

O N E

*Wystan*

HIS JACKET IS WINTER-GREEN tweed with a herringbone stitch, and rather too large. The lining has come loose and a button is hanging by a thread, destined to drop before the train reaches Birmingham. Beneath the jacket: a grey shirt and a spotted tie. The shirt has a greasy stain down the front. His arms are huge, the arms of an ape, and he's lighting a cigarette as he gets settled for the journey from Oxford to Glasgow. Oiled or greasy, it's hard to tell, his hair is close shaved at the back and sides, with a fringe hanging louchely over his forehead. His left ear sticks out, the remains of the schoolboy. The impression made is one of pale, large fragility.

It isn't until he looks up that his attractiveness becomes apparent. His blue eyes flicker with a lively intelligence that animates all his features. It's as if one can see the thoughts playing in his mind. But this is an illusion; his friends will find they never really know him. Wystan is that terrible, isolating thing: *unreadable*. His hands are enormous, dwarfing the matchbox. He holds it gently, a giant lifting a farmhouse.

Every few minutes, he has to get up and walk around. He is recovering from an operation for an anal fissure, and it is still, after many weeks, unbearably painful. Though its refusal to heal is depressing him, he has started to consider the intimate, searing pain as a physical expression of the torment he feels all the time, which is sutured into his very biology. The wound that will not heal, that cannot be spoken of in polite company, is becoming a separate entity. He composes, idly in his head, as the train clatters along, a letter to the Wound. He wants to make peace with it. He wants to be forgiven.

There are two others in his carriage: a suited man whose bowler hat is neatly on the rack above, and a man with a florid face, sour with drink, who has fallen asleep against the window. The purple of his mouth is visible as he snores. Wystan studies them in between glancing at the pages of the *Criterion*. The two destinies of Man. Suited looks well fed and contented. He is reading the financial information at the back of the paper, and his face has an ageing softness that denotes a life free of depravity. Florid radiates ill health from every broken capillary. No wife, no children, no love. In time, Wystan is surely to become one of these men. Once we are all grown up, there is nothing else.

Wystan is going to be a Great Poet. He has decided it firmly, told all his friends. His philosophy of life is inspired by Emile Coué: you will become what you believe you will become. Eighteen months ago, he graduated from Oxford after a sensational three years, but with a very poor degree, and T. S. Eliot has, this very week, accepted his manuscript for publication with Faber and Faber. His cigarette glows in his fingers as the train hauls itself out of Coventry station and continues the drag and choke to Scotland.

His work is not where his doubts lie; that is not what draws his gaze nervously to Florid, snuffling before him. It is love. He shuffles in his seat to relieve the pressure on the Wound. It pulsates with its own torn language, telling him that he will never really know love.

Wystan rubs his white brow, pushes his fringe out of his eyes and rummages in his satchel, swapping the *Criterion* for a book. He's reading a lot of Freud at this time; it offers him little comfort.

Sheilagh snaps into his mind, her pretty frown causing him a pang. When he proposed to her, he was confident that, even if he was not in love, then he would be soon. She had accepted in the bemusing way women have of being excited about invisible things, and he found her endearing. Sheilagh was a nurse, and she brought that feminine practicality to their relationship. She knew about bodies, so he did not feel the need to be the oracle in this area, and she also knew about the way things were meant to be. Best of all, Sheilagh was nothing like his mother, which was certainly progress, for he deemed much of his problem to be his excessive attachment to his domineering mother. He was twenty-two at the time, surely old enough to know his own mind.

But then she started crying, quite soon into it all. She was disappointed in him, without saying why. Before this, Wystan had never been a disappointment, and it had not played well with him.

Hills swell beyond the window and a few drops of rain spatter the glass. The whistle blares at Carlisle station, doors slam, and Florid jolts awake, glaring round at his companions before reaching into his bag for a packet of sandwiches. They have been neatly wrapped in paper and tied with string. Who has done this for Florid? A wife? A mother? Has he perhaps done it himself? The smell of egg fills the

carriage. Sniffing, the man reaches into his bag again and pulls out a bottle of beer. He flicks off the cap with a penny and sets it between his knees. Suited looks sideways with a sneer. The conductor, a half-pint man in a scarlet livery, appears in the doorway.

