

The Art of Falling

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The day after her meeting at the school, she and Philip had an appointment with the marriage counsellor. They'd chosen a therapist in a small town twenty miles east of the city, where they weren't known, or at least she had chosen the therapist and Philip had, grudgingly, agreed to go. 'I don't see why we must pay a stranger in order to talk to each other,' he said.

'Because we don't talk to each other,' Nessa said.

'Yes we do.'

'No, not properly. Not now.'

For several months they had unpeeled their lives in this room. it was, Nessa thought, like undressing in front of a stranger. That morning she wanted to raise the unfairness of Jennifer continuing to adore her father while becoming increasingly distant from her mother.

'It's like she's blaming me for his affair,' she said. They were seated around a table in a small, chintzy room above a dry cleaners.

'That's ridiculous,' Philip said.

'Is it?' she said. 'Children blame the wrong parent all the time. When my sister and I were young, we made a voodoo doll of our father and whenever he burned the dinner, or made us wait in the van while he was on a job, we'd stick pins in it. it makes me sad now to think about it, because our father was doing his best. it was our mother who was to blame, decamping to her relatives whenever the mood took her.'

'How old were you,' the therapist said, 'when you played that game?'

She considered for a moment. 'Ten. Maybe eleven. it wasn't a game. I kept the doll. I never did anything with it afterwards, but I kept it, and for a while, when I was about fifteen, I used to take it to school with me.'

Philip glanced, in an obvious way, at his watch. 'I think we're getting off the topic.'

'I'd like to stay with this a little longer, if we may,' the therapist said. 'Carry on, Nessa.'

She saw that he was looking at her expectantly. What more was there to say about the doll? ‘I remember wondering why it never worked for us,’ she said, ‘when it always worked for the people on the television.’

The therapist steepled his fingers. ‘Well . . .’ he said.

‘Hang on,’ Philip said. ‘Is that the cloth doll with the bamboo legs? The one I found in your sock drawer?’

‘Yes,’ Nessa said. ‘That’s it.’

‘You told me that doll belonged to your grandmother. A family heirloom.’

‘I’m more interested in the fact that you kept it,’ the therapist said. ‘Why was that, do you think, Nessa?’

Philip held up a hand to silence him. ‘You lied to me,’ he said, turning to Nessa.

She reddened. ‘What was I going to tell you? It was years ago. We didn’t know each other that well back then.’

‘We were married.’

She felt her temper rise. ‘After all the hurt you’ve caused,’ she said. ‘After everything you’ve done, you have the nerve to sit there and accuse me of lying. Me choosing not to talk about a doll, Philip, does not equate to you choosing to sleep with Cora Wilson.’

Philip looked to the therapist, as if to say *Rein this in*, but the man said nothing. ‘We drive all this way,’ Philip said, ‘to talk about us, and all you do is bring everything back to Cora. Cora, Cora, Cora.’

‘That is not fair,’ she said.

‘Maybe we should park this for the moment,’ the therapist said, ‘and get back to your relationship with your daughter.’ But for the remaining half hour, Philip was curt to the point of rudeness, and it was a relief when the time was finally up and they left in their separate cars, Nessa for Tragumna in West Cork, where she had an appointment on behalf of the gallery with the family of the acclaimed artist the late Robert Locke.

‘I’m afraid we’re running behind,’ Loretta Locke had said on the doorstep, ‘my mother took a bit of a turn.’ The first time she’d used that phrase, ‘a bit of a turn’, Nessa had been alarmed, but it turned out that Loretta used it to mean anything from a mild stroke to a fit of bad temper.

‘Is she all right?’ Nessa stepped over the leaves of an encroaching plant and onto the porch. Things grew with lush vulgarity here. Maybe it was the sea air: all those tiny particles of seaweed, all those hapless microorganisms blown inland to fertilise reedy fields.

‘Oh, Mother is absolutely fine.’ Loretta inclined her head to the small room at the end of the hall where Nessa usually spoke with Mrs Locke. ‘I’ve left you the newspaper.’

They were standing outside the studio where Robert Locke had worked on a number of his better-known pieces. Before the Lockes came to the house in the late sixties, the room must have been a sitting room. It was wide and bright, with two tall windows looking out to sea, another smaller window to the side, a ceiling with subdued cornicing and one bare lightbulb in the centre. *Gravity*, nominated for the Turner in 1985 and now in the national gallery, had been conceived and shaped in this room. *Venus at the Hotel Negresco*, known locally as ‘the Chalk Sculpture’, was here still. Over seven feet tall, it commandeered the room, part human female, part abstract. The ‘chalk’ wasn’t strictly speaking chalk at all, but a soft gypsum Locke had experimented with, fleetingly, in his middle years. Come September, the sculpture would move to a more fitting space in the gallery in the city, and the studio would move with it – the door, the floor, the ceiling. Even the dust would be transported. ‘I’ll be in here, if that’s all right,’ Nessa said, indicating Locke’s studio. ‘I’ve one or two things to check.’

