The Lost Fisherman

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Emily came flying down the steps, glaring at a piece of paper in her hand.

'May have time to get the tape,' she muttered.

She let the scrap float away, and ran down the street. It was quiet and warm and empty; the only person in it besides herself was a woman in black ringing a door bell. The church clock was striking five behind the roofs which were only a little lower than the tops of the huge chestnut trees: from the churchyard stole the green scent of the sward, the coolness, lightness, peace, of the petal-dripping trees.

But round the market hall trampled these strange crowds that the small townspeople were getting so used to; hot, bewildered people, burdened, with a dazzled look on their faces, looking for hotels, for lodgings, for rest. Some of them were sitting on the stone stairway, with their suitcases; some were eating, and some with their hands loosely clasped were staring downhill into the blue-grey hollow of the town. Many more would be queuing at the bus stop, the cafés would be full; there would be forms being signed in all the sash-windowed offices just as if the whole population were suddenly going to prison or to law or something. For last night London had had another heavy raid, and the three o'clock train had come in at half past four. Emily bought the tape from a country girl who was blind in one eye, and

selling buttons instead of looking after her father's poultry. She was sagging on the counter.

'Are you done in? So'm I.'

They had been to school together.

'Lord, you can't believe it,' said the girl, heaving herself up on her elbow: 'poor souls – there's any a host of 'em. God knows where they'll all sleep tonight. It must be *awful* up there! Has your sister come away?'

'Not yet. We wish she would. Keep on writing. Mother's terribly worried.'

'She must be. Yes, it's terrible with children…'

Emily nodded. She wondered if Annie and her family were still alive; if they still existed. Any moment they might not. Any second – the flashes when the truth showed were unrealisable. It was vile and horrible and terrifying, and yet unreal. Thinking was a physical, aching disease trying to conquer another disease – that of not thinking. Allow yourself to be injected – submit to noble advertisements. Save, work, smile. Be poster educated. London was being struck and struck and struck again. Annie and the children lived there. Patrick was a prisoner. England was close, how close, to invasion. Patrick, Patrick.

She came out of the shop and looked at the town hall clock. Slow by the church chimes, she noticed. The white face with its hands like an enormous pair of scissors, what did it mean to her? There would always be only one time now on it. That was because she had been staring at it when she held the telegram. A Prisoner of War. A quarter to three. Queer. How did the telegram come to be in her hand? She would never quite remember. Her mother was away: and she had felt, 'This joy isn't mine. I carry it.'

There was a word *widow* and a word *motherless*, but for the condition of a woman who had lost her son there was no simple expression. Childless was false; a woman whose only son was dead was more his mother than she had ever been: she was as secret, as filled with mystery as when she

and her child were one being, only this time she carried his whole life and death – she was the mother of his death.

Emily had gone into the telephone box. Her mother's voice said, 'Yes, dear?'

'Mother, good news. Hold on to something. Patrick is a prisoner.'

Faintly the voice: 'Emily… Emily…'

Now the town hall clock meant that hour. But sometimes these days when she looked at it she thought there was always time for grieving. Yes, always, Emily said to herself, turning round. Not for touching your love, or for seeing or being aware of the landscape you lived in, but always for sorrow.

Down the hill she plunged into the spinning people. The smell of war was the smell of a herd, weary and swollen footed. It wasn't the dead, but the driven, the sweated road, the shambling herd.

To avoid the direct but choked way home, she dashed up a narrow side street, one of the oldest in the town. Years before, a few cottages had been demolished. The walls still stood lodging in their niches the flying weeds of the fields, the winged grass which owned the earth, the nettles of gardenless places. Dandelions were in bloom and seeding, their bare wicks standing stiffly whence the flame had blown. There was the quiet intense odour of wallflowers in sunlight; and out of a doorless doorway two white butterflies lurched as if a breeze had puffed them out of the enclosure.

It was May. Oh, why did that still concern her? What was so urgent that it would not wait until the war was over to be beautiful again? Could you pull mankind like a burr out of your heart? But Emily stopped, swaying, conscious of this other presence in the worn, cracked street – the presence which made itself felt from the trees in the churchyard, and from the sight of the hills from her window.

She happened to stop, and she happened to peer round the doorhole…

The mumbled heaps, the smooth dirt and weeds, had been somebody's garden. It was worn to a gloss with children's games, but in the centre grew a lilac tree, its clusters faded to a bluish-grey, dropping their crumbs in the shade. There, close to the trunk in a rocking chair, a paper tossed over his knees, a man sat sleeping: he was quite unconscious. His powerful, innocent face free from eagerness, away from the frightening smell of people, he slept like a lad in a field, and Emily wished she might wait by him for a little while. She knew him, though not his name. She wondered as she turned away if he lived in that street – she had always wondered, though not in an asking way, where was his home. And what had made her stop? Was it the white butterflies, that had flown as though from his brain almost into her hand?

'Is there any news from Annie?' she asked, as she ran into the kitchen.

Her mother was at the sink, washing lettuce. She said there was no news.

'Mother, I've seen the fisherman!'

'Oh, have you? Do you know where he lives?'

'No, he was asleep!'

'Asleep?' sighed her mother absently.

'Yes, in a rocking chair in one of Saint's Cottages.'

'Well, what a strange place to doze in! I can't bear to walk up that street, it smells so bad.'

'You couldn't smell the gas today. Oh mother – gas. We've had a terrific day. Two gas extractions and both fought like mad. Poor Mr Jones, I bet he's bruised.'

