The Sea

John Banville

Published by Picador

THEY DEPARTED, the gods, on the day of the strange tide. All morning under a milky sky the waters in the bay had swelled and swelled, rising to unheard-of heights, the small waves creeping over parched sand that for years had known no wetting save for rain and lapping the very bases of the dunes. The rusted hulk of the freighter that had run aground at the far end of the bay longer ago than any of us could remember must have thought it was being granted a relaunch. I would not swim again, after that day. The seabirds mewled and swooped, unnerved, it seemed, by the spectacle of that vast bowl of water bulging like a blister, lead-blue and malignantly agleam. They looked unnaturally white, that day, those birds. The waves were depositing a fringe of soiled yellow foam along the waterline. No

sail marred the high horizon. I would not swim, no, not ever again.

Someone has just walked over my grave. Someone.

The name of the house is the Cedars, as of old. A bristling clump of those trees, monkey-brown with a tarry reek, their trunks nightmarishly tangled, still grows at the left side, facing across an untidy lawn to the big curved window of what used to be the living room but which Miss Vavasour prefers to call, in landladyese, the lounge. The front door is at the opposite side, opening on to a square of oil-stained gravel behind the iron gate that is still painted green, though rust has reduced its struts to a tremulous filigree. I am amazed at how little has changed in the more than fifty years that have gone by since I was last here. Amazed, and disappointed, I would go so far as to say appalled, for reasons that are obscure to me, since why should I desire change, I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past? I wonder why the house was built like that, sideways-on, turning a pebble-dashed windowless white end-wall to the road; perhaps in former times, before the railway, the road ran in a different orien-

tation altogether, passing directly in front of the front door, anything is possible. Miss V. is vague on dates but thinks a cottage was first put up here early in the last century, I mean the century before last, I am losing track of the millennia, and then was added on to haphazardly over the years. That would account for the jumbled look of the place, with small rooms giving on to bigger ones, and windows facing blank walls, and low ceilings throughout. The pitchpine floors sound a nautical note, as does my spindle-backed swivel chair. I imagine an old seafarer dozing by the fire, landlubbered at last, and the winter gale rattling the window frames. Oh, to be him. To have been him.

When I was here all those years ago, in the time of the gods, the Cedars was a summer house, for rent by the fortnight or the month. During all of June each year a rich doctor and his large, raucous family infested it – we did not like the doctor's loud-voiced children, they laughed at us and threw stones from behind the unbreachable barrier of the gate – and after them a mysterious middle-aged couple came, who spoke to no one, and grimly walked their sausage dog in silence at the same time every morning down Station Road to the strand. August was the most interesting month at the Cedars, for us. The tenants

then were different each year, people from England or the Continent, the odd pair of honeymooners whom we would try to spy on, and once even a fit-up troupe of itinerant theatre people who were putting on an afternoon show in the village's galvanised-tin cinema. And then, that year, came the family Grace.

The first thing I saw of them was their motor car, parked on the gravel inside the gate. It was a low-slung, scarred and battered black model with beige leather seats and a big spoked polished wood steering wheel. Books with bleached and dog-eared covers were thrown carelessly on the shelf under the sportily raked back window, and there was a touring map of France, much used. The front door of the house stood wide open, and I could hear voices inside, downstairs, and from upstairs the sound of bare feet running on floorboards and a girl laughing. I had paused by the gate, frankly eavesdropping, and now suddenly a man with a drink in his hand came out of the house. He was short and top-heavy, all shoulders and chest and big round head, with close-cut, crinkled, glittering-black hair with flecks of premature grey in it and a pointed black beard likewise flecked. He wore a loose green shirt unbuttoned and khaki shorts and was barefoot. His skin was so deeply

