1959

My Picture Left in Scotland

George Garrett

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Professor Dudley walked from his desk to the window and looked out at the barbered green of the quadrangle, his profile outlined sharply against the glass. The student, sitting in the straight-backed chair, watched him out of the corner of his eye. The professor took a deep puff on his cigarette and blew a series of quick, handsome smoke rings. He was watching the brown squirrels on the lawn. They scurried about with plump devious energy and, somehow, reminded him of priests, the fat little priests carved in stone on the tower at Chartres. You almost had to be a mountain climber to see those priests.

“I suppose you want me to be honest with you.”

The boy opened his mouth to speak, ended by merely nodding.

“There are two ways, really,” Professor Dudley continued, returning to his chair behind the desk. “One can be tactfully honest, that is, virtually noncommittal. Find the virtues worthy of praise and ignore the naked faults. Even so, though, believe me, tact can be a wound. Or, on the other hand, if one mingles a little honey with the gall, one can say more or less exactly what one thinks.”

“I just want you to tell me the truth,” the boy said.

“Good.”

The professor grinned and picked up the manuscript. The title was The Signal Elm which probably explained, he thought, why the student had sent it to him. He had received the manuscript, bulky and badly typed, in the mail a couple of weeks before, accompanied by a reticent, expectant note asking that, if he had the time, would he mind reading

When we accepted his story, George Garrett was in Rome on joint American Academy, Prix de Rome, and Sewanee Review fellowships. The University of Texas Press brought out a collection of poems, The Sleeping Gypsy, in 1958. Garrett’s first novel, The Finished Man, will be published by Scribner’s in September.
it? The professor had sent a note in reply saying it would be a pleasure to read the novel and setting the date and hour when they could meet in his office and discuss the book. He added that it was a pleasure to look at the creative work of his students. After all, was that not one of the disguised virtues of the discipline of liberal arts?

"It's probably an admission of ignorance, Mister Grubb," Professor Dudley said, "but I don't recall you in any of my Victorian classes."

"I never took the course officially, sir," Grubb said. "But I do come every year to hear your Matthew Arnold lectures."

"You must have noticed," the professor said, smiling gently, "that once in a while I've been guilty of repeating myself."

"The way I look at it," Grubb said solemnly, "is once you've really done the job, you can't help repeating yourself."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it. Are you a senior?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't it odd that we've never met before now?"

The boy smiled back and shrugged.

Of all the sad and inarticulate gestures of mankind that shrug was classed among the least appealing. Grubb couldn't have offended more by picking his nose. The boy sat awkwardly attentive in the chair, still bearing after four years the definable stamp of a metropolitan high school. There was something about all of them, the professor thought, something of the clumsy ponderous solemnity of the self-educated man. It must take some doing, a vegetable tenacity, to rise to the top in classes, each of thirty or forty, in public high schools of thousands, and to be accepted finally by private colleges with the highest admission standards. At least it stirred one's admiration.

"I hope you're comfortable," the professor said. "Would you care for a cigarette?"

"Thanks just the same," Grubb said. "I don't smoke."

"I have to admit to something," the professor said. "I have a confession to make before I can say anything about your book. Years ago I wanted to be a novelist myself. After I finished here and spent a little while at Oxford, I lived for a year or so in Paris just writing. And even after that, when I was new to the treadmill of teaching, I kept at it for a while. Mea culpa, I have three unpublished novels in my desk at home."

"I never knew that," the boy said. "That's very interesting."

"Now I've given you fair warning," the professor said. "The point is, anything I say has to be taken with a grain of salt."
“The way I look at it,” the boy said, “is you ought to be able to help me even more. I’ll take my chances.”

“Maybe so,” the professor said. “Now then, about The Signal Elm.”

