

THE QUARRY

Letters From A Lost Love

Cain Duncan

Dearest Eliza,

The roof caved in yesterday—and would you believe, the entire household slept through it all! The howling wind of the coast is such a constant companion that it drowned out the crack of splintering beams and plaster. We woke up this morning to a layer of rainwater. It spread glistening over the freshly polished silverware, like dew over morning grass, leaving behind a miniature sea stained the colour of cold tea, of which soaked the hem of my skirt a murky brown. The storm rolled off the horizon sometime during the night, washing branches the size of trees to the shore and tossing stones and sticks through the windows. The thundering rain that had heralded the storm had apparently been too much for the poor roof – which we later discovered had been attacked by woodworm – and it had broken under the weight of the night's fury.

The servants tried to usher J— and I away from it all. Afraid, I think, of the broken glass, but I am so sick of being treated like a brittle fragile, broken thing Eliza, that I wandered inside the kitchen for a closer look. And there, among the shredded thatch and broken beams, hidden under the softly creaking beams, was a cuckoo chick. Its down feathers caught and radiated the light like a halo, and before I even knew what I was doing I had it cupped in my hands. It

reminded me so much of that tiny sparrow we found on one of our frequent walks through the park, that I could not bear to leave it alone.

I do so miss you Eliza. You, and your quiet laughter and the small smirk you never can quite hide behind your hand. I just finished reading *Pride and Prejudice*. I am sure you will be overjoyed, a fact which makes it worth that half year slaving over it. Miss Austen is a beautiful writer, yet I cannot help but wish for the easiness of their love. No secrets or guilt in keeping things from the people they love. Would my own father love you as much as I, then I would not be happier for the world.

When father came down, he did his best to convince me to give the chick to the dogs, but J— persuaded him to let me keep it, aware of my chafing at being locked inside the house. I am not, after all, so sick that I must be confined to bed all day, as you were last autumn with that awful flu.

The servants cleared away the debris and we breakfasted on the balcony; the cuckoo chick wrapped in rags beside my elbow. As the morning progressed, we persuaded Father to take the carriage down to the village so we might be able to meet our neighbours, who have been so kind as to send us fresh fish every Sunday since we arrived.

It will surely be an interesting visit. They have an unmarried son; a young man father seems set on me marrying. It's all dreadfully predictable, but I know you worry about my loneliness, and who knows? Maybe I shall find a friend in him.

Farewell for now my lovely Eliza, you will be present in my every waking thought and prayer.

Yours,

Sophia.

My dearest Eliza,

You'll be glad I'm sure to hear that the frequent visits with our neighbours have been going well. At least that is what my father might say. I must confess to you though; the son is a terrible bore, and I cannot see a friendship blooming with him. We have dined with them nearly ten and two times, each time my father loudly and publicly expressing his love of the man. It is most uncomfortable. You know what he thinks, of you my love? That my illness is caused by your 'unsavoury character' and wicked intentions. He must have seen us when we were walking through the park one day, but when, I would not be able to say. Your frequent hunting excursions and tendencies to challenge men to chess and backgammon have never earned his approval. 'Women are playthings to be forgotten,' as he so often says. I doubt your declaration at the dining table on Christmas Eve, that you are to remain unmarried, has helped the situation at all. The ripple of shock that sent through the vicar's guests truly was a miracle to witness. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life. For one so shy and quiet as you Eliza, it is incredible how often you manage to get under other people's skin.

It is indeed getting harder to smuggle you these letters dearest Eliza. Even J— is weary of helping me in what he thinks is a pointless exercise. But you know, you must know, that even this will not deter me. I will hobble down to the post office myself if I must.

You seem to be in better spirits than our last exchange, a fact of which I can be forever grateful. Thinking of you suffering alone has been most awful. The last time I saw you cry was when we were but thirteen, and I cannot help but worry that you now are more alone than I. I at least have the cuckoo bird, a most spirited and frightful creature. She has been terrorising the entire household, and I cannot help but be quite proud.

Yet how can I take pride in such things when you are not here? You, who are so far away, under a different sky, a different sun. I must admit to you, the horizon from where I'm standing is rather grey. The birds which have been keeping my company in these long months are taking flight to escape the winter, of which I too wish I could escape. Yet God – if she exists – did not grant me wings and so here I must remain. An idea I imagine that will leave you scandalised; I know what you were like in church my love. The most devout woman I know, and the kindest too. That vicar who stared at us with such malice is not blessed with half of Her grace as you. It is those summer stained memories of a happier time that will warm me through the cold to come.

That, and your promise to visit this spring. Being apart from you does not bear thinking about. But bear it I must.

The gulls are abandoning their nests my love, and so I too must take leave of you.

Yours,

Sophia.

My dearest Eliza,

I will not dance around the news which even my pen shudders to write, for that would be an unkindness I could not wish upon you. So, the crux of the matter is that it appears to be that I am in fact, more ill than we first feared.

The family doctor visited yesterday and left me with the knowledge that my own body is eating itself alive. I am afraid I was not present for the conversation, father leaving me to sit outside while they consulted privately. So, there I was, watching the clouds scurrying across the sky like rats, decidedly *not* listening to father's rage leaking out of the house and staining the air a sickly orange. Father believes that I will walk away from this alive, Doctor G— must have told him otherwise, nothing makes him so angry as being told he is wrong.

But let's move on to happier thoughts. I was strong enough yesterday to sit at the bottom of the garden and watch the gulls flock overhead to nest in the great stone cliffs that crash down to the sea. I couldn't help but laugh at their cries, those wild things. Their elegance and grace brought back bittersweet memories of a time when you and I danced together at your manor in the countryside, in the ballroom and then in secret, under the light of the moon. You always have possessed a certain recklessness that I cannot help but let sweep me away. Like that day you convinced me to go climb the trees in the orchard, which ended in you neatly spraining your ankle after jumping from one tree to another. A fond memory now, if it wasn't one then. One of the many reasons why I love you.

