

Edna O'Brien

*What a Sky*

THE CLOUDS – dark, massed and purposeful – raced across the sky. At one moment a gap appeared, a vault of blue so deep it looked like a cavity into which one could vanish, but soon the clouds swept across it like trailing curtains, removing it from sight. There were showers on and off – heavy showers – and in some fields the water had lodged in shallow pools where the cows stood impassively, gaping. The crows were incorrigible. Being inside the car, she could not actually hear their cawing, but she knew it very well and remembered how long ago she used to listen and try to decipher whether it denoted death or something more blithe.

As she mounted the granite steps of the nursing home, her face, of its own accord, folded into a false, obedient smile. A few old people sat in the hall, one woman praying on her big black horn rosary beads and a man staring listlessly through the long rain-splashed window, muttering, as if by his mutters he could will a visitor, or maybe the priest, to give him the last rites. One of the women tells her that her father has been looking forward to her visit and that he has come to the front door several times. This makes her quake, and she digs her fingernails into her palms for fortitude. As she crosses the threshold of his little bedroom, the first question he fires at her is 'What kept you?', and very politely she explains that the car ordered to fetch her from her hotel was a little late in arriving.

'I was expecting you two hours ago,' he says. His mood is foul and his hair is standing on end, tufts of grey hair sprouting like Lucifer's.

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'How are you?' she says.

He tells her that he is terrible and complains of a pain in the back from the shoulder down, a pain like the stab of a knife. She asks if it is rheumatism. He says how would he know, but whatever it is, it is shocking, and to emphasize his discomfort he opens his mouth and lets out a groan. The first few minutes are taken up with showing him the presents that she has brought, but he is too disgruntled to appreciate them. She coaxes him to try on the pullover, but he won't. Suddenly he gets out of bed and goes to the lavatory. The lavatory adjoins the bedroom; it is merely a cupboard with fittings and fixtures. She sits in the overheated bedroom listening, while trying not to listen. She stares out of the opened window; the view is of a swamp, while above, in a pale untrammelled bit of whey-coloured sky, the crows are flying at different altitudes and cawing mercilessly. They are so jet they look silken, and listening to them, while trying not to listen to her father, she thinks that if he closes the lavatory door perhaps all will not be so awful; but he will not close the lavatory door and he will not apologize. He comes out with his pajamas straggling around his legs, his walk impaired as he goes towards the bed, across which his lunch tray has been slung. His legs like candles, white and spindly, foreshadow her own old age, and she wonders with a shudder if she will end up in a place like this.

'Wash your hands, Dad,' she says as he strips the bedcovers back. There is a second's balk as he looks at her, and the look has the dehumanized rage of a trapped animal, but for some reason he concedes and crosses to the little basin and gives his hands, or rather his right hand, a cursory splash. He dries it by laying the hand on the towel that hangs at the side of the basin. It is a towel that she recognizes from home – dark blue with orange splashes. Even this simple recollection pierces: she can smell the towel, she can remember it drying on top of the range, she can feel it without touching it. The towel, like every other item in that embattled house, has got inside her brain and remained there like

furniture inside a room. The white cyclamen that she has brought is staring at her, the flowers like butterflies and the tiny buds like pencil tips, and it is this she obliges herself to see in order to generate a little cheerfulness.

'I spent Christmas Day all by myself.'

'No, Dad, you didn't,' she says, and reminds him that a relative came and took him out to lunch.

'I tell you, I spent Christmas Day all by myself,' he says, and now it is her turn to bristle.

'You were with Agatha. Remember?' she says.

'What do you know about it?' he says, staring at her, and she looks away, blaming herself for having lost control. He follows her with those eyes, then raises his hands up like a supplicant. One hand is raw and red. 'Eczema,' he says almost proudly. The other hand is knobbly, the fingers bunched together in a stump. He says he got that affliction from foddering cattle winter after winter. Then he tells her to go to the wardrobe. There are three dark suits, some tweed jackets, and a hideous light-blue gabardine that a young nun made him buy before he went on holiday to a convent in New Mexico. He praises this young nun, Sister Declan, praises her good humour, her buoyant spirit, her generosity and her innate sense of sacrifice. As a young girl, it seems, this young nun preferred to sit in the kitchen with her father, devising possible hurley games, or discussing hurley games that had been, instead of gallivanting with boys. He mentions how the nun's father died suddenly, choked to death while having his tea, but he shows no sign of pity or shock, and she thinks that in some crevice of his scalding mind he believes the nun has adopted him, which perhaps she has. The young nun has recently been sent away to the same convent in New Mexico, and the daughter thinks that perhaps it was punishment, perhaps she was getting too fond of this lonely, irascible man. No knowing.

