

Edna O'Brien

Storm

The sun gave to the bare fields the luster of ripened hay. That is why people go, for the sun and the scenery—ranges of mountains, their peaks sparkling, an almost cloudless sky, the sea a variety of shades of blue, ceaselessly flickering like a tray of jewels. Yet Eileen wants to go home; to be more precise, she wishes that she had never come. Her son Mark, and his girlfriend, Penny, have become strangers to her and, though they talk and go to the beach and go to dinner, there is between them a tautness. She sees her age and her separateness much more painfully here than when at home, and she is lost without the props of work and friends. She sees faults in Penny that she had not noticed before. She is irked that a girl of twenty can be so self-assured, irked at the languid painstaking way that Penny applies her suntan oil, making sure that it covers each inch of her body, then rolling onto her stomach imploring Mark to cover her back completely. At other times Penny is moody, her face buried in a large paperback book with a picture of a girl in a gauze bonnet on the cover. There are other things, too: when they go out to dinner Penny fiddles with the cutlery or the salt and pepper shakers, she is ridiculously squeamish about the food, and offers Mark tastes of things as if he were still a baby.

On the third night, Eileen cannot sleep. On impulse she gets out of bed, dons a cardigan, and goes out on the terrace to plan a strategy. A mist has descended, a mist so thick and so opaque that she cannot see the pillars and has to move like a sleepwalker to make her way to the balustrade. Somewhere in this sphere of milky white the gulls are screaming, and their screams have a whiff of the supernatural because of her not being able to see their shapes. A few hours earlier, the heavens were a deep, a hushed blue, studded with stars; the place was enchanting, the night balmy and soft. In fact, Penny and Mark sat on the canvas chairs looking at the constellations while waiting and hoping for a falling star so that they could make a wish together. Eileen had sat a little apart from them, lamenting that she had never been that young or that carefree. Now, out on the terrace again, staring into the thicket of mist and unnerved by the screaming gulls, she makes herself a firm promise to go home. She invents a reason, that she has to do jury duty; then, like a sleepwalker, she gropes her way back to bed.

But next day she finds herself lying on the beach near them, smarting beneath a merciless sun. There is a little drama. Penny has lost a ring and Mark is digging for it in the sand. He scrapes and scrapes, as a child might, and then he gets a child's shovel which has been left behind and digs deep, deeper than is necessary. He retraces where he has already scraped. Penny is crying. It was a ring Mark gave her, an amethyst. Eileen would like to help, but he says he knows where he has already searched and it is best to leave it to him. Penny dangles her long, elegant fingers and recalls how the ring slipped off. He jokes a little and says what a pity that she hadn't called out at the very moment, because then they could trace it. Others watch, some supposing that it is money that is lost. Penny begs him to give up, saying that obviously it was meant and alluding to possible bad luck. He goes to a different spot.

"It can't be there," Penny says, almost crisp. Eileen sees that he is smiling. She does not see him pick anything up, but soon after he stands over Penny, bends down, and reenacts the ritual of putting on an engagement ring. Penny cries out with joy and disbelief, says she can't believe it, and a great ripple of warmth and giddiness overtakes them. Mark is fluent now with stories of life at university, fights he got into, scrapes he got into, being stopped by the police on his motorcycle and so on, as if the relief of finding the ring has put to rest any unspoken difference between them.

In the late afternoon they drive back to the villa and discuss where they should go for dinner. Penny decides to cut her fringe and stations herself at the kitchen table wielding a huge pair of scissors, the only pair in the house, while Mark holds a small, shell-shaped mirror in front of her. Sometimes in jest Penny puts the point of the scissors to his temple or nips a little hair from above his ear and they joke as to who is the bigger coward. Afterwards, the shreds of cut blond hair lie on the table, but Penny makes no attempt to sweep them up. They have drinks and the bits of hair are still there, dry now and exquisitely blond. Eileen eventually sweeps them up, resenting it even while she is doing it.

When they arrive for dinner they are bundled out onto a terrace and told they must wait.