tanned by the sun it had a purplish sheen. Even his feet, I noticed, were brown on the insteps; the majority of fathers in my experience were fish-belly white below the collar-line. He set his tumbler – ice-blue gin and ice cubes and a lemon slice – at a perilous angle on the roof of the car and opened the passenger door and leaned inside to rummage for something under the dashboard. In the unseen upstairs of the house the girl laughed again and gave a wild, warbling cry of mock-panic, and again there was the sound of scampering feet. They were playing chase, she and the voiceless other. The man straightened and took his glass of gin from the roof and slammed the car door. Whatever it was he had been searching for he had not found. As he turned back to the house his eye caught mine and he winked. He did not do it in the way that adults usually did, at once arch and ingratiating. No, this was a comradely, a conspiratorial wink, masonic, almost, as if this moment that we, two strangers, adult and boy, had shared, although outwardly without significance, without content, even, nevertheless had meaning. His eyes were an extraordinary pale transparent shade of blue. He went back inside then, already talking before he was through the door. 'Damned thing,' he said, 'seems to be . . .' and was gone. I lingered a moment,

scanning the upstairs windows. No face appeared there.

That, then, was my first encounter with the Graces: the girl's voice coming down from on high, the running footsteps, and the man here below with the blue eyes giving me that wink, jaunty, intimate and faintly satanic.

Just now I caught myself at it again, that thin, wintry whistling through the front teeth that I have begun to do recently. *Deedle deedle deedle*, it goes, like a dentist's drill. My father used to whistle like that, am I turning into him? In the room across the corridor Colonel Blunden is playing the wireless. He favours the afternoon talk programmes, the ones in which irate members of the public call up to complain about villainous politicians and the price of drink and other perennial irritants. 'Company,' he says shortly, and clears his throat, looking a little abashed, his protuberant, parboiled eyes avoiding mine, even though I have issued no challenge. Does he lie on the bed while he listens? Hard to picture him there in his thick grey woollen socks, twiddling his toes, his tie off and shirt collar agape and hands clasped behind that stringy old neck of his. Out of his room he is vertical man itself, from the soles of his much-mended glossy brown brogues to the tip of his conical

skull. He has his hair cut every Saturday morning by the village barber, short-back-and-sides, no quarter given, only a hawkish stiff grey crest left on top. His long-lobed leathery ears stick out, they look as if they had been dried and smoked; the whites of his eyes too have a smoky yellow tinge. I can hear the buzz of voices on his wireless but cannot make out what they say. I may go mad here. *Deedle deedle.*

Later that day, the day the Graces came, or the following one, or the one following that, I saw the black car again, recognised it at once as it went bounding over the little humpbacked bridge that spanned the railway line. It is still there, that bridge, just beyond the station. Yes, things endure, while the living lapse. The car was heading out of the village in the direction of the town, I shall call it Ballymore, a dozen miles away. The town is Ballymore, this village is Ballyless, ridiculously, perhaps, but I do not care. The man with the beard who had winked at me was at the wheel, saying something and laughing, his head thrown back. Beside him a woman sat with an elbow out of the rolled-down window, her head back too, pale hair shaking in the gusts from the window, but she was not laughing only smiling, that smile

she reserved for him, sceptical, tolerant, languidly amused. She wore a white blouse and sunglasses with white plastic rims and was smoking a cigarette. Where am I, lurking in what place of vantage? I do not see myself. They were gone in a moment, the car's sashaying back-end scooting around a bend in the road with a spurt of exhaust smoke. Tall grasses in the ditch, blond like the woman's hair, shivered briefly and returned to their former dreaming stillness.

