what you can in him. Something there still is.

"Did she ever ask for me?" you ask. "I prayed for her every night," you said.

You have washed yourself clean today, John. Ian sees you for the first time. He will never take your advice about anything again. Already he has unravelled himself from us. I shall never forgive you, John, but I shall live with you. "Why make it worse," Ian said. That is our morality. The emptiness of your going and my staying will always be between us. I stayed with her to the end, to comb her hair, to wash her body, to see her skin turn grey. The minutes of life are so fragile, I have each one of hers until the end. I have lived in a place you will never see, John, a place of enmity and nerve and terrible love. I have it all. I will always have it all. I grasped it all, because I stayed, John. From beginning to end.