

“The Lover” by James Wood

She was glad of the lake. It's soft, dark water helped to soothe and quiet her mind. It took her away from the noisy, squawkish world of the cat-walk and let her lie untroubled at its side, listening only to the gentle lapping of its waves.

She felt at peace. Alone. Unhindered and free. Free to do nothing but watch and listen and dream.

London, Paris, New York - names, only names. Names that had once meant excitement, then boredom, then frustration, then slavery. Names that had brought her to the edge of a breakdown and left her doubting her own sanity.

But here everything was at peace. The lake, the trees, the cottage. And she was at one with them. Here she could stay for the rest of her life. Here she would be happy to die.

Across the sun hurried a darkening filter of cloud; the advance guard of a larger and even graver army. The ripples on the water, chased by a freshening wind, pushed their way anxiously from the far side of the lake until they almost bounced at her feet. Way above her a solitary rook cawed its way home - a lonely, troubled sound. And in the East there was thunder.

Quickly she gathered her things together and made for the cottage. But already the rain flecked the water behind her and pattered the leaves as she raced beneath the trees. Sodden and breathless, she ran for the cottage door, and, as she opened it, the storm burst.

And there on the hearth, gaunt and unwelcome, stood a man.

'Hello!'

It was an odd way to greet a complete stranger who had invaded her home, but it was all she could think of to say. A casual greeting to someone who seemed to be expecting her, waiting for her. Maybe it was the way they did things down here?

'I suppose you had to shelter from the storm too?' she asked.

≤ 2 ≥

The man said nothing.

She ought to have been angry at this rude intrusion on her privacy, but anger somehow seemed pointless. It was as if the cottage was his, the hearth was his, and she had come out of the storm to seek refuge at his door.

She watched him, cautiously; waiting for an explanation. He said nothing. Not a word.

'Did you get wet?' she asked.

He stood, huddled by the open fire, gazing at the dying embers.

She walked over, brushing against him as she bent to stir the logs into life, but still he did not move. Erratically the flames burst forth, lighting up the sadness in his dark eyes.

'And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up and all the cottage warm . . .'

The words , spoken by him in a quiet, toneless voice, took her by surprise.

'Pardon?' she said.

But he seemed not to hear. Only the shiver of wind in the trees and the tittering of rain on the thatched roof broke that eerie silence.

She tried once more. 'It looks as if it's set in for the evening. Would you like to sit down for a while?'

His eyes followed her as she moved to take off her coat and brush out her hair.

'.....and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall . . .'

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Poetry. He was quoting poetry.

He looked vaguely like a poet; lean, distressed, with a certain bitterness in his eyes and hopelessness in his form. And his voice was deep and languid, like the middle of the lake where the water ran darkest.

Yet those were not his lines. The words were not created by him. They were somehow familiar. Half remembered. Surely she had heard them before?

'Did you write that?' she asked, forcing herself to make conversation.

He smiled, a pitiful smile, but did not answer.

As she watched him she had the feeling that he'd let himself into the cottage knowing that she would return. He'd been waiting for her. Expecting her. She was sure of it. And, for the first time, she was afraid.

She turned towards the window. No one was outside. Just the rain beating unceasingly.

She knew she'd never make it to the village, and no one would hear if she cried out. She was alone, completely alone with this frighteningly silent stranger.

A sudden renting sound outside made her jump: a splintering of wood followed by a crashing to the ground.

'It tore the elm tops down for spite
And did its worst to vex the lake . . . '

That poem again! That same poem! What was it? Why did it fit the scene so perfectly? And why couldn't she remember it?

'What an awful wind,' she said as casually as possibly. 'Perhaps I ought to make sure that ---

She had been working her way towards the door when he turned and slowly shook his head.

She stopped. Hypnotised. Unable to take another step away from him.

≤ 4 ≥

Destiny, her mind told her. This is your destiny; what you were created for. London, Paris, New York - no matter where you went you had to return here. To this cottage. To this man.

Quietly he walked towards her, past her, and on towards the heavy oak door. The key twisted in the lock, the shutters closed silently over the windows.

Gently, very gently, he took her arm and led her back to the hearth and the blazing fire. They were alone and she wanted to scream, but she couldn't.

' And last she sat down by my side
And called me '

That poem! That damned poem! How did it go? Please God, how did it go? Please, please let her remember!

' . . . when no voice replied
She put my arm about her waist
And made her smooth white shoulder bare . . . '

His left arm held her tightly, the slender fingers biting into her skin, while his right hand caressed the softness of her fair hair.

'But passion sometimes would prevail
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her '

Love? This wasn't love! This was madness. Insanity. He was crazy. He'd taken something of beauty and twisted it into macabre reality.

'Be sure I looked up at her eyes . . . '

His own eyes shone with a maniacal fervour.

≤ 5 ≥

'Happy and proud at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me . . . '

Porphyria! Browning's poem! She knew it! Oh my god, no! No! No!

'That moment she was mine, mine fair
Perfectly pure and good . . . '

She wanted to scream. She tried to scream. But she couldn't. His fingers were about her throat and no sound emerged. She fought for air but she could feel her body falling, falling. Her mind struggled to escape from the darkness but all she could hear was a voice, a distant voice, fading, ecstatic

' and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her

Things to Consider:

1. How does the author create suspense?

2. Why does this woman feel like this predicament was her "destiny"?