Leafing through the pages Professor Dudley had quickly grasped the outline of the shopworn plot. It told the story of a young man’s struggle to maturity and identity, starting from the strict confines of an immigrant Jewish family in Brooklyn (Was Grubb Jewish? It seemed likely, at least possible.) whose roots were in the old world, progressing until the young man was able to feel wholly of the new world, conquering it, and, as well, transcending the shadowing mediocrity of his background. At the climax the boy arose and delivered the Valedictorian Address at PHS the nth while his parents listened in gentle awe to his mastery of a language they had never really learned. The book ended in a subdued tone, the young man arriving at a green and only dreamed-of campus, possibilities ringing his head like a saint’s halo of real gold. Still, the professor could tell, there were sections and occasional scenes which were beautifully written. Sometimes the young stammer into poetry almost in spite of themselves. The poor man’s Scott Fitzgerald. Professor Dudley hadn’t the slightest notion why the novel was called The Signal Elm. Doubtless something had eluded him. He confined his critique to purely technical faults, stiff dialogue, overwritten description, crude symbolism, lack of clearcut motivation for actions, absence of well-defined development of what appeared to be the dominant themes. He had to work quickly, for he had another appointment to follow. The whole thing was precisely the material for the type of vignette Professor Dudley could tell so well, with mild self-deprecating irony, at a faculty party.

“I hope I haven’t been too rough with you,” he said. “I’m aware this book means a lot to you.”

“Yes, sir,” Grubb said. “It means a good deal.”

“Maybe that’s the trouble. Maybe you’re too close to the material at this time. Why not try some other theme, an entirely different kind of story, one that will let you keep a little aesthetic distance?”

“Don’t you think I could revise? I’ve got notes on everything you said.”

“No, Mister Grubb, to tell you the truth I don’t think there’s any hope for this one. You asked me for the truth. Remember though, it’s only my opinion. I feel that there’s nothing you nor I nor anyone else could do to salvage this book. It would take a genius of another stamp—a Dickens.”
"Yes, sir," the boy said sadly.
"I can see you're very disappointed. Don't be. You're young, much younger than you realize now, and, after all, it's only your first trial run. Don't take my word as gospel, though. Show it to somebody else."
"I don't think that will be necessary," Grubb said rising to leave, the manuscript a limp and wounded thing in his hands. "There isn't anybody else in school who could handle it technically, the way you did."
"That's not quite accurate," Professor Dudley said, walking him to the door. "But I suppose it's the white lies, the happy little self-delusions, that we all live by, isn't it? I'm very glad you brought the manuscript to me. Otherwise we might not have met. Do you play squash, Mister Grubb?"
"No, sir."
"Well, something will turn up before graduation," the professor said, offering his hand. "When you go out, will you tell the young lady waiting in the hall to come right in. And Grubb, for heaven's sake, don't give up. I'd like to think I'll see the day when you'll send me a copy of your first novel."
Mister Grubb looked at him, shrugged eloquently and departed, closing the door softly behind him.

When the door closed, the professor walked over to his windows. He saw Grubb appear, ambling along the crisscross walk and, particularly, he noticed an intriguing squirrel who paused in alarm by a tree near the walk, its paws poised together in an attitude of prayer, its great soft tail cocked like a question mark. He heard the door open and shut behind him.
"Miss Palmer," he said, offering her the straight-backed chair, "I'm sorry I had to keep you waiting."
"You've always been so good about time," she said. "I can't complain about having to wait a little."
She sat easily in the chair, her legs demurely crossed, and looked at him. She was as blonde and full-bodied as a ripe pear and her eyes were as clear and cool as springwater. He gave her a light for her cigarette and moved behind the desk. Professor Dudley ruffled the papers in the top drawer and came up with a manuscript bearing the title "My Picture Left in Scotland: A Study of Ben Jonson," beneath which was typed "Submitted as Spring Term Junior Paper to the Department of English by Jenny Bell Palmer." Professor Dudley shuffled its wide-margined, beautifully typed pages, studiously frowning. He was aware
that Miss Palmer had shifted her position. She was sitting on the edge of her chair.

"With regard to your paper," he said, "I think I'd better read my comments first."

He glanced at her and she nodded.

"This is a lucidly written, close and comprehensive study of a single poem by Jonson, and, within those limitations, you have succeeded admirably. One is not entirely convinced that this eighteen-line lyric is deserving of such scrutiny or that the poem is as representative of Jonson's work as the writer seems to assume. The reader, not himself a specialist in the Renaissance period, would like to be encouraged by cogent evidence to accept the validity of the implied assumption. On the whole, however, in spite of certain minor mechanical errors, this paper is an adequate realization of its intentions. B minus."