I walked down Station Road in the sunlit emptiness of afternoon. The beach at the foot of the hill was a fawn shimmer under indigo. At the seaside all is narrow horizontals, the world reduced to a few long straight lines pressed between earth and sky. I approached the Cedars circumspectly. How is it that in childhood everything new that caught my interest had an aura of the uncanny, since according to all the authorities the uncanny is not some new thing but a thing known returning in a different form, become a revenant? So many unanswerables, this the least of them. As I approached I heard a regular rusty screeching sound. A boy of my age was draped on the green gate, his arms hanging limply down from the top bar, propelling himself with one foot slowly back and forth in a quarter circle over the gravel. He

had the same straw-pale hair as the woman in the car and the man's unmistakable azure eyes. As I walked slowly past, and indeed I may even have paused, or faltered, rather, he stuck the toe of his plimsoll into the gravel to stop the swinging gate and looked at me with an expression of hostile enquiry. It was the way we all looked at each other, we children, on first encounter. Behind him I could see all the way down the narrow garden at the back of the house to the diagonal row of trees skirting the railway line – they are gone now, those trees, cut down to make way for a row of pastel-coloured bungalows like dolls' houses – and beyond, even, inland, to where the fields rose and there were cows, and tiny bright bursts of yellow that were gorse bushes, and a solitary distant spire, and then the sky, with scrolled white clouds. Suddenly, startlingly, the boy pulled a grotesque face at me, crossing his eyes and letting his tongue loll on his lower lip. I walked on, conscious of his mocking eye following me.

Plimsoll. Now, there is a word one does not hear any more, or rarely, very rarely. Originally sailors' footwear, from someone's name, if I recall, and something to do with ships. The Colonel is off to the lavatory again. Prostate trouble, I bet. Going past my door he softens his tread, creaking on tiptoe,

out of respect for the bereaved. A stickler for the observances, our gallant Colonel.

I am walking down Station Road.

So much of life was stillness then, when we were young, or so it seems now; a biding stillness; a vigilance. We were waiting in our as yet unfashioned world, scanning the future as the boy and I had scanned each other, like soldiers in the field, watching for what was to come. At the bottom of the hill I stopped and stood and looked three ways, along Strand Road, and back up Station Road, and the other way, toward the tin cinema and the public tennis courts. No one. The road beyond the tennis courts was called the Cliff Walk, although whatever cliffs there may once have been the sea had long ago eroded. It was said there was a church submerged in the sandy sea bed down there, intact, with bell tower and bell, that once had stood on a headland that was gone too, brought toppling into the roiling waves one immemorial night of tempest and awful flood. Those were the stories the locals told, such as Duignan the dairyman and deaf Colfer who earned his living selling salvaged golf balls, to make us transients think their tame little seaside village had been of old a place of terrors. The sign over the Strand Café, advertising cigarettes, Navy Cut, with a picture of a bearded

sailor inside a lifebuoy, or a ring of rope – was it? – creaked in the sea breeze on its salt-rusted hinges, an echo of the gate at the Cedars on which for all I knew the boy was swinging yet. They creak, this present gate, that past sign, to this day, to this night, in my dreams. I set off along Strand Road. Houses, shops, two hotels – the Golf, the Beach – a granite church, Myler's grocery-cum-post-office-cum-pub, and then the field – the Field – of wooden chalets one of which was our holiday home, my father's, my mother's, and mine.

If the people in the car were his parents had they left the boy on his own in the house? And where was the girl, the girl who had laughed?

The past beats inside me like a second heart.

The consultant's name was Mr Todd. This can only be considered a joke in bad taste on the part of polyglot fate. It could have been worse. There is a name De'Ath, with that fancy medial capital and apotropaic apostrophe which fool no one. This Todd addressed Anna as Mrs Morden but called me Max. I was not at all sure I liked the distinction thus made, or the gruff familiarity of his tone. His office, no, his rooms, one says rooms, as one calls him Mister not