'My dear child! You must be tired. Sit down and eat something. Were you all right?'

Emily had taken a temporary job as a dentist's nurse and receptionist, being quite untrained except in sterilising instruments and comforting people. 'Oh yes, quite,' she said. 'I stood behind them, it was old Jones got the kicks. I say, Mum, I think I'll ring Annie up tonight.'

She was twenty-seven and was to work in the ordnance

factory at Chepsford as soon as the real nurse recovered from an operation. Meanwhile she quite liked her work. She never thought about it after the day was over. It was that kind of job. Teeth, she thought, when handed about, were rather absurd: otherwise she had grown used to the white overall, the sterilisers, the appointment book.

But – seeing the fisherman! As she ate her supper and helped to wash up, everything else that had happened since the morning seemed ugly and monotonous. He belonged to a life that was neither tedious nor terrifying. If her mother had guessed the emotions that filled her, she would have said, Are you in love with him? No, no. It isn't *individual*, like that. He is something – he's part of something that's being lost. And I want it to come back. It's life. At least it is to me. Oh dear. Am I going out of my mind, or is my mind going out of me?

The house that Emily and her mother lived in was at the bottom of the town near the Co-operative Mill. It had stood for centuries and smelled of stone and mice and coal, and the spicy old beams which still had the bark on some of them. It was said to be the oldest house in the town. The street door had a large dented brass knob: when you turned it and stepped into the passage it was as if you came under the shadow of a great cliff, for all the sunlight was at the back where it fell into a tiny paved yard as into a box. A long narrow corridor of a path led past a wall with a fine flat vine, as ancient as the building, to a large plot of garden. Next to that was the Friends' graveyard which had in the middle a cedar tree. This enormous geni, so dark as to be nearly black, seemed dead to all sunshine and looked the same by moonlight as by day. The house was simply Number 17, but to the older spirits of the town it was known by its disused and genial name of The Friends' House.

The room where they were eating their early supper was the kitchen. It was clean and orderly: quiet with polished brown furniture, and lit by the evening sun. The door into

the yard, and the well lid in the flagstones were open, for both Emily and her mother liked the delicate, flashing reflection of the water which flickered about the imprisoned space. The ferns and vine leaves were still: flies wove the evening light into their loom, and there was a calling note from a blackbird in the apple tree next door.

Emily looked at the canaries swaying in the window; she gazed meditatively into the corner at the oilstove. When war seemed close, she remembered her mother had said they would have to move the oilstove. How she had laughed! But it had come true, and they had moved it, for the shutters wouldn't close when it was in the window. Not a pinch, not a leaf of light showed after dark now. Emily, glancing at the fuchsias in their pots built up on bricks, recalled how the lit plants were sprinkled on the darkness before the blackout came.

After they had washed up, she went and sat in the front room by the 'town window'. She was as glad of the shade as of a different mood. The mother lay on the sofa, her tired legs lifted high on cushions. She read the paper, her face grim and pale, frowning with anxiety. Emily looked at the chestnut trees behind the warehouse, and the clear sky. She could hear the blackbird singing, 'Bird of Paradise, Bird of Paradise', over and over again, and then most sweetly, gently, 'Come butty, come butty, come butty'.

It was so small a town that ducks swam right through it on the brook. Jays and woodpeckers flew screeching over the roof, regarding it perhaps as no more than a large and stony shadow. The wind sowed hayseeds in the cattle market, and the gardens, even the scratchiest, were scented with their red hawthorns and lilacs. Everywhere one went one breathed them. And there was the river, and the silver-blue hills.

May, all of May, Emily thought, her arm resting on the sill, her body supple and pleasant. The shadow of their gable was falling on the road, and the sun was pouring gold over the pale blue sky. A slow dusty echo tracked each footstep.

But down here in the faded part of the town where there were no hotels but only poor men's lodging houses, they escaped the weary rummaging on the hill.

Slum games were scrawled in chalk on the pavements, women looked at their neighbours' doors, and men in shirt sleeves smoked. The human beings, the trees, bathed in the delight of the evening. Children, grime painting scowls on their faces, sulky mops of hair in their eyes, squealed and squatted akimbo on their games, monkey hands on their knees.

May, May, May! The time of year when all is perfect and *young*. The hills were the same, the trees had the same roots, as when she was a child at Aunt Fran's. How long the grass must be! She could feel her toes combing through it, aching with cold dew, the snapping of a clover head in a sandal buckle. She could see the white billy goat chained to the stone roller. How many horses did Uncle Donovan say it would take to move it? All of them – ten horses. Ten horses in the stable…

Her mother got up and went out. Emily lapsed on. The women came and seized the children; the doors shut, the air grew purer and more and more transparent, as if for silence to shine through it. At last Emily thought of the river, shining smoothly under the mist, on those early morning bathes. Why did it all seem so near, and closer every day, and yet so irrevocably saddened? If one person dies, the past is altered. Uncle Donovan was dead. People she had loved were dead. When you were young everyone was eternal. Her eyes moved, and she wondered at her emotion on seeing the sleeping man. She almost laughed. Yes, people would say she was in love with him. She laughed at the ridiculousness of her being in love with anybody. She couldn't be. And the fisherman – he wasn't like the others. Their talk had been casual, never cautious. They had never seemed to meet for the first time. In fact, although she could remember their first words, they never had 'met' any more than animals or birds

meet. He was – what? An atmosphere in her own soul. Something more than a mood which was increasing in her.