‘Which way is the bar?’ asks Wystan. He forgot about lunch, and didn’t really appreciate how long the journey is.

The conductor points backwards. ‘Two coaches down, sir.’ He looks at his watch. ‘Still a few ham sandwiches, I believe.’

Wystan nods. In a while, he’ll wander along and see what there is. He sighs and observes through the window the almost imperceptible change from the greens and browns of Cumberland to those of Dumfriesshire.

The London establishment, which waits both to claim and judge him in a few years, shrinks to a speck. He is coming, for as long as they’ll have him, to the briny shores, the promenade of hardware shops and grimy cafés, to the land of shallow valleys and low hills, of violet summers. His home will be the land of naval ships, with its seething hatred of outsiders, with its petty religious tyrannies. Soon, he will drop submarines casually into his poems; the sea will creep into his soul.

It’s not his choice exactly. His trust money is about to run out, and he needs a job. His friend Cecil Day-Lewis has nominated him for this post of schoolmaster at Larchfield, though he has no experience of teaching and a severe distrust of the school environment. Florid coughs over his beer, drains it and fishes another out of his bag. Suited shakes his newspaper, expertly rolls it up and slips it under his arm before leaving the carriage, presumably to go to the bar. Wystan says, ‘Shall I open the window?’ and Florid grunts his

assent. Cool Scottish air rushes in. Florid's hands are trembling. The sole of one boot is coming adrift and his laces are undone. Wystan knows he would rather end up as Florid than Suited, and indeed that is his trajectory. There's an honesty about Florid. He's given up trying to be what he is not.

When Sheilagh told Wystan his poems disgusted her, he knew that wasn't *it*, or wasn't it exactly. Her intuition that his poems were not about her, or anything she'd recognise, was certainly correct, but, as she sat sobbing into her hands, he wondered if he should press her to tell him what it was. At that moment, he hated her enough to humiliate them both. He might say, *So let's talk about disgust, then*, and see if it led to a conversation with any honesty in it. In truth, she bored rather than disgusted him; her body bored him, her deference bored him. Most of all, her safety bored him, even while he craved it. Should he tell her all this?

And yet, she loved him. On his side, there had certainly been tremendous hope. And is hope not the sibling of love? She wanted him to apologise for the poems in some way, to deny that what she thought was in them was in them. He couldn't do that, but he could apologise for himself.

Which he did. He cried while he did it, and he held her hand until he had finished. *Not cut out for marriage. You deserve someone better. A proper man.* She didn't look up when he left. When he reached home, he went to bed, where relief crashed over him and he cried until he was empty.

Wound is communicating its discomfort. Wystan gets up to walk to the bar. Why should this journey put him so in mind of Sheilagh? Perhaps he knows that, after her, there will be no love of the kind he

wants. He has chosen the Wound over healing. The train sways, as if nodding its assent. Wystan feels suddenly tearful and digs his nails into his palm. Anyway, now is a new beginning. He could scarcely be further from Sheilagh and the hopes he had of change.

And the future? What of it? He cannot imagine a future where he fits. Wystan is travelling not into the future but into the heart-land of – as he will soon describe it – the enemy. He does not know that he will be more alone than he has ever been, that he will love more deeply than he ever thought possible – and he will long for the consolations that poetry cannot give, at least not to the writer.

It has all been decided. He will live quietly, teaching English and French to the sons of Scotsmen, and he will get on with his work. He will be able to establish his routine for writing, he will be able to devote himself to it. Provided, of course, that he causes no scandals.

## T W O

### *Dora*

‘**A** H! THE POETESS!’  
Silver heads lifted. The voice materialised into Lois, a neighbour from along the road, who advanced through the guests on the lawn, her eyes full of amusement and intrigue. She planted a dry kiss on Dora’s cheek and stepped back to take in the full measure of her pregnant belly.

In recent months, Kit had taken several unaccompanied trips up to Helensburgh, to finalise details of the purchase of Paradise, the mansion on whose lawn they were now standing, and to lay some groundwork in his new job. News had swiftly got out that a rather charming architect was moving into this part of town, and Kit had found himself with lots of new acquaintances, who accosted him for advice about their building projects. Lois had bagged him to help with designing some new windows for her listed coach house.