"Thank you," Miss Palmer said.

"Really, it wasn't bad at all," he said. "You're improving all the time."

"I enjoyed doing this one," she said. "It's so much easier to write about something you really like."

"I am curious as to why this particular poem caught your fancy."

"I thought it was a very personal kind of a poem," she said. "You take something like 'Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes.' That could be written to almost anybody in general. This poem seemed to have a particular person in mind. There he was in love with this young girl and worried because he didn't think she loved him. I thought maybe it would be interesting if I wrote about it from the feminine angle."

"That's an interesting notion," he said. "I'm not sure you made it clear in your paper though."

"That's the trouble," she said. "As soon as I start writing a paper I freeze up. A paper is, by definition I guess, an impersonal thing."

She had relaxed again, recrossed her marvelous legs, and it occurred to him that at any moment all her youth and vitality would burst the shell of the cashmere sweater and tweed skirt, leaving her nude and shining as an apple. A veritable vision by Cobean.

"Excuse me, did you say something?"

"Nothing, Miss Palmer, nothing at all. My imagination was wandering in the precincts of senility. Let's take a look at the poem and see what you were really trying to do in the paper."

He went to the bookcase, fumbled vague-handed for a moment, and returned with an anthology of Elizabethan and Jacobean verse. A quick
flipping of pages and he found the poem, presented the book to her and stood behind her close by the chair, close enough to detect the sweet fresh odor of soap. She must have showered just before coming to keep the appointment. Miss Palmer studied the poem silently.

"It’s the last part especially," she said finally. "In the first part he just states the facts. He says he loved her and she didn’t seem to love him."

"What about the last part?"

"Don’t you see what I mean?" she said. "It’s self-evident to me."

"Suppose I read it."

He leaned over her shoulder, his hands gripping the chair and in a soft voice, still haunted by the ghost of an Oxford accent, he read.

Oh, but my conscious feares,  
That flie my thoughts betweene,  
Tell me that she hath seene  
My hundreds of gray haires  
Told seven and fortie yeares.  
Read so much wast, as she cannot embrace  
My mountaine belly, and my rockie face,  
And all these through her eyes, have stoppt her eares.

"It sounds very nice when you read it like that."

"But what about the last part, Miss Palmer? It appears to me the poet is being realistic about the whole thing. He’s forty-seven, gray-headed, fat and his face is, as Time would say, craggy."

"That’s exactly my point," she exclaimed. "He doesn’t say word one about what the girl thinks. He’s just being sorry for himself."

"Indeed he doesn’t. How could he put that in the poem? What man, since poor old Adam, has ever known for sure what the girl thinks?"

"That’s the trouble with men," Miss Palmer said. "Even the intelligent ones."

"Then I’m afraid the defect is irremediable."

"No, it isn’t. They just don’t use common sense. Look how silly it is. There was Ben Jonson worrying about what some girl was thinking about him."

"Let’s face it, he does admit a few physical characteristics that might be called impediments."

"When a girl falls in love with an older man, that doesn’t even enter into it."
“That’s a very sweet thought,” he said. Without moving an inch he could have bitten Miss Palmer’s pink exposed ear. He turned away and lit a cigarette.

“It’s not just ‘a very sweet thought,’” she was saying. “Look, I have perfectly ordinary normal reactions to things. Now my daddy, for example, is ugly as sin and I could easily fall in love with a man like him.”

“And your supposition is that Ben Jonson was a lovable old guy.”

“You might put it that way.”

“Ah,” he said, standing once again in strict profile by the windows, “what a good world it would be if the illusions of the young and fair . . .”

“But it is a good world,” she insisted. “Don’t you think?”

Professor Dudley felt his mouth relaxing into a slow smile. He returned to his desk, sprawled leisurely and unofficial on the edge of it, his long legs dangling, exposing below the creased line of his gray flannel trousers the neat loafers he wore, the subdued argyle socks and the tanned bulge of an athletic, tennis-playing calf. He looked a good deal younger than forty.

“I don’t know why you do it,” he said. “Every time you come to my office you arrive immaculately bursting with youth and life. You make me feel the weight of every one of my years, the burden I push around like the rock of Sisyphus. You ought to be ashamed.”