'My dear, I wish you'd go and ring up Annie.' Her mother was looking in. A flush was on her cheek and neck, streaking her thinness. Emily knew that this meant great nervous endurance. She jumped up and said she would go at once. Suddenly she shivered. She had to put on her coat.

It was quiet now, growing dusky. She had sat for a long time waiting for her call to come through. The mirror with the lettering on it was sinking into the shadow of the wall, the smoky voices in the bar were thicker. Suddenly someone shouted: 'Do with 'im? Give 'im to the Jewish women, and tell 'em to save something alive for the Poles.' There was a guttural laugh, a hoarse shuffling of tones, and then a blending again. Emily leant on the weak little cane table, the ice-cold edge of a slippery magazine touching her hand. Her heart beat in the long suspense and she sat with her eyes fixed on the telephone hanging in the corner by the door.

Presently the house emptied. There was a shambling noise in the street: the landlord looked in at her, rubbing his bare arms:

'Not through yet?'

'No.'

'Want a light?'

She shook her head.

'It's cold in here,' the landlord said, buttoning his cuffs, and he went out closing the door, leaving the shutters open. The moonlight fell towards the windowsill, creepingly, like a hand edging on to the keyboard. A twist of breeze made the hem of the white curtains writhe.

'There must be a raid on. I'll cancel,' she said to herself. Five more minutes passed. The landlord had gone back into the smoking room. He was crumpling papers, talking in a petulant undertone with louder bursts of sighs and yawns. A woman spoke sharply, '… this time of night?'

'She's trying to get London.'

'Oh! Well, I've locked up—'

The telephone rang.

'Annie?'

'Yes, Emily – you've had my wire?'

'No. Nothing.'

How cold and queer the air felt! And those old magazines with their odour of linoleum—

The receiver spouted words, all unintelligible: it whistled, it gurgled and was hollow with some deep resonance, like a dry pump.

'Tomorrow – tomorrow,' it shouted.

'All right,' she yelled. 'You're coming tomorrow. Is there a raid on?'

'Not 'alf,' said Annie's voice in a little space which it exactly filled. 'It's not too bad yet but I must get ready to take the children down to the shelter. There, did you hear that? Christ, I hope it's not going to be as bloody awful as last night.'

Emily heard her call, 'All right, I'm coming.' It was as if a prompter had spoken for the stage, a half-tone, sibilant, expressionless. Then she seemed to have hung up. She went out into the passage and tapped on the hatch.

'Finished?'

'Yes, thank you.'

The man looked at her as she paid. He stooped, then reached up, and then once more framing himself pushed a little glass towards her. 'Come on, Miss, drink this. I know you won't tell on me.' He winked, but his face was concerned: 'It's bad up there.'

She drank. The blood bristled in her cheeks, she leant against the wall, not because she was overcome, but because for the moment she was concentrating so intensely elsewhere that her own body began to slip sideways. She could see the skies. And those unseen, immeasurable arms which human beings carry folded in their breasts, reached out – out – out to

fold back the menace. She stood in this state of extended will, her spirit a vaster version of her physical resistance, for about a minute, and then went out, carefully shutting the street door.

'Emily, how long you have been! Was it all right?'

'Yes, Mother, perfectly. She's coming down tomorrow.'

'Oh, thank God!'

Her mother was in her purple dressing gown, holding it round her throat, her eyes peering over the light of a tiny lamp she held, with a globe like an orange: 'There was nothing happening?'

'No, Mother.'

'But why hasn't she wired?'

'She has. I don't know why we didn't get it. I must just go and finish emptying those drawers.'

'It's a pity you didn't do it this evening. You ought to go to bed. I'm glad we've arranged things.'

For days they had been discussing receiving Annie and the children. There were only two large upstairs rooms, and the mother wouldn't think of using the attics in case of incendiaries. She would share the great brass bed with Annie, and the two little girls would have Emily's room. Emily was to go every night to sleep at Aunt Fran's farm – about a mile away from the town. It was a gentle level walk, by the river: she would love it. It was the possibility of returning to Aunt Fran's roof perhaps which was making such a vividness among her memories of her childhood when she had lived at Ell Hall for a year.

Electricity was expensive. The two women lit a larger lamp and went upstairs. In their dressing gowns and soft shoes they fanned from corner to corner, Emily bending over a trunk, her mother absently touching the walls as if she were planning certain movements.

At last she sat on the end of the sofa to unroll the elastic stocking from her bruised and swollen veins. 'Jamie's cot *there*?' she murmured. She got up and touched the wash-stand.

They moved it: somehow they both wanted to complete everything, to move into their own new positions as far as possible that night.

They continued their soft, hushed midnight work. Sometimes the boards shook under the grey-green carpet, and the young starlings stirred startlingly in the chimney. But at last they were in bed. The blackout curtains of heavy sage-green serge were left across the mother's window in case she might remember anything she might want to collect in the night. But Emily pulled hers back; her sash window looked towards the garden and the faint irridescent colours of a moon cloud. There were the vine leaves and the path leading to the moon and the cedar tree. She lay on her side facing them, her hair all pushed into a heavy sensation at the back of her head. Her hands burned with the restless touching of the day, but at last they were alone.

The night was the ghost of the day, as the moon was the ghost of the sun. And the fragrance which balanced in the window was the ghost within a ghost, neither retreating nor advancing, but fluttering outstretched and withdrawn like a breath.

She didn't sleep. Her eyes refused to close over the dream in her brain. Planes drove over; and it was as if they were seaming together long strips of sky. But when they had gone the wavy stillness of the night still clung about the leaves unchanged.