"Aspetta . . . aspetta," the waiter keeps saying, although his meaning is already clear. Eileen notices everything with an awful clarity, as if a gauze has been stripped from her brain—the metal chairs glint like dentist's chairs, a

pipe protruding from underneath the terrace is disgorging sewage into the sea, while a little mongrel dog barks at the sewage with untoward glee. The waiter brings three tall glasses filled with red Campari and soda.

"It's just like mouthwash," Penny says, wiggling one of the straws between her lips. Eileen is doing everything to be pleasant, but inside she feels that she will erupt. First she counts backwards from a hundred to one, then she takes a sip from her glass, not using a straw, then resumes counting and wonders if they, too, are aware of the estrangement. She is meaning to tell them she will go home earlier than planned, but each time she is on the point of saying it, there is some distraction, Penny asking for a fresh straw, or the mongrel now at their table, or two people identically dressed and with similar haircuts, their gender a mystery.

As they drive back to the villa after dinner, it happens. Its suddenness is stunning. Eileen does not understand how it happens except that it does: a sharp word, then another, then another, then the eruption.

"Are you all right in the back?" he asks.

"Fine," Eileen says.

"We're not going too fast for you?" he asks.

"If Penny were driving too fast I'd tell her to slow down."

"Huh . . . it wouldn't make any difference," Penny says. "I'd tell you to hitch." Eileen bristles. She infers in this insolence, dislike, audacity. Suddenly she is speaking rapidly, gracelessly, and she hears herself saying cruel things, mentioning their moodiness, cut hairs, the cost of the villa, the cost of the very car they are driving in, and even as she says this she is appalled. In contrast they are utterly still, and the only change she sees is Mark's hand laid over Penny's. Eventually Eileen becomes silent, her outburst spent, and they drive without saying a word. When they arrive home, they stagger out of the car and she sees them walk towards the villa with an air of exhaustion and defeat. She hurries, to try and salvage things.

"We must talk," she says to Mark, and touches his sleeve. He flings her off as if she were vermin. It is his turn to explode. His rage is savage and she realizes that a boy who has been mild and gentle all his life is cursing her, vehemently. Penny clings to him as if he were a mast, begging him not to be angry, and there is such terrifying contrast between the tender appeal of her sobs and the rabidness of his words as he denounces his mother. She, too, looks at him, begging him to stop, and sees that the whites of his eyes are the color of freshly shed blood. He has passed sentence on her forever. A thousand memories pass through her as she begs to be allowed to explain herself. He will not hear of it. When he finishes his exhortation, he leads Penny towards the open door and they go out, down the steps and up the path to the gateway. Eileen knows that to call after them is useless, and yet she does. They disappear from sight, and turning round in the kitchen, she does something that she knows to be absurd: she dons an apron and goes to the sink to wash the glasses that have been there since before they went out. She washes them in soapy water, rinses them under the hot tap, then under the cold tap, and dries them until they are so dry that she can hear the whoosh of the cloth on the dry glass.

Soon the kitchen is utterly silent. She can hear the lap of water through the open window and the clatter from the rigging of the few boats that bob back and forth in the breeze. She is waiting both for the sound of the car to start up or for their return. She combs her hair, walks around her bedroom, consults her bedside clock, and listens for them. After an hour she undresses and turns out her light in the belief that the dark house and the knowledge that she has gone to bed will bring them back. Lying there, praying - a thing she has not done for years - she hears them come in on tiptoe, and without any premeditation she rushes out to the passage and in one burst apologizes and says some madness possessed her. Idiotically she mentions sunstroke, and they look at each other with blanched and mortified faces.

In the morning they all rise earlier than usual and she can see that, like her, they did not sleep. They are quiet; they are utterly thoughtful and polite, but they are embarrassed. She asks a favor of them. She reminds them that for days they had planned to go sailing and she wonders if they could go today, as she would welcome the day to herself. They are relieved and, as she can see, quite glad, and without even touching their breakfast they get up and start to gather a few things — towels, bathing suits, suntan oil, and bottled water in case, as Mark says, they are marooned! She waves goodbye to them as they drive off. When they have gone she comes back into the house, makes another pot of tea, and sits by the table, moping. Later she makes her bed and then closes the door of their bedroom, not daring, or wanting, to venture in. The floor of their room is strewn with clothes — a pink chiffon dress, silver shoes, a sun hat and, most wrenching of all, a threadbare teddy bear belonging to Penny.