'A great girl, the best friend I ever had,' he says. Wedged among the suits in the cupboard is the dark frieze coat that belongs to the bygone days, to his youth. Were she to put

her hand in a pocket, she might find an old penny or a stone that he had picked up on his walks, the long walks he took to stamp out his ire. He says to look in the beige suitcase, which she does. It is already packed with belongings, summer things, and gallantly he announces that he intends to visit the young nun again, to make the journey across the sea, telling how he will probably arrive in the middle of the night, as he did before, and Sister Declan and a few of the others will be waiting inside the convent gate to give him a regal welcome.

'I may not even come back,' he says boastfully. On the top shelf of the wardrobe are various pairs of socks, and handkerchiefs - new handkerchiefs and torn ones - empty whiskey bottles, and two large framed photographs. He tells her to hand down one of those photographs, and for the millionth time she looks at the likeness of his mother and father. His mother seems formidable, with a topknot of curls, and white laced bodice that even in the faded photograph looks like armour. His father, who is seated, looks meeker and more compliant.

'Seven years of age when I lost my mother and father, within a month of each other,' he says, and his voice is now like gravel. He grits his teeth.

What would they have made of him, his daughter wonders. Would their love have tamed him? Would he be different? Would she herself be different?

'Was it very hard?' she asks, but without real tenderness.

'Hard? What are you talking about?' he says. 'To be brought out into a yard and put in a pony and trap and dumped on relations?'

She knew that were she to really feel for him she would enquire about the trap, the cushion he sat on, if there was a rug for his knees, what kind of coat he wore, and the colour of his hair then; but she does not ask these things. 'Did they beat you?' she asks, as a form of conciliation.

'You were beaten if you deserved it,' he says, and goes on to talk about their rancour and how he survived it, how

he developed his independence, how he found excitement and sport in horses and was a legend even as a young lad for being able to break any horse. He remembers his boarding school and how he hated it, then his gadding days, then when still young – too young, he adds – meeting his future wife, and his daughter knows that soon he will cry, and talk of his dead wife and the marble tombstone that he erected in her memory, and that he will tell how much it cost and how much the hospital bill was, and how he never left her, or any one of the family, short of money for furniture or food. His voice is passing through me, the daughter thinks, as is his stare and his need and the upright sprouts of steel-coloured hair and the over-pink plates of false teeth in a glass beer tumbler. She feels glued to the spot, feels as if she has lost her will and the use of her limbs, and thinks, This is how it has always been. Looking away to avoid his gaze, her eyes light on his slippers. They are made of felt, green and red felt; there are holes in them and she wishes that she had bought him a new pair. He says to hand him the brown envelope that is above the washbasin. The envelope contains photographs of himself taken in New Mexico. In them, he has the air of a suitor, and the pose and look that he has assumed take at least thirty years off his age.

At that moment, one of the senior nuns comes in, welcomes her, offers her a cup of tea, and remarks on how well she looks. He says that no one looks as well as he does and proffers the photos. He recounts his visit to the States again – how the stewardesses were amazed at his age and his vitality, and how everyone danced attendance on him. The nun and the daughter exchange a look. They have a strategy. They have corresponded about it, the nun's last letter enclosing a greeting card from him, in which he begged his daughter to come. From its tone she deduced that he had changed, that he had become mollified; but he has not, he is the same, she thinks.

'Now talk to your father,' the nun says, then stands there, hands folded into her wide black sleeves, while the daughter says to her father, 'Why don't you eat in the dining room, Dad?'

'I don't want to eat in the dining room,' he says, like a corrected child. The nun reminds him that he is alone too much, that he cries too much, that if he mingled it would do him some good.

'They're ignorant, they're ignorant people,' he says of the other inmates.

'They can't all be ignorant,' both the nun and the daughter say at the same moment.

'I tell you, they're all ignorant!' he says, his eyes glaring.

'But you wouldn't be so lonely, Dad,' his daughter says, feeling a wave of pity for him.

'Who says I'm lonely?' he says roughly, sabotaging that pity, and he lists the number of friends he has, the motorcars he has access to, the bookmakers he knows, the horse trainers that he is on first names with, and the countless houses where he is welcome at any hour of day or night throughout the year.