She began to see Annie in the shelter, the baby on her lap, and the little girls in the top bunk, peeping tearfully over the abyss. Guns, bombs, barrage, and then the screech of a plane being drawn into the vacuum.

She sat up suddenly, and drove her head between her knees, embracing her body with those amazingly powerful thin arms: 'All this! Oh, what a pity I can't go to sleep because then I get there, I get there…'

She rocked, and then driven to stillness crouched in a knot, surprised at her dry voice. Her eyes felt as if they must work,

must see everything; not seeing anything, she was reduced to their corner in her flesh.

Unexpectedly she saw. What she saw was the fisherman's peaceful face, asleep. She had started up at the shelter scene, but now she lay down again and turned her face into the shelter of her hands, lined, as it were, with chilly, green grass. She found she could array her thoughts if she couldn't release them.

When you were out of doors your body became the touch, the texture of the world, with all its fluid airs, plants, waters, wind. The wind's flesh crept against yours, and the grass clothed the prone body with its feeling of openness and closeness.

She saw the river meadows, the little red bays in the bank where the turf had slipped into deep pools, and bendings where the river bent, the narrow green path rubbed into the grass. Across it lay a fishing rod. Sitting precariously on one of the jutting turfs which was dead and brown fibre, was a man, feet braced against a lolling alder limb. It was March; he wore a belted raincoat, but he had thrown a scarf into the tree. She was walking towards him: as she came closer he turned his face and looked quietly at her. And then suddenly, but not as if it *were* suddenly, they were speaking to each other. This happened quite often until six weeks ago, but as an image she retained none except the first meeting. She knew that of all the faces she had met, there was none at all like this one. It was secret, if candour can be secrecy; it could have been knowing, but she had never seen it when it was. Very dark shining eyes, oval, olive cheeks and chin, a smooth skin. They couldn't resemble each other physically but she felt as though each of them sent the same lights and shadows up to the surface. She walked on guessing, 'I can look like that.' For a few weeks every time she walked that way she met him, and then one day, not. She didn't see him again until she looked at him in the weedy rooms of the ruins. But she was sure they had understood something instantly,

perfectly, and for ever. They were friends. And in their perfect familiarity with each other there was incalculable individual solitude.

She smiled into her hands. And this time it didn't feel as if she were roaring with laughter in the middle of everybody's despair. It felt as if she were talking to the fisherman about the curlews and watching the male bird go round and round the sky, calling and searching. The fisherman always made her think of the bird, the hills and the river, and not of himself: he recalled to her a beam of the true meaning of freedom and fulfilment: with him or thinking of him she became again the real Emily who used to swim across the river in the early mornings, who was free, whose being absorbed and radiated the harmony of the countryside in which she was growing. Perhaps it was talking to him which had made her ponder so much on her childhood this terrible spring.

Sleep was like tears in her open eyes, sharp yet tender. She was getting there. Her mind swayed and she no longer knew herself as separate and conscious. The room was the linen room at Aunt Fran's where she had slept, with the dark brown cupboard at the foot of the stairs and the dull leaded window, like a pattern of muslin in grey and black with another pattern of twigs shadowed through it. She remembered how coarse seemed the texture of the sky seen though the thick glass… She was looking up at the candle Aunt Fran was holding, floating in its haze, blinking… And then the room was gone and she was sitting on the garden seat watching her aunt's fingers as she split filberts open with a silver penknife. They were sitting under the Wellingtonian and the air was full of the scent of resin. Aunt Fran was saying:

'Your uncle and I are very fond of you. You have always been good with us.'

It was evening. Children were shouting; a vast splash of light over the west meadows dazzled through the trees. She

put out her hand to lift the basket from the grass when suddenly she was awake and knew there had been an eruption of sound which she hadn't heard. It was like a silent explosion which shattered the perfect sphere of rest in which she was lying, and it was the siren.

The mother woke up convinced that she was young again. Her husband was alive: he was with her in the dream; she was married to him but they were being introduced. She woke, talking; part of her speech still seemed to be joined to her, but part had vanished.

'The wind was so lonely last night with the window bare that I went to bed early. It seemed so long since I had been playing the piano and talking…'

Then she heard herself say: 'Beethoven.'

She lifted her head: 'Where's the cot? Where's Jamie, my little Jamie? Annie! Where are the children?' She struck a match. She was awake now: 'Emily, Emily…'

She could just see the empty corner where the washstand had been.

Emily came in: 'I don't hear anything, do you? It must be Bristol again. Or Gloucester.' She was smoking and seemed tenuous with sleep, her body clinging to the support of the wall.

But as she came wavering round the big double bed, the mother moved to put her feet down, and seeing that unhappy blue and white flesh hovering to reach the floor, a pity and an anger which she could never have mentioned caused her heart to make something like a gesture in her body.

'Don't get up, Mother,' she begged: 'It can't be anything else.'

'I hope they don't bomb the bridge,' began her mother. The bridge was very close, carrying the line across the street where they lived. Like a great many of the older women in this small town, Emily's mother instinctively regarded it as an exceedingly likely target – as indeed it might have been had the raiders ever discovered the whereabouts of the great filling

factory at Chepsford. The groan and slow thunder of the ammunition trains was a part of their nights. 'Lethal,' the mother would murmur, and the walls would tremble, like the pillars of the market house when the tanks and dismembered planes came swerving down the narrow streets.

They listened, their chins lifted, their necks stretched. Was that a plane?

'Bombs!'

