

## **We'll never meet again**

### **1.**

“I FEAR NOT THE DEAD BUT THE LIVING!”

He would say this with such conviction that I began to think that the living were probably much better at haunting than the dead.

Haunting was the word. Haunting all around me. I felt utterly haunted, unable to understand or endure my surroundings. But was the house also haunted, the land where the house stood, the sea that flowed tirelessly beside it, the birch trees, even the birds that had arrived just in time for spring?

“It all seems haunted to me!” I said, peering out from the window.

I looked towards those eerie and pallid woods, entirely detached from who I was or had ever been.

“Don't say such things, Laura!” he begged.

### **2.**

Ray and I have been together for a long time now, always in this haunted and isolated place. And every time I try to say that unexplained things are happening, he will have none of it.

“But what about that phone call to your mobile?”

“It was you who phoned me from the house.”

“No, it could never have been me!”

“A technical fault then.”

“It wasn’t an error! It was –“

“It was a haunted phone call!” he said and laughed.

He always laughs in that downcast manner of his, in his eyes no sign of joy.

“Why can’t you see things the way I see them?”

### 3.

The house stands on a promontory at the southernmost tip of the island. The sea is rough; the smell of the earth, stale. Any greenery is off-colour and flowerless. Indistinct and matt, Ray says. Living here is about taking a gamble; there are just too many ghostly dangers. And when I mention it to Ray, he refuses to believe in ghosts.

“Despite the evidence?” I ask.

“What evidence?” he asks back.

“Look, it’s all around us!” I shout.

His constant denials of the obvious make me tremble. So much in fact that I begin to turn around the room until my head hurts. Ray takes me in his arms to stop the spinning, clicking his tongue several times to appear even more reproachful.

“Oh, that fateful accident!”

### 4.

Yes, ever since the accident I have been prone to sensitivities of all sorts. Smells are now bitter and the light sharper. I feel icy cold most of the time, and my skin has become so raw that I cannot bear the sun. As to what I can and cannot do, that is a little more complicated. Let us say for now that I barely have the strength to hold a pencil and do some sketching. Ray insists that I should try to sell my drawings.

“Being an artist is all in the past, and I’ll never be an artist again!”

He laughs in his sad way, as if pining for something long gone.

“Did you know that you have a knack for tragedy?”

I smile in order to appease him.

“In my present situation, Ray, there’s no other option.”

“You always go on and on in that tragic streak of yours,” he says looking away,

“Yes, the accident is definitely to blame for all your ills!”

## 5.

The accident that brought us together changed me more than I could’ve imagined. I’m now unhealthily attuned to all things natural and wild, and I can’t think of anything that’s more important than nature itself. Although I’m unable to leave the house for the time being, this endless observation of birds or trees from the window has become more captivating than life itself. Ray keeps prescribing pills of various tints, but what helps me most is drawing. It’s no longer my old dynamic sketching, and there’s definitely no impassioned style of any sort. Instead, mine are the gentlest strokes of the pencil, as though the objects I draw aren’t of this world. Vapid, Ray says to describe them.

## 6.

“And what about the stirring in the living room, and the creaking sounds inside the walls, and the goings on in the cellar!”

“Is that all?” he asked without taking his eyes off the book he was reading.

We were both sitting at his desk, and I was trying to draw a little china statuette of a blue-tit. It was the first time I was not sketching directly from nature.

“And the crackling of fire when there’s none? And the howlings?” I replied, providing yet more evidence.

That’s how it was with Ray, any comment from me about the haunted house was followed by his denial and summary rejection.

“Enough!”

“And the day I saw a bright shadow over our bed...”

“You need a new prescription!” he replied, turning the page of his book.

It was getting cold and dark, but neither of us did anything to increase the temperature or the light. We remained silent, a chilly darkness enveloping us. And after a few minutes of nothing very much, he stated once again his favourite thought.

“No, not afraid of the dead, but of the living. Remember that we’ll never meet again!”

“It’s only because you want to believe that,” I replied.

He lifted the book and shook it in the air.

“You’re wrong there. In fact, I wish we did come back and live forever. You know that I’m a lonely man on this island!”

I would have none of his defeatist attitude.

“But there’s all this unfinished business to get on with, all these people wanting to say more or do more, wanting to come back for love or for –”

“Or for what?” he asked defiantly.

I could not look at him when I said the word, and so I turned it into a question.

“Warmth?”

Ray put his book down and sighed.

7.

“It’s in the cellar!”

Ray had been away for three weeks, and those were my first words to him.

“What’s in the cellar?”

“Whatever it is that haunts this house!”

“Well, if it troubles you, keep away!” he said, entering through the front door and leaving his suitcase in the corridor as he always did.

He sat down at the kitchen table and started to read the local paper without paying any attention to what I did or said.

“You sometimes behave like you lived on your own!” I said, but got no reply.

The newspaper covered his eyes and I could only see the top of his head and his mop of gray hair. The front page spoke of impending storms at sea.

8.