To cheer him up, the nun rushes out and shouts to a little girl in the pantry across the way to bring the pot of tea now and the plate of biscuits. Watching the tea being poured, he insists the cup be so full that when the milk is added it slops over onto the saucer, but he does not notice, does not care.

'Thank you, thank you, Sister,' he says. He used not to say thank you and she wonders if perhaps Sister Declan had told him that courtesy was one way to win back the love of recalcitrant ones. He mashes the biscuits on his gums and then suddenly brightens as he remembers the night in the house of some neighbours when their dog attacked him. He had gone there to convalesce from shingles. He launches into a description of the dog, a German shepherd, and his own poor self coming down in the night to make a cup of tea, and this dog flying at him and his arm going up in self-defence,

and the dog mauling him, and the miracle that he was not eaten to death. He charts the three days of agony before he was brought to the hospital, the arm being set, being in a sling for two months, and the little electric saw that the county surgeon used to remove the plaster.

'My God, what I had to suffer!' he says. The nun has already left, whispering some excuse.

'Poor Dad,' his daughter would say. She is determined to be nice, admitting how wretched his life is, always has been.

'You have no idea,' he says, as he contrasts his present abode, a dungeon, with his own lovely limestone house that is going to ruin. He recalls his fifty-odd years in that house – the comforts, the blazing fire, the mutton dinners followed by rice pudding that his wife served. She reminds him that the house belongs to his son now and then she flinches, remembering that between them, also, there is a breach.

'He's no bloody good,' he says, and prefers instead to linger on his incarceration here.

'No mutton here; it's all beef,' he says.

'Don't they have any sheep?' she says, stupidly.

'It's no life for a father,' he says, and she realizes that he is about to ask for the guarantee that she cannot give.

She takes the tea tray and lays it on the hallway floor, then praises the kindness of nuns and of nurses and asks the name of the matron, so that she can give her a gift of money. He does not answer. In that terrible pause, as if on cue, one crow alights on a dip of barbed wire outside the window and lets out a series of hoarse exclamations. She is about to say, about to spring the pleasant surprise. She has come to take him out for the day. That is her plan. The delay in her arrival at the nursing home was due to her calling at a luxurious hotel to ask if they did lunches late. When she got there from London, late the previous night, she had stayed in a more commercial hotel in the town, where she was kept awake most of the night by the noise of cattle. It was near an abattoir, and in the very early hours of the morning she could

hear the cattle arriving, their bawling, their pitiful bawling, and then their various slippings and slobberings, and the shouts of the men who got them out of the trailers or the lorries and into the pens, and then other shouts, indeterminate shouts of men. She had lain in the very warm hotel room and allowed her mind to wander back to the time when her father bought and sold cattle, driving them on foot to the town, sometimes with the help of a simpleton, often failing to sell the beasts and having to drive them home again, with the subsequent wrangling and sparring over debts. She thinks that indeed he was not cut out for a life with cattle and foddering but that he was made for grander things, and it is with a rush of pleasure that she contemplates the surprise for him. She had already vetted the hotel, admitting, it is true, a minor disappointment that the service did not seem as august as the gardens or the imposing hallway with its massive portraits and beautiful staircase. When she visited to enquire about lunch, a rather vacant young boy said that no, they did not do lunches, but that possibly they could manage sandwiches, cheese or ham. Yet the atmosphere would exhilarate him, and sitting there in the nursing home with him now, she luxuriates in her own bit of private cheer. Has she not met someone, a man whose very voice, whose crisp manner fill her with verve and happiness? She barely knows him, but when he telephoned and imagined her surrounded by motley admirers, she did not disabuse him of his fantasy. She recalls, not without mischief, how that very morning in the market town she bought embroidered pillowcases and linen sheets, in anticipation of the day or night when he would cross her bedroom doorway. The thought of this future tryst softens her towards the old man, her father, and for a moment the two men revolve in her thoughts like two halves of a slow-moving apparition. As for the new one, she knows why she bought pillowslips and costly sheets: because she wants her surroundings not only to be beautiful for him but to carry the vestiges of her past, such sacred things as flowers and linen, and all of a sudden, with unnerving clarity, she fears that she

wants this new man to partake of her whole past – to know it in all its pain and permutations.