The owners of Paradise Lower, Matthew and Felicity, were the party hosts. They would be leaving the very next day, and Dora and Kit would be moving in. Matthew had constructed an ugly but

effective barbecue out of an old mangle, and the smell of sausages drifted over the grass. Dora felt the oddness of her position as the not-yet owner, meeting guests on her not-yet lawn.

There was a little circle around them now. ‘You know,’ Lois said to Dora, ‘I have been dying to meet you for ages. Kit’s been hiding you! I thought he was making you up! Forever coming up and staying at that flat all alone and talking about his “wife”. Poor sad soul, I thought.’ Chuckles overcame her for a moment. Kit nodded, enjoying the game. ‘And then,’ Lois continued, ‘I was behind Kit in the queue for the checkout at the Co-op and I saw, in his basket, he had *two* lamb chops and a bottle of wine! And I thought to myself, Aha! Something’s up! Perhaps he does have a wife . . . or a girlfriend!’

At this, Lois collapsed into wheezy giggles.

Kit put his arm around Dora. ‘No girlfriend. Just a wife.’

‘Yes, a *poetess*. How wonderful. Tell me, Dora, should I have heard of you?’

Dora opened her mouth to attempt an answer, but the way the circle was staring gave her the uneasy sense that their attention had moved on and her poetry was not the main subject of interest. There was no other way to describe it: the guests were *gawping* at her stomach with perverted abandon. Never having had any contact with babies in her previous existence, she wondered if she was witnessing for the first time how women behave around infants or the prospect of them. Dora had become magnetic: the women’s fingers began to uncurl as if irresistibly drawn to touch her. She was the centre of attention, certainly, even if no one was interested in what she said. The information that she was a poet had never produced this level of interest at parties.



Lois had Kit's hand now and was leading him towards the table where bottles and plastic cups were laid out. Plainly not invited to follow, Dora stared after them. What was going on? Her husband was stooping good-naturedly over another woman now, who was describing her conservatory, how perhaps he might take a look one evening.

She felt a hand on her arm and Felicity was standing with a hot dog for her. 'How are you doing?'

'Terrific, thanks.' Dora indicated the adoring circle around her husband.

'Handy, being married to an architect,' Felicity said.

Dora grunted. She considered being married to an architect no handier than being married to a poet. But there seemed no way to say that and not appear bad-tempered. She liked Felicity, who was about Dora's age and had a gentle, lilting Scottish accent. Liking Felicity had brought Dora round to the idea of living in a divided building in a faraway seaside town; if Felicity could thrive here, couldn't she?

Not only had Felicity thrived, according to her own account, but the house was perfect for a newly married couple with a baby on the way. When Dora and Kit were looking for somewhere to live, Dora had struggled to grasp that the kinds of houses she was used to – terraces, semi-detached houses: buildings that involved living side by side – barely existed here. Wealthy shipbuilders in the nineteenth century had built their country homes in Helensburgh, and now many were converted because of the cost of heating and maintaining such huge properties.

Paradise was a striking example of such a conversion. Blue, with a generous frontage that reminded Dora of buildings in Oxford

somehow, there was no way of knowing from the front that it was divided into two; the grand façade with its ornate main door gave nothing away. Kit and Dora had bought the lower apartment with the main front door, and Paradise Upper had a staircase entrance at the back. Despite the house's beauty, it took Dora quite a few visits to agree with Felicity that it did suit them. She had scoured the estate agents for a family home that she recognised as one: a terrace with a courtyard garden; some small country cottage; a townhouse, even, tall and thin and looking out over the railway line at Helensburgh Central. But her choice emerged, simple and hard: a breathtaking mansion, which they could never have afforded, or part of one. Understanding this had taken her so long that several had been and gone from the market. They had committed to this one in some desperation.

Paradise's long front lawn stretched almost to the sea, separated only by a hedge and the narrow coast road. Dora had not got over the strangeness of having the sea so close, the incredible open emptiness of it, and the constantly changing colours of the sky and the water. This afternoon, the sea was a clear turquoise, hushing them gently from the shingle. There was so much outside space here. Dora had never seen such a huge garden in a domestic home. Alongside the massive lawn with its borders of shrubs and trees swept a wide drive, which became a forecourt in front of the house.