“I never know how to take you,” she said. “You’re always either being ironic or just kidding around.”

“I’m not just kidding around.”

“You don’t look a day over thirty and you know it.”

“And today you look as if you’d just stepped out of a Renoir canvas.”

“You ought to be ashamed.”

“Why, what on earth’s the matter with Renoir?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “His women are so—sensuous.”

“There you go. Passing judgment on the basis of pre-conceived values,” he said. “How am I ever going to make a critic out of you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, frowning.

“Take a word like that, like sensuous. The way you use it—sensuous—implies that it’s a naughty word. It’s a perfectly respectable neutral adjective and you know it.”

“All right,” she said. “But you know what I mean.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know what you mean.”

He looked into her bright clear eyes. They were like water on a wind-
less day, unclouded by any complexity. If there was any emotion to be read from her eyes it was only a mild, a very mild anxiety. Perhaps it was simply curiosity.

"Let's pursue the point," he said. "You find Renoir sensuous in a way that has connotations of naughtiness. Why?"

"Oh I don't know," she said a little petulantly. "I just do, that's all."

"Let me tell you how I feel about Renoir," he said, suddenly exuberant, theatrical. "I find Renoir is Paris in the spring, the sweetest, ripest, greenest city of April in the world. A long time ago, quite possibly before you were born, I lived on the Left Bank, seeing everything with wide, intoxicated eyes, drinking in every impression like wine, jotting down wild, irresponsible, inspired ideas for poems and novels and plays. Renoir symbolizes all that to me, the life blood of youth, the time when every girl in Paris was a living still life compacted of the brightest fruits of the earth."

"Oh well," she said. "You were an artist. Artists are different."

"In what way?"

"You know what I mean. I used to go to the life class over at the Art Department," she said, lowering her eyes. "It was a mixed class, but once you got used to the idea of a naked woman posing up there it was all right. Everybody just concentrated on their drawings. All except a couple of football players who couldn't draw a straight line. They sat right behind me and giggled."

"There are always football players who sit in the back and giggle. We have to ignore them."

"I ignored them all right. One of them had the nerve afterwards to call up and ask me for a date. Would you believe it?"

"Your first point is well taken. Artists are different."

But she had looked away from him, smoothed her skirt and gathered up her books, and now she was standing. He thought he detected the faint stain of a blush on her cheeks.

"I still don't like Renoir," she said. "Maybe men do, though."

"I wish we had time to discover why you really don't respond to Renoir," he said. "Maybe some other time. As it is, the light is waning, it's past five o'clock, and I must totter home."

"Christ!" she gasped. "I'm late for choir practice."

She started for the door in a rush.

"Hey, Jenny Bell," he called after her. "You forgot your paper."

Collecting herself, she returned and gracefully accepted the paper from his hands.
“I hope,” he said, “you’ll feel free to drop in any time during the rest of the term and discuss your work.”

“Don’t you worry,” she said. “I will.”

She walked out of the door, closing it gently behind her. He could hear her feet running down the hall and, looking out of the window, he saw her racing across the quadrangle, scattering poor astounded squirrels in every which way, her skirt blowing, her white legs flashing, Diana the huntress without a thought in her head, and he, Actaeon, gnawed to pieces by his own hounds. He bit his lip until he could taste the light salt flavor of blood.

Professor Dudley walked home the back way, avoiding the main street of the town with its bustle of rush-hour traffic and last minute shopping. It was always better walking along the tree-lined residential streets with their well-kept lawns and well-painted houses. It took a little longer but it was only a few blocks either way; and he thought that walking easily in the green shade was a kind of ritual. He always felt that coming home from the college he was like a deep-sea diver rising slowly from an arena of dark, dreamy beauty into the pitiless blare of sunlight and burning air. When he opened the door, Ronnie stood formidably barring his way, arms akimbo.

“Susie broke my bicycle,” he said. “And Mamma is sick and we’re hungry.”

“Well, now,” Professor Dudley said, “we’ll have to see about all these things, one at a time.”

“I should hope so,” Ronnie cried over his shoulder, fleeing.

He set down his briefcase and looked at himself in the hall mirror. Not quite like Dorian Gray, he thought, but somehow remarkably lucky, remarkably free from the lines of either his years or his sins. He adjusted his necktie and climbed the stairs to his wife’s room. He knocked and entered, finding Vivian in bed, her thin troubled face buoyed by pillows, etched with the pains of a headache.