They looked at each other in incredulous silence. And there fell through the sky two percussions locked in each other's vibrations. Clash, clash – like cymbals, like lightning with music. Emily had never heard two sounds so simultaneous yet so separate. It was most beautiful, distinct, entrancing, the way the skies played for that moment.

No thud came. No blow. The quicksilver fled all over their bodies: in the silence they stared and heard the mice ripping at the lining of the old house, rustling and searching through the crowded pockets of its deep cupboards.

'Put out the light!' said the mother.

About ten minutes passed in darkness. Some soot fell down the chimney and they heard it showering in the fender. A bird squeaked. The hush was the suspense of thousands listening, an underground, underdark thing, conscious and of the earth.

'I'm going to look out of the window,' said Emily. She saw fire on Hangbury Hill, red fire, crawling into the woods. She gazed and remembered how the birds and rabbits and snakes screamed when the heath was burned.

There were three bombs, they heard the next day. The man who is always present, no matter how outlandish the fact or the hour, described how he had seen them burst in the woods. He said the trees had writhed, there had been a kind of ashen light and the furrow in which he was standing had wriggled like a snake. He told the tale in the market square, outside the station, and in seven pubs.

Some of the strangers laughed.

'Well, damn!' they said. 'Fancy bombs here! Well what next, I say?'

But some of the rich ones were packing already, having heard of the neighbouring factories.

To Emily the event of the bombs crowded into an already crowded day. She wouldn't think about them. The weather was clear, but there was something stifling in the air, something sated and flaccid. Through the warm swishing streets the scent of meadows and chestnuts in bloom drifted with the smell of the fire-blighted broom and gorse now scattering in slow smoke. She was busy: a great many patients were admitted, but there was nothing dramatic in this day's work: and as she sat eating her lunch in Mr Jones' conservatory, where somebody had left the hose dribbling among the legs of half a dozen wormy kitchen chairs, her mind returned again and again to that one generous year of childhood with her aunt. There was something then on or behind those smoking hills for her. One by one her passions were being lost, but this – this spirit of place, this identification of self with unregarded loveliness and joy – seemed, after a dormant cycle, to be becoming her life.

She sat breathing the green, double-hot air of the geranium-trellised conservatory, eating sandwiches and seeing Aunt Fran. Sometimes she was in her greenhouse, stretching her nose over the plants, with the perfume of the vine in all her movements, but most vividly she saw her at her bedroom window on a summer evening about seven o'clock. Emily saw her smiling and waving across the buttercup-yellow fields to the distant shallows where the naked town boys were splashing like stars in the burning silver water. 'Look, look – I suppose we can call it summer now,' the aunt would laugh. And it *was*: such summer as it had never been since. There she would sit, and call Emily to her to come and have her hair curled before going to bed. She held the brush on her lap, and the fingers of her right

hand she dipped into a mug of tepid water before twisting each strand of hair into the rags. Emily could feel the slight, drowsy tug at her scalp, and the selected lock sliding through Aunt Fran's first and second fingers. The book she was reading aloud lay open on the dressing table among the silver things and the old yellow combs – *The Story of a Red Deer…*

'There! Goodnight. And when you're in bed sing me a song.'

'What shall I sing?'

'Well – 'John Peel' – or – 'The Keel Row'.'

Her voice seemed to stir in her as she remembered, and she heard the air coming from herself as she crouched in the bed.

As I came through Sandgate, through Sandgate, through Sandgate,
As I came through Sandgate, I heard a lassie sing…

The silent voice in her was physical now – she could hear it, feel it rising… she never sang at The Friends' House; she liked to sing out of doors. She saw the leaves in the walnut tree, the wall where Esau, the red cat, sat in the dusk, she heard the owl, and felt the grain of the light fading in the room.

I heard a lassie sing.

Why did it all seem beautiful then? It couldn't have been, not everything. But no Emily nowadays would climb an oak tree to see if sitting in it would make her sing like a blackbird, nor listen to the notes with such an unaffected thrilling expectancy.

When her work was over she went straight home. A little girl in a red check pinafore, whose two hands had swallowed the door knob, was jigging on the doorstep, and peeping through the keyhole. Her laughter and that of another child

inside was pealing out into the street. When she saw Emily she peeped up sideways under her arm.

'Hullo, Aunt Em'ly.'

'Hello, Ann.'

'What d'you think I'm doing?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm looking at Diddle. And Diddle's looking at me. I can see her eye. I said I'm going to look *in* at the keyhole. Because I'm not often out in the street. Hullo, Diddle,' she bawled, 'I'm here, are you there?'

'Hullo, Ann, I'm he-ere,' cackled a smaller voice, with bursts of chuckling. Suddenly Ann lost interest. She gave Emily a long stare that was cool, peculiar and consciously measured. And Emily felt shy of the child's sudden gaze and stooped to pick a red hair ribbon off the pavement. Ann triumphed, and yet was reassured. She broke up again into a small skipping, smiling creature.

'*We've* all run away from ole Hitler,' she said cheerfully. 'Mummy's here, and Diddle and Jamie. Did you know?'

She twirled the door knob faster, and the catch inside went clack-clack.

'I knew you were coming,' said Emily.

'Jamie wasn't frightened. Diddle was. Wasn't you, Diddle, eh?'

'Ye-e-s,' chuckled the child inside.

'Diddle cried. Jamie didn't. I'm going to open the door. I want to tell you something.'

They went into the cool stone shadowed passage which was heaped with luggage and a pram. Diddle, a very short fat little thing, was squatting on the mat.

'Don't touch!' cried Ann anxiously: 'This is the-wipe-your-feet mat, Aunt Em'ly. I put something under it. I didn't want to drop it. It's a penny. Here it is. Heads or tails?'