J— said he would take me there in the carriage tomorrow to see the gulls up close. An offer borne perhaps out of the need to wipe the exhaustion from the corners of my eyes. It is an effort doomed to failure; I can already tell. Every day I grow weaker. The trip from the village to the coast seeming to drain the last of what little energy I have left. I should not have been parted from you and I wish that you were here Eliza. The sun does not shine so brightly and the fresh breeze not so relieving on my feverish skin without you here by my side. But you remain in town and may as well be half a world away.

Forever yours,
Sophia.

Beloved Eliza,

Your last letter has filled me with a fear I can scarcely describe. To talk of taking your own life! My love, how could I continue to exist in a world without you in it? You must not allow yourself to lose hope! This illness shall pass, and I will escape from my father and reunite with you in that cottage by the woods where we first met, however long the carriage ride may take me.

Please write as soon as you can. Please wait for me.

Your love,
Sophia.

My dearest Eliza,

Thank you for your swift reply. I have worried myself sick. Scarcely a day has gone by when I didn't pray to God. But my love, don't you know that I would give anything to see you

again? You must not allow yourself to fall into despair; we are destined for greater things than this, and you know not all evils are unending.

What are you now reading? I take comfort in the fact that your books will be there to keep you company even when I am not. I can only imagine how your sisters would take your loss, young L— would be inconsolable. No, it doesn't even bear thinking about!

These thoughts lead me to the fact that I have not seen you for an age. Every day drags on as if the clock has forgotten to keep ticking, yet I cannot tear my gaze away. My illness has me confined to the house and edges of the garden. The long walks you and I shared during those sweet summer days now seem like a far-off memory that belong to someone else. Yet I can still feel the dry grass brushing against my ankles, see you falling asleep with Jane Austen's newest novel open on your chest.

Yet spring has taken hold of the valley in a turn of events which seems to surprise no one but me. These long winter months have dragged themselves by, but the flowers peering through the grass have convinced the sun to hang herself back in the ceiling of the sky. The cliffs have become my favourite place to be; the wind talking my hair loose of its pins for it blow adoring around my face. It makes me want to write novels – only for you to read of course – and it seems to be the only place my breath doesn't stutter in my lungs.

Of course, J— does not approve. You know his proper views of the world, how could he? He thinks I look like a wild thing, but he would never begrudge me anything, and I am ashamed to say that it is too easy to take advantage of such a thing. Please don't be displeased with me Eliza. Without you by my side, I must take advantage of any small pleasures that stumble across my path. The graceful curve of the gulls wings, their raw cries that echo across the surface of the sea – they remind me of the poetry you constantly fall in love with, another way for me to be closer to you.

The cuckoo chick has found a home in a discarded hat box that I spent the morning lining with old clothes that have grown too big for my thin arms. She has taken to peeping softly at the rising sun, in want perhaps, of the family blown away in the storm. Certainly, we have seen no other circling birds wandering the empty sky in search for their lost chick. As dismal as her lodgings are, I cannot help but notice that her feathers have grown in glossy and strong. Her

voice high and sweet, even as my own hair becomes thin and grey, my voice withering with the waning moon.

The sun is rising from behind the clouds and I'll have to leave you for now, Eliza. I am not yet spoilt for good weather and must make the most of it while I can.

Yours,

Sophia.

Dearest Eliza,

I'm sorry my letters are becoming shorter. I haven't the strength to write them. Your latest letter came like a warm breeze to spirit away storm blown clouds. It lifted the haze which has become my constant companion these long months, even if only for a moment. Your story about the little dog moved me almost to tears. I cannot remember the last time I laughed that hard. I'm sorry my own letters take so long to get through, I have now been forced into secrecy as J— refuses to aid me any longer. I have to lie in wait like a prey animal waiting for my father to turn the other way so I may steal down to the post office. My only company now is the cuckoo chick who has now flourished into a beautiful specimen, the like of which I have never seen.

My father took me out hunting with he and my brother in an effort, I overheard them discussing in the parlour, to get me some 'fresh air'. It reminds me almost of our first days together as children: the sun kissed ground, the bare trees and quiet birdsong. There was no big game for them to catch and so they resorted to shooting the gulls flying overhead. And there I was, forced to watch as they fell to the ground one by one, like feathered tears. I was still seeing them hours later, even as the cuckoo fluttered around my head singing her sweet song.

I stained my handkerchief red yesterday, and the family doctor Mr G— has started to watch me with eyes as sad and distant as the moon. Even though I was sent here to the sea for my health, I'd have rather stayed and wasted away by your side my love. If I look at my hands

under the weak light of the moon, I can see the delicate bones of my fingers poking through my skin. I think I am ready now to say goodbye to you Eliza, one final time.

Yours,

Sophia.

My sweet Sophia,

Your last letter made me fear as I have never feared before. The thought of you dying before I could hold you in my arms one last time is unthinkable. And so, I have left town in a flurry of hurriedly packed trunks and am making my way to you as I write this. I only pray I am not too late.

When I arrive in your village have your bags packed and ready to go, for we shall leave in the same carriage in which I arrive. There is a house waiting for us in the warmer part of the country, with a sturdy roof and yellow walls, surrounded by flowers on all sides, populated with swallows and nightingales to keep your cuckoo chick company.

I know your father will surely be upset, but how can we care when we have such limited time to spend together before the end? If God can forgive us this – and she will, of this I am sure – then your father must understand.

Please wait for me my love.

Yours, now and forevermore,

Eliza.