‘Of course,’ Loretta said. ‘We won’t be long.’ Locke’s daughter was in her late forties, tall and lean with close-cut auburn hair. She wore the kind of clothes that elicited politeness from shop assistants. That day it was tailored navy trousers, a striped blue and white shirt under a camel-coloured sweater.

It was humid, dull, save for a dazzle of light miles out at sea, and Nessa hadn’t worn any tights. She noticed that her legs, pale, and dappled here and there with old bruises, complemented the floorboards. She’d already measured every inch of this floor on her hands and knees, photographed it, sketched it on gridded paper over a series of afternoons in preparation for the gallery’s acquisition of the studio. She’d marked in pencil the exact location of Robert Locke’s chair; his work-bench still with its rasps and chisels; the cast-iron statue, half stoat, half man, that had stood so long in one place that when she’d moved it, she’d found two perfect imprints of its clawed iron feet on the floor. She had liaised with the conservationist, commissioned the survey and the elevational drawings. She had tagged; she had devised a computerised archive. Already some things had been packed into boxes with typed labels on the outside, a catalogue number in the top right-hand corner.

The Chalk Sculpture stood in the middle of the room. It had achieved notoriety some years before when it came to be regarded as embodying fertility powers. The public had sought it out in their hundreds; they came in a spirit of supplication, less to marvel at what critics had described as the piece’s ‘gritty transcendence’, its alien, unsettling beauty, than to plead their case.

Nessa walked over and touched a hand to the swell of the figure's belly. The sculpture had once languished for a period in a disused cowshed in Clonakilty, before the farmer, reportedly tired of it, delivered it by tractor and trailer back to the Locke women, Robert Locke being dead by then. Nessa touched a finger to the indent in the centre of the chalk-white belly. A groove had formed from the already water-damaged gypsum being eroded by the hands of pilgrims. Nessa wondered about these people, who'd flocked not to consider Robert Locke's genius but to beg for babies. She had rescued the sculpture from such indignities. But when the gallery had set about acquiring it, parts still had a dung-ish tinge from the years in the cowshed. The conservationist had spent days with a small brush engaged in the complicated process of cleaning without erasing.

When she was younger and a student of art history, Nessa had written her thesis on Locke. There were many theories on why the sculpture didn't have a face, and she had critically analysed all of them. Looking at the figure now, she was no nearer to understanding why Locke had left the head as a block of unchiselled stone, and yet made one foot so miraculously detailed that even now, all these years later, after all the erosions of air and cow breath, all the indignities of Loretta's cleaning solvents before she knew better, it was still possible to see the trace of a hair on the big toe and the amphibian webbing of the two smallest ones.

Outside, beyond the patch of gravel where her car was parked, an untended field sloped to the seashore, with the ghost of an old pathway, a tiny modulation in the tilt and shading of the reeds, running down the centre. She imagined Robert Locke walking that path after a morning spent chiselling and shaping.

She'd met him, decades earlier, at college when she was a star-struck student. To be here, in his studio, his former home, still felt, on occasion, as if she were taking liberties, as if she were becoming privy to things that she shouldn't. What sort of man had he been? What sort of father? Or husband? One who wouldn't have made a fuss about a bloody doll, she thought; one who understood the necessity to transfer our emotions to forms and shapes outside ourselves, lest our feelings rise up and destroy us.

'Everything all right?' She hadn't heard Loretta come back, but there she was, standing in the doorway, head quizzically to one side. 'I'll bring you down now. My mother's ready.'

In a smaller room at the back of the house, Mrs Locke was seated at a circular table. She was eighty-four, small proportioned, with white hair pinned in a French twist. There was a smattering of broken veins on her face, which she liked to disguise with a dusting of powder, always that little bit too much powder, so that fine grains of it sat on her cheeks, on the tip of

her nose. She was wearing a black suit cut from a fabric that Nessa's mother might have rubbed between her fingers before pronouncing good. She might also have pronounced it old-fashioned. The afternoon was overcast, and Nessa reached for the light switch.

'I never need the lamps in the daytime,' Eleanor said, 'not in summer. Artificial light is a sacrilege in a place like this. We moved here for the light. Didn't I ever tell you that?'

'You did.' Nessa went to a lamp in the corner, switched that on too.

'Do you know what Robert would say if he could see us now? With all these lamps on? he'd say what a pity. What a pity to squander the lovely soft light.'

Nessa imagined that Robert Locke, if asked, would not call the light 'soft'. The light here was glorious, but it was blade-sharp, unsparing. There were days, as she drove along the coast road, when she thought the darts of silver coming in off the water might slice her in two. She glanced at Loretta, but she had already sidled away with a book to an alcove at the side of the room. This was where she hid out on the afternoons Nessa interviewed her mother.

'Is that thing on?' Eleanor said, pointing to the Dictaphone.

'Not yet.'

'Well, turn it on, would you? I've remembered something I must tell you about Robert.'