'Tails,' screamed Diddle.

'Not you – Aunt Em'ly,' said Ann with jovial authority.

'Ann!' a voice called.

'She's here, playing pitch and toss,' shouted Emily.

'Toss you for tuppence, Ann, PQ'

'I've won, I've won. I always know. That's what I wanted to tell you. This is tails,' said Ann mysteriously.

'Tails,' said Diddle.

'You look.'

'Ye-e-es.'

'You mustn't look!'

'I muttoned look…'

Annie appeared, slanting out of a doorway, lunging into an apron.

'Ann, for God's sake—' her voice was dry with fatigue. '*Will* you come and drink your milk?' she muttered, seizing each bland child. She was thinner even than Emily, her terse red dress tossed over the wind of her limbs. She held Emily's eyes for a moment, in her own an unconscious hardness and contempt for all things irrelevant to pure animal life – a look which was the mother's at times. Yet far back, there was a friendliness: 'Hullo, sister, when there's a moment I shall see you…'

'See you. See you. See you. No, you won't. I don't live in your eyes,' said Emily to herself. She stepped out into the tiny stone yard; it seemed dull there – something was missing. Oh yes, the lid of the well was down and a great stone on it. The dark, ivy-green water was buried and all its flight of reflections.

'Emily,' said her mother, draining the potatoes over the grating so that the steam climbed the wall like a plant – 'Emily, fetch me that cloth, dear. I'm sorry there aren't any greens. I hadn't time to… thank you. Perhaps before you go you'd get us some nettle tops. Poor Annie has more than she can do.'

'Yes, Mother.'

She could hear the canaries cracking their seeds with a tiny insect-like pop. It was so hot that the stones were tepid in the shade. The pods of broom and gorse burst in the sun with that wee minute crack, with only the linnet to make the

stillness alive. Emily remembered, as if she saw the burnt grass and the sky above, the clicking and whirring world of heat. Upstairs the children being put to bed dropped a geranium leaf on her head and laughed in the bow window. She looked at her mother's amethyst beads and thought of the river. Under the drops and the silver, her mother's neck was patched with a scattered flush. Her love for her own children was all anxiety, only what she felt for her grandchildren was physical and enjoyable. She sat at the table straining not to interfere, not to run upstairs with kisses when Jamie cried, not to be upset by Annie's retorting voice. Annie, however, said less and less, and towards the end of the meal abruptly drew her chair back into the window and there sitting bowed with her strangely gnarled nervous hands binding her knees, cried wearily. Suddenly she seemed younger than Emily, younger even than her own children. And her attractive matronly little face which owed some of its beauty to work, but nothing to her everyday mind, became a rarer face – the real face. Seeing her crying, her breath jerking, terrified and childish, they knelt by her and tried to smooth the movements of her frightened body with their touches.

'He'll be killed. Oh Mother, Mother.'

'No, he won't, dear. No, he won't. Please… there,' pleaded the mother.

'Yes…' Annie cried; her tone struck them and they looked at her in silence. In the sunshine her shining tears crusted her: she smeared them from her eyes with her queer powerful fingers whose tips were like drops of coldness: 'Yes. I can't live, I can't live. I don't know anybody here. I want Tom. I want Tom.'

'Annie, darling, you've got the children!'

The temper of hysteria, which is so like mad fury, shook her. She stood up, crying out as she flew through the door: 'To hell with the children! I shall send them all to school and go back to Tom.'

The mother sat down, sighing. A slight breeze came blowing down from the garden and the vine leaves bent as though stroked by the dress of someone coming walking along the path. With that movement came the phase of evening, its entire separation from the day.

'What we shall do with her – what we *shall* we do – if Tom – if anything *should* happen to Tom. She told me before you came in – when she was quite quiet, you know – she told me he says she must be responsible for the children. She said, he said they must have *one*…'

'Yes,' said Emily drearily.

And now the seven o'clock train was in, two hours late, standing in the station releasing puffs of steam, and the light was beginning to bank against the trees and the yellow meadows. With a basket Emily was moving slowly along the coal dust path against a grey hedge of nettles, nipping off their tops with her gloved fingers.

Through the palings she saw the hurrying flickers of people with suitcases, bicycles, push chairs and children – all scuttering, like the pictures on the sticks of a fan which is shaken out and flicked back. The sound of their feet threaded past the new factory site where the hammering had ceased – the sound of their thin words, the tune of a stick being tapped out, towards the town, and three taxis shooting down the road. The greasy dark engine slid away: then came the pure smell of evening, the scent of sky and grazed fields, water and shadows.

She turned and put her basket down. She looked at two chestnut trees in flower, broad green and tapering blossoms balancing, that grew in a piece of willowy waste. The sunlight on them seemed part of themselves, and the flowers looked as if each one had been placed by a hand among the splayed leaves.

The birds sang. Their notes were always like echoes; as though one never heard the voice but only its reflection. The calls were the length of dark woods… as they sang, thought

Emily, in the rain outside the rooms one loved, where the fire was one slow old log charred like an owl's breast.

'I'd love to sit at a window and sew and look out at trees like that. For hours and hours and hours of quiet…'

In that minute she realised that she had achieved the complete vision of her desire and her indifference. Her desire was peace and freedom – the wildness of peace, the speed and voicelessness of it. Her indifference was her duty, which she would do. Try to do. The spirit of life would be laid by for years of spiritual unemployment, that was a part of war. She glanced at the trees, their leaves drooping now in the sinking light. She would take with her their stillness: as she left them she said goodbye.