Felicity grinned. 'Yes, it's really yours! Your baby will be so happy here. Now, let me introduce you to a few people.' She took Dora's hand and led her back into the throng.

As the introductions started, Dora tried to retain the powdered faces with their attendant names. There were wives of the church

elders; the lady who played the organ; the lady who ran the music society; the wife of the new minister; the new minister. A lady in a purple dress with a plunging neckline told Dora about her jewellery, which she made and sold. Perhaps Dora would like to come and see her workshop? Pointed questions and comments washed over her, hands brushed against her belly and Dora began to feel dizzy. How did anyone stay private – anonymous, even – here? Faces, accents, the landscape all demanded your attention, the luminous northern light searched you out, and look – the music-society lady was peering at her through thick glasses. Her eyes were huge behind them. She asked Dora a question – *when is it due*, probably – and now a man with a dewdrop on his nose was bending over her and telling her about the sewage system that lay under the road outside.

‘Our best friends are your upstairs neighbours, Mo and Terrence,’ said the jewellery-maker. ‘Such *good* people. *Wonderful* people.’

‘Oh, yes; I haven’t met them yet.’

The woman said, ‘They do such good work with the church. They *belong here*.’

Dora’s husband was laughing again, relaxed and happy. His Edinburgh accent, which had always seemed so wonderfully exotic, blended in here, and did not seem like an accent at all. Kit had come home, in some fundamental way. It was the way Dora spoke that stood out. Kit caught Dora’s eye and smiled. He looked like a complete stranger.

*They belong here*. The words wedged in Dora’s mind, started a slow spin. They carried a clear implication, as yet unarticulated. What was it? That Felicity and Matthew had not belonged? Or . . . she and Kit? There was something accusing in the tone, or perhaps

in the very words themselves. She braced herself to meet her upstairs neighbours . . . what would belonging here look like?

Dora suspected she had probably never belonged anywhere, but in the case of the city she knew best, Oxford, not belonging gave one a kind of exotic value. And because it was a university town, most people arrived there not really belonging. The daughter of northern teachers, Dora had never expected to go to Oxford, and indeed her mother had told her not to apply there, as she would feel out of place. Nevertheless, she had applied, had been successful; and to her mother's grudging alarm, for three years had immersed herself in the world that was most real to her: that of books and reading. A PhD on Wilfred Owen and the poetry of World War One had sealed her into its warm sandstone interior for another four years, and her own poetry had begun to emerge in that time.

Oxford had been a revelation. Poetry was a *real thing* in her gowned area of the town. Being clever was a good thing at Oxford, displaying your cleverness even better. After finally completing her PhD, Dora was offered a job at the university's publishing house as a lexicographer, which suited her interest in words and her temperament perfectly. And while many thought her shy and brainy to the point of passionlessness, they were wrong. There had been love affairs, mostly with young, intense and scruffy postdocs at the university. These had always fallen apart at the point where she was expected somehow to change, to accommodate them in some profound way. She never wanted to, enough, and they certainly seemed to have no notion of accommodating her, and her need to scribble and read.

It was a story – their story – that she and Kit liked to tell: how the unlikely couple met. A former tutor took pity on Dora's

seemingly one-dimensional life and invited her to a dinner party at her former college, and Kit, a friend of a friend and newly widowed, was invited too, and there was an immediate connection between the brainy lexicographer and the gentle architect that no one could have foreseen.

Now that Dora was so heavily pregnant, she needed to go to the toilet all the time. The only advantage was that it was an opportunity to be alone, to escape when she needed to think. She excused herself from the jewellery lady and slipped away across the lawn towards the wisteria draping the front door's pergola like the entrance to a cave.

But as she crossed the forecourt and reached the step, with its promise of cool relief from the sun, she felt a hand on her arm. Felicity said, 'Ah, here they are, Mo and Terrence Divine – your upstairs neighbours.'

'Oh, but I . . .' Perhaps the introduction would not take long. Dora shuffled from foot to foot and turned to greet them.