Doctor, seemed at first sight an eyrie, although they were only on the third floor. The building was a new one, all glass and steel – there was even a glass-and-steel tubular lift shaft, aptly suggestive of the barrel of a syringe, through which the lift rose and fell hummingly like a giant plunger being alternately pulled and pressed – and two walls of his main consulting room were sheets of plate glass from floor to ceiling. When Anna and I were shown in my eyes were dazzled by a blaze of early-autumn sunlight falling down through those vast panes. The receptionist, a blonde blur in a nurse's coat and sensible shoes that squeaked – on such an occasion who would really notice the receptionist? – laid Anna's file on Mr Todd's desk and squeakingly withdrew. Mr Todd bade us sit. I could not tolerate the thought of settling myself on a chair and went instead and stood at the glass wall, looking out. Directly below me there was an oak, or perhaps it was a beech, I am never sure of those big deciduous trees, certainly not an elm since they are all dead, but a noble thing, anyway, the summer's green of its broad canopy hardly silvered yet with autumn's hoar. Car roofs glared. A young woman in a dark suit was walking away swiftly across the car park, even at that distance I fancied I could hear her high heels tinnily clicking on the tarmac.

Anna was palely reflected in the glass before me, sitting very straight on the metal chair in three-quarters profile, being the model patient, with one knee crossed on the other and her joined hands resting on her thigh. Mr Todd sat sideways at his desk riffling through the documents in her file; the pale-pink cardboard of the folder made me think of those shivery first mornings back at school after the summer holidays, the feel of brand-new schoolbooks and the somehow bodeful smell of ink and pared pencils. How the mind wanders, even on the most concentrated of occasions.

I turned from the glass, the outside become intolerable now.

Mr Todd was a burly man, not tall or heavy but very broad: one had an impression of squareness. He cultivated a reassuringly old-fashioned manner. He wore a tweed suit with a waistcoat and watch chain, and chestnut-brown brogues that Colonel Blunden would have approved. His hair was oiled in the style of an earlier time, brushed back sternly from his forehead, and he had a moustache, short and bristly, that gave him a dogged look. I realised with a mild shock that despite these calculatedly venerable effects he could not be much more than fifty. Since when did doctors start being

younger than I am? On he wrote, playing for time; I did not blame him, I would have done the same, in his place. At last he put down his pen but still was disinclined to speak, giving the earnest impression of not knowing where to begin or how. There was something studied about this hesitancy, something theatrical. Again, I understand. A doctor must be as good an actor as physician. Anna shifted on her chair impatiently.

'Well, Doctor,' she said, a little too loudly, putting on the bright, tough tone of one of those film stars of the Forties, 'is it the death sentence, or do I get life?'

The room was still. Her sally of wit, surely rehearsed, had fallen flat. I had an urge to rush forward and snatch her up in my arms, fireman-fashion, and carry her bodily out of there. I did not stir. Mr Todd looked at her in mild, hare-eyed panic, his eyebrows hovering halfway up his forehead.

'Oh, we won't let you go quite yet, Mrs Morden,' he said, showing big grey teeth in an awful smile. 'No, indeed we will not.'

Another beat of silence followed that. Anna's hands were in her lap, she looked at them, frowning, as if she had not noticed them before. My right knee took fright and set to twitching.

Mr Todd launched into a forceful disquisition, polished from repeated use, on promising treatments, new drugs, the mighty arsenal of chemical weapons he had at his command; he might have been speaking of magic potions, the alchemist's physic. Anna continued frowning at her hands; she was not listening. At last he stopped and sat gazing at her with the same desperate, leporine look as before, audibly breathing, his lips drawn back in a sort of leer and those teeth on show again.

'Thank you,' she said politely in a voice that seemed now to come from very far off. She nodded to herself. 'Yes,' more remotely still, 'thank you.'

At that, as if released, Mr Todd gave his knees a quick smack with two flat palms and jumped to his feet and fairly bustled us to the door. When Anna had gone through he turned to me and gave me a gritty, man-to-man smile, and the handshake, dry, brisk, unflinching, which I am sure he reserves for the spouses at moments such as this.

The carpeted corridor absorbed our footsteps.

The lift, pressed, plunged.

We walked out into the day as if we were stepping on to a new planet, one where no one lived but us.

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