'If you neglect yourself you must automatically belong to something else. The State. There's nothing else to claim you…'

Some quiet long task at a window looking out on chestnut trees in bloom. Sewing, writing poetry, or just growing older. Aunt Fran shelling peas, gathering raspberries. That kind of order, order not for its own sake, but for the wilder, more ecstatic rhythm which it imitated. Life's natural conformity to life, not to this warped form of death.

War has no seasonableness. No light or darkness, no true time but lies, lies, lies, to make the hands go faster.

She began to hurry, thinking of the clock.

Walking along the river to Aunt Fran's that night Emily met the fisherman. He came up the bank through the willows chewing a grass. She started when she saw him: she had been staring at the sky, all clear light, a sky which she seemed to have seen before but not on earth. As she stood wondering and unconscious, a dream of the night before came back to her with a feeling of distance and quietude. She remembered a kite bursting in space and two giant figures stepping down arm in arm and walking away, never turning round…

The fisherman wished her good evening. For the first time

they shook hands. He asked her where she was going; when she told him, he said that if she liked to walk back with him to the boathouse he would row her up the river.

'It would save you going all round by the bridge,' he said. 'Would you like to? I've got the keys.'

Emily said she would love it, it was years since she had been on the water. So they turned and strolled along the bank. It was quiet and cool: they could smell the meadows up for hay and see the moonlight forming round the moon on the pale horizon.

'The moon looks as if it were made of thistledown,' said Emily.

He looked at her quickly, and away at the water again.

'Are you fond of the country?'

'Sometimes I think I'm fond of nothing else.'

They talked but seemed to give their minds to the river and the twilight. He went before her, holding back the bloom-laden sprays of hawthorn round which little moths were spinning their balls of flight: her legs were damp: in her flesh she felt the familiar chill of the fields at dusk and the clear wakefulness which often precedes sudden and deep sleep.

She was patient now, and at peace… she saw his olive hand with the greenish tan on it, holding back the branches, and she wondered how it came to be that they should know each other so completely and yet so subtly ignore each other.

He walked slowly, his feet making a frail noise in the grass. Over the flowerlit meadows on the other side a shell of mist was closing. There was an exquisite clear coolness and spaciousness. Water under a root fluted like some stationary bird.

'I work at the factory,' he said. 'That's why I haven't seen you for a long time. I'm a chargehand now.'

'I saw you yesterday,' she said, 'in Saint's Cottages. You were asleep, though.'

'Yes.' His voice was expressionless. 'I don't like little rooms in the summer. My shift's changed now. I shall be on days tomorrow.'

She went with him dreamily, her mind full of vague emotion and one sharp thought, that she would never forget this, because somehow she also knew that they would never meet again.

The river was bent like a scythe, and on it a single swan sailed opposite the boathouse. Its whiteness was sharp, distinct, and its being seemed to cease at the water line, it made so little restlessness of swimming.

Inside the boathouse was a huge hollow rolling noise and a wooden banging. That too was familiar: clubmen used it as a skittle alley. While the fisherman went in Emily stood looking down at the deep ditch under the hawthorns where the water was concealed by the white floating petals. The smell of the bloom was like forgetfulness. She held a branch to her face, and when she released it it flew up into the tree with a battering sound like a concealed wood pigeon's wild shudder into flight. She sighed a deep sigh to give her heart room. The fisherman came out with a pair of sculls. They stepped down to the landing. A moorhen whirred the water.

'Get in,' he said.

She walked steadily down the boat. She had a feeling as if her feet were breathing. Weeds wavered under the surface, darkness rose and clung. There was a sense of mist rather than dusk broken around them. The boat rocked and then poised itself into narrow balance. The river under it was taut and vibrant as a gut under a fiddler's finger…

The fisherman pushed out, then all in one movement he sat down and opened the wide embrace of the oars. They glided to the middle and then upstream. They had only a short way to go, the river making less than a quarter of the way that the fields roamed.

Pausing a moment, drawing his fists towards his chest and bunching them there, he looked at her smiling and asked: 'Can you row?'

'No,' she said; 'what does it feel like?'

'Grand.'

He added: 'I like to feel the oars bringing the tremble of the water up to my hands. They almost throb, you know, here and *here*. It's such a strong feeling, though – powerful—'

'Like electricity,' she said.

'Ye-e-es. A sort of connection with something one doesn't know. You think a lot, don't you?' he suddenly asked, fixing his eyes on her.

'No,' she said sadly.

'Well, you look as if you do. But perhaps you call it something else.'

She dipped her hand, sank and floated it, watched its inner fingertips of round green pearls sliding mistily along under the surface. Dandelion seeds were drowning; all the stillness of the grey elf world was flowing and they were silent for a while, the banks piled on either side of this quiet corridor of water darkening its edges.

'I don't know, I don't know,' she sighed in her thoughts.

'I often row up and down here all night,' said the fisherman: 'all night,' he repeated to himself.

'Do you?'

He stooped again as if he were lifting the river on his back, and strokes sent them jetting upward.

'Yes. I love the river. To me there's nothing like it.'

She imagined him at the factory all day and then out here, all night alone, never asleep, never losing sight of himself: 'But don't you ever sleep then? Aren't you tired the next day?'

'No, I don't feel tired. You see I can't live my life among a lot of people all the time, and then just sleep.'

She said nothing for a moment, laying her wet hand on her forehead. Then she asked, puzzled:

'How long are the shifts then?'