Dora's most intimate neighbours were holding hands. They wore matching cardigans with a crest on the breast. Terrence's shirt was open at the neck, revealing a cross on a chain. His hair was combed back, creating an effect of rippled pewter, and he was wearing a pair of glasses with darkened lenses clipped on to them, but not pressed down, so they stuck out like two small visors. A faint scent of after-shave hung around him. He was unexpectedly handsome.

'Mo and Terrence, this is Dora. She's a poet!' With each word, Felicity eased herself further away, though her demeanour was impeccably friendly. She was now right on the invisible edge of what constituted their group.

‘So. *Dora*.’ An arm unfolded. Mo’s little hand clasped Dora’s.

Dora felt the cool fingers around hers. Her neighbour’s hair was tightly permed and tinted a rather startling gold. On her forehead was an eye-catching mole that reminded Dora of a tiny nameless nation lifted out of a school map.

One more step back and Felicity would be free. She seemed anxious to be gone. Dora was puzzled. These people had lived together in Paradise for – how long was it? Five years? Felicity took that last step and vanished into the party, and Dora was alone with the new neighbours.

Mo watched Felicity disappear and then asked, ‘Do you know the Lord, Dora?’

Dora’s gaze roamed desperately and fell on the boat parked on the forecourt in front of the house. She was sure it hadn’t been there when they came round to view. It was on a trailer and the tarpaulin had been rolled back to reveal, in curly gold writing, the name *Lady Maureen*.

‘Um . . .’ Dora didn’t say the only thought to rise into the vacancy of her mind, which was, *Christ, that boat is enormous*.

‘Jesus and the *Lady Maureen*,’ said Terrence, squeezing Mo to him before releasing her like a spring. ‘The twin pillars of my life.’

Mo said proudly, ‘Terrence is an elder in the church. We’ve been here for – how long now, dear?’

‘Oh . . . it must be fifteen years.’ Terrence smiled down at his wife. It was a warm, attractive smile that left Dora feeling oddly envious. Terrence continued, ‘It is Paradise indeed, here. Mo runs the Sunday school.’

Mo’s attention turned to Dora’s belly.

‘When are you due?’

‘November.’

‘Our son, Theodore, is having his first child in the new year. Our first grandchild!’ She studied Dora’s swollen form, taking in every detail, until Dora blushed.

‘Boy or girl?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘You’ve a low bump, there. I think it’s a boy. Terrence, don’t you think it’s a boy?’

Terrence looked startled. ‘Oh, I don’t know anything about all that. I’m more about the spirit than the flesh.’

Mo’s voice was so breathy and sing-song that one word rustled into the next, making it necessary for Dora to concentrate hard, as if it were a complicated *Beowulf* lecture. The old lady went on: ‘We’ll be helping Theodore a lot with the wee one. My poor daughter-in-law knows nothing about anything, and my son, he’s so busy with the double-glazing business. He’s done so well. I don’t understand the ins and outs, of course, but he’s a real high-up now. So you’ll be seeing a lot of us! Who is your birth partner?’

‘My husband, Kit. Over there.’ How she longed for him to come over. He knew how to talk to people. His easy social manner charmed everyone. He *belonged*. Dora was so tired and her bladder felt as if it might burst. As if to emphasise the point, the baby aimed a kick right on it.

Mo was talking again: ‘It’s wonderful to hear the voices of children, isn’t it? Our friends love to visit us with their children. They *so* enjoy playing on the lawn.’ Her eyes flicked up to her husband.

Dora reeled her attention back in, alerted by Mo's last whispered words. The long lawn at the front of the house, with the drive alongside it, belonged to Paradise Lower. The upper flat owned the rear garden, a neatly cultivated terrace with a summer house. In grappling with Paradise's divisions, Dora had seized on this ownership of the lawn as something that made her feel better about living at such close, isolated quarters with complete strangers.

She observed again the *Lady Maureen* dwarfing the Divines' parking space. She noticed the many cars parked in the drive for the party, and then she looked back at Mo, wondering how to formulate a reply. Had she, in fact, misheard?

Was she expected to say something like, *But you must let your friends run about on our lawn!* Is that what people did out here? Use each other's gardens?