The moment has come to announce the treat, to encourage her father to get up and dress, to lead him down the hallway, holding his arm protectively so that the others will see that he is cherished, then to humour him in the car, to ply him with cigarettes, and to find in the hotel the snuggest little sitting room – in short, to give him a sense of well-being, to while away a few hours. It will be a talking point with him for weeks to come, instead of the eczema or the broken arm. Something is impeding her. She wants to do it, indeed she will do it, but she keeps delaying. She tries to examine what it is that is making her stall. Is it the physical act of helping him to dress, because he will, of course, insist on being helped? No, a nun will do that. Is it the thought of his being happy that bothers her? No, it is not that; she wants with all her heart to see him happy. Is it the fear of the service in the hotel being a disappointment, sandwiches being a letdown when he would have preferred soup and a meat course? No, it is not that, since, after all, the service is not her responsibility. What she dreads is the intimacy, being with him at all. She foresees that something awful will occur. He will break down and beg her to show him the love that he knows she is withholding; then, seeing that she cannot, will not, yield, he will grow furious, they will both grow furious, there will be the most terrible showdown, a slanging match of words, curses, buried grievances, maybe even blows. Yes, she will do it in a few minutes; she will clap her hands, jump up off the chair, and in a sing-song voice say, 'We're late, we're late, for a very important date.' She is rehearsing it, even envisaging the awkward smile that will come over his face, the melting, and his saying, 'Are you sure you can afford it, darling?' while at the same moment ordering her to open the wardrobe and choose his suit.

Each time she moves in her chair to do it, something

awful gets between her and the nice gesture. It is like a phobia, like someone too terrified to enter the water but standing at its edge. Yet she knows that if she were to succumb, it would not only be an afternoon's respite for him, it would be for her some enormous leap. Her heart has been hardening now for some time, and when moved to pity by something she can no longer show her feelings – all her feelings are for the privacy of her bedroom. Her heart is becoming a stone, but this gesture, this reach will soften her again and make her, if not the doting child, at least the eager young girl who brought home school reports or trophies that she had won, craving to be praised by him, this young girl who only recited the verses of 'Fontenoy' in place of singing a song. He had repeatedly told her that she could not sing, that she was tone-deaf.

Outside, the clouds have begun to mass for another downpour, and she realizes that there are tears in her eyes. She bends down, pretending to tie her shoe, because she does not want him to see these tears. She saw that it was perverse not to let him partake of this crumb of emotion, but also saw that nothing would be helped by it. He did not know her; he couldn't – his own life tore at him like a mad dog. Why isn't she stirring herself? Soon she will. He is talking non-stop, animated now by the saga of his passport and how he had to get it in such a hurry for his trip to America. He tells her to fetch it from the drawer, and she does. It is very new, with only one official entry, and that in itself conveys to her more than his words ever could: the paucity and barrenness of his life. He tells how the day he got that passport was the jolliest day he ever spent, how he had to go to Dublin to get it, how the nuns tut-tutted, said nobody could get a passport in that length of time because of all the red tape, but how he guaranteed that he would. He described the wet day, one of the wettest days ever, how Biddy the hackney driver didn't even want to set out, said they would be marooned, and how he told her to stop flapping, and get her coat on. He relives the drive, the very

early morning, the floods, the fallen boughs, and Bidy and himself on the rocky road to Dublin, smoking fags and singing, Bidy all the while teasing him, saying that it is not a passport that he is going for but a mistress, a rendezvous.

'So you got the passport immediately,' the daughter says, to ingratiate herself.

'Straightaway. I had the influence - I told the nuns here to ring the Dáil, to ring my TD, and by God, they did.'

She asks the name of the TD, but he has no interest in telling that, goes on to say how in the passport office a cheeky young girl asked why he was going to the States and how he told her he was going there to dig for gold. He is now warming to his tale, and she hears again about the air journey, the nice stewardesses, the two meals that came on a little plastic tray, and about how when he stepped out he saw his name on a big placard, and later, inside the convent gate, nuns waiting to receive him.

Suddenly she knows that she cannot take him out; perhaps she will do it on the morrow, but she cannot do it now; and so she makes to rise in her chair.

He senses it, his eyes now hard like granite. 'You're not leaving?' he says.

'I have to; the driver could only wait the hour,' she says feebly.

He gets out of bed, says he will at least see her to the front door, but she persuades him not to. He stares at her as if he is reading her mind, as if he knows the generous impulse that she has defected on. In that moment she dislikes herself even more than she had ever disliked him. Tomorrow she will indeed visit, before leaving, and they will patch it up, but she knows that she has missed something, something incalculable, a moment of grace. The downpour has stopped and the sky, drained of cloud, is like an immense grey sieve, sieving a greater greyness. As she rises to leave, she feels that her heart is in shreds, all over the room. She has left it in his keeping, but he is wildly, helplessly looking for his own.