“You know,” she said, “it’s not much help even if you know it’s psychosomatic.”

“No,” he said. “I guess it hurts just as much.”

“A regular soap-opera day here,” she said. “First the dishwasher broke down after breakfast and then I couldn’t start the car. I don’t know what’s the matter with it. It just won’t seem to work for me. One goddamn thing after another and then to top it all Susie cut an awful gash in her head trying to ride Ronnie’s bicycle down the flight of steps at the park.”
"That's how she busted it."
"What?"
"The bicycle."
"Oh, I suppose so."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked her hand. Such pale slender hands with such exquisite, useless fingers, he used to call her his Rossetti girl.

"So how do you feel now?"
"Lousy," she said. "Just plain lousy. I can't budge. It feels like the top of my head is coming off any minute."

"Call the doctor?"
"What's the use? It's all in my mind."

He felt suddenly like shrugging his shoulders, just like Mister Grubb.

"How was your day?"
"Same old rot," he said. "Another day, another dollar."

"Pearls before swine?"
"So to speak," he said. "Have the kids had supper?"
"God no," she said. "The very thought of the kitchen appalls me."

"Well, I'll warm something up."

The kitchen was, as he anticipated, a shambles. He took a long swallow from a bottle of scotch and got busy clearing things so that he could at least have the sink and the stove free. The main thing, he thought, the real distinguished advice I have for you this morning, gentlemen, is two-fold. Point one: never, under no circumstances, no never marry an intellectual woman. If you must marry at all, which is debatable, search for a plump ripe stupid peasant woman. Keep her barefoot and pregnant and full of good solid food like meat and potatoes. If you can't locate such a delectable mountain, such a promised land for the sowing and the reaping, let this be your guide. Never marry a woman who is smarter than you are. Now for point two. Let's see, what was point two? Ah yes, I have it right here and I shan't detain you a moment. Mark this well. Keep your grubby, and I use the word advisedly, keep your grubby, cotton-picking fingers out of the arts, lest, bitten by a bug or burned by a gemlike flame, as the metaphor may go, so to speak, lest you become infected with ambition and struggle yourself gray-headed and black in the face trying to be what you most patently are not. Most patently.

"All right, kids," he shouted. "Let's eat."

They ate canned Spanish rice with milk and bread and butter. They seemed perfectly happy, Susie triumphantly bandaged and Ronnie
eagerly pursuing the prospect of a new bicycle. As a matter of fact, he thought, it might even be an adventure to be a child in a high disorganized family. He dabbled at the rice with his fork, but wasn't really hungry.

“What's at the movies, Susie?”

“We're going to watch TV tonight.”

After they appeared sufficiently stuffed, he shooed them into the living room to watch TV and retired to his small study with the bottle of scotch. He poured a drink and listened to the gunfire and forlorn battle cries coming from the living room. He picked up a copy of Matthew Arnold from the desk and read through “Dover Beach” in about thirty seconds.

“You old fraud,” he said, tossing the book aside. “You, Matthew Arnold, like the rest of us. The truth is we all tried to sign up with the ignorant armies but they classified us 4-F and the only thing left to do is sit on the fence with the railbirds and holler when they go by. You too, T. S. Eliot. And you too, Renoir, turning sweaty female flesh into apples and bonbons. And, ah yes, you too, Ben Jonson, mon frere.”

He took a detective story off the shelf and began to read, hoping that before he got really involved the damn thing the phone would ring. The odds were perfectly good that somebody would call. It would not, of course, be Jenny Bell Palmer. It would not, he trusted, be Mister Grubb or F. Scott Fitzgerald on the line. Somebody would call. Life is like that. Full of little surprises, don’t you know?

SNOW IN SICILY

“All the snow that falls on Mt. Etna belongs to the Archbishop of Catania... Etna snow ice cream has a better flavor.”

—News item.

All the snow that falls on Etna, 
Being his by right alone, 
Nets the bishop a pure profit. 
Erupting, it’s the jet of Tophet; 
Quiet, it’s his ice cream cone.

—Ernest Kroll