It was so cold that night that we lit a fire with whatever we could find lying around, bits of wood, used envelopes, old newspapers.

“Did you save any lives this time?”

“Twenty perhaps.”

“Was it easy to save them?”

“Well, I just had to check the results of various tests. Mine is always the second opinion!”

“A man who saves lives!”

“That’s very much the punch-line when it comes to being a doctor. ”

“Other islands, other surgeries, other patients!”

“Yes, you never know when it may strike. I have to be ready to save anyone whose turn it might be.”

He laughed, but he was sadder than ever. I swallowed hard before I spoke.

“Is that what you did with me that day when the accident happened?”

In no time at all, the bits of paper in the fireplace became ash and the small chips of wood turned bright red.

“Can you get me some wood from the cellar, just a few pieces will do. Would you be able to cope with that?” he asked, without answering my question.

I spun around the room, in my now obsessive way.

“I refuse.”

“Why?”

“A place too dark, too terrifying!”

“There’s nothing wrong with the cellar!” he shouted.

He took me by the hand and dragged me against my will. I could do nothing to stop him. Tiny lamps lit our way, and we walked down the footsteps and the narrow corridor. After entering an even smaller space where we had to lower our heads, we finally came to the place where we kept the wood. It was so damp down there that lines of moisture rolled down the walls.

“There’s nothing here but logs of wood!” he said to me, shaking his head.

I pointed towards a sombre object.

“The old furnace!”

I would have wanted to spin there too, but in such a small space I could only shake uncontrollably.

“It’s working! The furnace’s working!” I shouted.

Ray sniffed the air.

“It smells of burnt coal. And recently burnt too...”

He opened the furnace, and sure enough some of the ashes were still pink.

“Have you used this furnace?”

“Never!”

He put his hand inside and touched the cinders. His index finger was now covered in silvery soot.

“Still warm!”

I rubbed his hand with mine until there was no trace of dust.

“Do you believe me now?”

“Perhaps –”

“Perhaps what, Ray?”

“Perhaps I don’t believe everything you say, but I believe in you!”

Bolts of lightening lit up the sea, and almost immediately thunder struck the island. The storm was just above the house, hitting hard. Ray trembled so much that I thought he was about to spin like me.

“If only I had blood in my veins!” I complained.

## 9.

I had come to Fowdrey to draw cormorants and guillemots and black-headed gulls. It was a journey against all odds. I had been told endless times that it was unwise to travel so far and that ships were known to be unsafe in these seas.

“So much easier to draw from photographs,” my editor kept saying.

I replied that I had always done all in my power to catch a glimpse of a bird taking off or landing or nesting, that drawing was more about experiencing than about the object itself.

“Then draw birds at your own peril!”

After a long journey first by train and then by sea, I arrived on the local ferry, happily looking at skies filled with screeching birds. And as I crossed a shaky gangway onto the safe land of the tiniest of islands, I did not realize at first that there were other shouts and screams coming from every direction. And then there was only me, standing there and barely holding on as the gangway gave way.

## 10.

The descent seemed so much slower than expected. As I fell I could see the damage inflicted on the hull by rough seas and outlandish creatures. I remember thinking that perhaps I should sketch barnacles and mussels as well as birds. For a full six minutes I was in those cold waters, drowning. Until Ray saved me, it felt like eternity itself.

He was there on the pier, waiting to set off on one of his medical visits, and did not think twice when he jumped into the water and dived to get me. We were rescued by a fishing boat soon enough, but Ray insisted on taking me to his house to see what else could be done for me, if anything at all. I remember that I was covered in seaweed and bitumen, like a true sea creature, and that I'd stopped breathing altogether. But he was a doctor after all, a man who saved lives –I heard him say those words to the locals. And ever since that day, I've been here. There's no other option anyway, as I cannot leave the house for now. And until I recover, if I ever do, I just want to spin and keep warm. His first words to me after the accident still ring clear:

“You're now living in my house in Fowdrey. I need you as mistress of this home. I've fallen in love with you, your eyes, your lips, your hands. Will you take me as your everlasting companion?”

## 11.

The wind is blowing as I've never heard it.

"I'm alone, you see. I can't face up to the living, only the sick and the dying," he says.

The wind's blowing and he needs me, I can tell that he needs me more than anything.

"And I... I need you in order to exist."

"You don't say!" he whispered.

And as he spoke, doors banged, fleeting shadows crossed the air, laments could be heard inside the walls.

"You and I like to talk of love," I said, "but this house is definitely haunted!"

## 12.

I touched him gently on his cheek, so much I could manage.

"Oh, you're always so cold!" he complained.

"A doctor," I replied trying to avoid his gaze, "would say that I had died long ago!"

He laughed even more sadly than usual.

"Don't ever mention such things, Laura."

"But you don't believe in ghosts, Ray, do you?"

I didn't move, but he held me with the same strength as he did on that fateful day.

"Remember I'm afraid of the living, not the dead!" he replied, but as always there was nothing I could say or do to prove him wrong.

From: 'Zero Negative - Cero negative'

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