Mo powered on: 'Felicity and Matthew . . . they loved to see children happy, laughing . . . enjoying themselves. Such *generous* people.' Her fingers crept to her neck, then her earlobes, then back to Terrence's hand.

Dora was getting a crick in her neck from leaning in. Finally, she could stand no more. 'Please excuse me. I'm so sorry . . . You know what it's like!' And she waddled towards the open doorway.

The gloom embraced her. She rested her head against the cool of the wall and took breaths until her pounding heart began to slow.

She looked around the beautifully corniced hall, with the wide decorative staircase at the end. Tomorrow, it would be hers. She and Kit loved the way that the lower apartment was largely untouched by the conversion. The staircase simply turned into a cupboard at



a certain point. Dora's new home was fairytale grand with pan-elled walls and huge fireplaces and tall windows looking out over the lawn.

The original cloakroom in the hall was tiny, with an authentic Edwardian lavatory and high cistern. Dora had liked the space from the first time they had viewed the house. She thought she could see out the remainder of the party just sitting here quietly.

Dora was respectably married at last, to a man she could say without hesitation that she loved. They had bought the main apartment with a huge garden in the grandest house she had ever been in, and that, she had been sure, gave her a place. She could be like the ladies out there now; she could be a *hostess*; she could give her own parties on the lawn. Her child could grow up secure of his or her place in the world. Her child would be a Fielding, with a childhood home to love and remember.

This was the plan, and she loved it. She was a lucky woman. How many women really get what they want? All of it?

But unease crept and crawled all over Dora now. Alone in the Edwardian cloakroom, she pulled off her cardigan and scratched the skin of her arms until the red weals began to bead with blood. This steadied her mind a little, as did focusing on the sea and thinking up new ways to describe it. Waves strutting . . . a turquoise dress, off the shoulder . . . a submarine like a whale, with light breaking off its back . . . Waves strutting . . . or tutting? Perhaps at the shore . . . Perhaps the little waves tut at the shoreline . . . Dora smiled to herself, noticing, now, the fierce sting of the scratches on her arm. She ran the tap and dampened toilet paper and pressed it to the skin.

A knock at the door. 'You in there, Dora?'

Kit had come to find her. Exhausted, Dora pleaded to go home. They bid hasty goodbyes and, as Kit helped her into the car, anxiety sucked her words away. How she wanted to be a success, like her husband was. He seemed to have had a wonderful afternoon dispensing advice to the area's ladies. He had even chatted to the new neighbours and come out unscathed.

How Dora wanted to be the sort of woman a man is glad he married. Instead, all she could do was stammer, 'Kit, do you think . . . ? Do you think we've made a mistake? With the house?'

Kit's hand snapped out and covered hers. 'No . . . no, don't say that. You're just exhausted.'

There was a tap on the glass. Lois was signalling for Dora to open the window.

'I meant to tell you, Dora, dear,' she said breathlessly. 'There was another poet you may have heard of, here in Helensburgh. A long time ago, now. W. H. Auden! Do you know of him?'

'Really? In Helensburgh?'

'Yes, he taught at the boys' prep school, Larchfield, way back; I think it must have been 1930 or something like that. Anyway, I thought you'd like to know. Two poets! What do we call that? A brace? A couplet?' She giggled again. 'Well, I must be off. Lovely to see you both!'

'W. H. Auden?' Dora asked Kit in amazement.

'I remember something about that now.'

'Auden . . .' Dora repeated. 'That's so *unlikely* . . .' She trailed off, seeing the unlikeliness of Auden in this landscape suddenly very like her own. Kit kept his hand over hers as he drove them the short distance home.

Later, after they had eaten and Kit had fallen asleep in the bedroom of the bare flat they had rented for the move, Dora came into the moonlit sitting room, among all their boxes, and took out her notebook.

She rested her pen on the page.

*(Ah, the poetess!)*

Writing a few lines, beginning a poem, taking her fear out and studying it to make it into something – this was what she had always done to make sense of her life.

She wondered how it must have been for Auden, arriving into this strange place.

Did he, as she now did, lay down his pen?

Did he, too, find that suddenly, inexplicably, there was nothing to say?