'Eleven hours.'

He smiled at her. Emily tried to smile back, but her mouth felt as if it had been trodden on. There was an extraordinary solitude upon his face like that of a man who is standing

away, right away beyond the last shelter, watching the lightning.

'My mother was a Frenchwoman,' he told her abruptly: 'but she wasn't a bit the sort of person you'd think. Not thrifty or tidy or anything Frenchwomen are supposed to be. I never knew what it was to have a solid pocket or a weathertight button on me… I used to wander about the fields. I've got the habits of a tramp now… oh, not the visible ones, I hope – no – but I can't stand houses simply because it seems you can never be alone in them. However—'

'I don't expect *a whole house*,' said Emily laughing: 'I like a *room* I can be alone in. And sit near the window.'

'I shouldn't like a country without trees, though,' she went on vaguely; 'you'd feel like a bee in a glass hive. Was your mother scientific?'

'Good God – my mother!'

'Well, I think Frenchwomen are.'

'Well,' he said, 'perhaps you're right. Perhaps she *was* scientific in her way. She liked growing flowers. White flowers – big white daisies – tall ones – I remember them all along our hedge, walking in the wind. Many a time coming home I've taken them for our white cat in the twilight. By jove, yes.' And he pulled an oar out of the water as if it had a root, and looked at the end of it dripping.

'Smell the fields,' he muttered, turning.

'My mother was a musician,' said Emily slowly, 'not one that anyone knew about – she just played beautifully and loved it. She wanted to be a singer, but her father wouldn't let her. Some other girl had failed. Do you know,' she was leaning forward, looking down at her feet and clasping her ankles with her cold wet fingers as she spoke – 'do you know, sometimes I think of Mother all day, and what I'm sure was the happiest part of her life. It was when she was about my age. She had gone from the piano to the organ. Whenever she speaks of Bach she seems to remember herself then, when she was beginning to play his fugues. She

used to pay a boy sixpence to blow for her. Just two of them on a weekday in an empty church… her eyes shine when she speaks of it. Oh dear, I think of her then. It's unspeakably sad because one of those days she must have walked out full of ecstasy and never gone back. I seem to imagine her leaving her joy behind forever and then all the troubles and the hard work and the poverty falling on her. And then, I can't help it, I look at her face and feel heartbroken. Isn't it dreadful? I suppose it isn't – not when you think of war.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'She got married?'

'Yes. And had four children. We're a poor substitute for Bach.'

'I don't know,' he said again gravely, thinking: 'Bach himself was probably a substitute for – I mean he took the place of – some woman's single freedom. Don't you think so?'

'Yes. But we are nearly all bad,' she said under her breath.

He was working the oar loosely, turning the nose of the boat towards the old sheep dip where she was to be landed. Glancing back at her, he demanded what she was thinking.

'I?' she said: 'I was thinking we shall never meet again. I don't know how I know it, but I do.'

'It's queer you should feel that, because it's very likely I shall be moved soon. Called up probably. I don't really care much where I go.'

'Don't you feel anything?'

'Yes, I feel something.'

'What?' she cried passionately.

'What?' he laughed, patting the water: 'Why, lost!'

The word seemed to sink down and down into the middle of the river. Her body felt light and chilly: she put her hand on the narrow edge of the boat and looked down at the shadow within the shadow of the reflected sky. A glow of yellowy green, precious light, *the light of darkness* as she saw it, lay on the level behind that they had left. On the top of

the bank the enormous hemlocks spread distinctly, neither black nor green but a strange soft brown colour of darkness. This was the place. The current, with its go up or go down, would not let them think.

'Goodnight,' she said, as the grass-swept boat thrilled against the bank.

'Goodnight,' he said at the end of the swaying boat.

'Goodnight and thank you.'

She jumped ashore. She stood on a stone. Hesitatingly he seemed to hover. Then came the clear plunge of the oars. The boat made a bias curve. She stared it away. From the fields the river was all mist, and the slight moonlight was only another kind of invisibility. He had gone. But she heard no stroke. He must be drifting down. He had gone and it was over and they would never meet again.

Emily bent and rubbed her feet which were as wet and cold as if they had been walking in the river. Neither of them had made the least individual acknowledgment of the other. It was from this point of view, the most inscrutable meeting in her life. And yet she understood what it might mean to each of them. Wasn't it the farewell to something each was feeling through the other? Wasn't that why neither he nor she could contradict her instinct that they would never talk together again? Was that too direct, too crude, an explanation? Wasn't it truly what it amounted to tonight?

She stood up, hooking both arms like wings, fists pressed against her, she fled down the tingling, tangled path, the pale yellow moon leaping about in the sky as she ran, the fragrance rising behind her from bruised clover, docks and nettles. In the home meadow each cow was lying still as a rock on the seashore. Her heart seemed to be vaulting in and out of a hole in her breast. A flock of ewes and lambs in the corner by the yard gate trembled on to their feet, shuddering like the echo of thunder in the ground as they shook themselves. The scent of honeysuckle was everywhere in the air as an intenser stillness. And now, the

grit of the yard sticking to her wet feet like sand, she bounded up the steps – she was at the house. Weak, dazed, she leant against the porch. There came a pounding vision of machinery, of voices unbroken by silence, into her ears and her closed eyes. The future…

She looked through the window into the room with its parasol of lamplight. Aunt Fran was asleep in her chair over her knitting, a candle in a brass candlestick burning beside her. The dim gold shone through the tangled room and out on to the lawn.

Emily thought, 'With that candle end I shall go to bed.'