Eileen gathers up the large bottles that had contained seltzer water and walks to the little local supermarket with them to collect a refund. She is carrying a dictionary in order to make the transaction easier. In the little harbor a few children are bathing and paddling while their mothers sit on large, brightly colored towels, talking loudly and occasionally yelling at the children. It is not a beach proper, just a harbor with a few fishing boats and a pathetically small strip of sand. After she has exchanged the bottles she comes and sits next to the local mothers, not understanding a word of what they are saying. Everywhere there are children: children darting into the water, children coming out and begging to be dried, children with plastic bubbles like eggs strapped to their backs to enable them to swim, children wet and slippery as eels, teeth chattering. Two small boys in red seersucker bathing suits are arguing over a piece of string, and as she follows the line of the string with her eyes she sees a kite, high above, fluttering in the air. The fine thread sustaining the kite suggests to her that thin thread between mother and child and it is as if the full meaning of motherhood has been revealed to her at last. Although not a swimmer, she decides to go in the water. She thinks that it will calm her, that her agitation is only caused by the heat. She rushes home to fetch a bathing suit and towel, and on the way there convinces herself that Mark and Penny have come back.

"Yoo-hoo," she says as she enters the kitchen, and then goes towards their bedroom door and knocks cautiously. As there is no answer, she goes inside and starts to make their bed. She pulls the cover off in one rough gesture, pummels the mattress, and then very slowly and patiently makes the bed, even folding back the top sheet the way it is done in hotels. She then picks up the various garments from the floor and starts to hang them in the already crammed closet. She notices that Mark has brought two dark suits, a cream suit, sports jackets, and endless pairs of leather shoes. She wonders what kind of vacation he had envisioned and suddenly realizes that for them, too, the holiday must seem a fiasco. Her mood veers between shame and anger. They should have understood, should have apologized, should have been more sympathetic. She is alone, she has recently been jilted, she has dreamed of her lover on a swing with his wife, both of them moving through the air, charmed, assured creatures. Great copious tears run down her face onto her neck, and as they reach her breastbone she shivers. These tears blind her so that the red tiles of the floor appear to be curving, the roses on the bedspread float as if on a lake, and the beaded eyes of the teddy bear glint at her with malice. She will swim, or she will try to swim; she will dispel this frenzy.

At the harbor she lifts her dress off shyly, and then with considerable shame she reaches for her water wings. They are blue plastic and they carry a flagrant advertisement for a suntan lotion. Standing there in the water is a boy of about eighteen holding a football and letting out the most unseemly and guttural sounds. He is a simpleton. She can tell by the way he stares. She tries to ignore him, but sees the ball come towards her as she makes her intrepid passage through the water. The ball hits her shoulder, so she loses her balance, wobbles, and takes a second to stand up straight again. The simpleton is staring at her and trying to speak, a foam of spittle on his lips. Drawing off her wings, she looks into the distance, pretending that she is not aware of him. He moves towards her, puts a hand out and tries in vain to catch hold of her, but she is too quick. She hurries out of the water, positions herself against a rock, and cowers inside a huge brown fleecy towel. He follows. He is wearing a chain around his neck, attached to it a silver medal with a blue engraving of the Virgin Mary. His skin is mahogany color. He comes close to her and is trying to say something or suggest something, and trembling inside the big brown towel, she tells him in his language to go away, to get lost. "Vamoose," she says, and flicks the back of her hand to confirm that she is serious. Then one of the local women yells abuse at him and he goes off silently into the water, tossing the ball to no one in particular.

At home, forcing herself to have lunch, Eileen begins to admit the gravity of things. She realizes now that Mark and Penny have left. She pictures them looking at a cheap room on some other part of the island, or perhaps buying a tent and deciding to sleep on the beach. On her plate colonies of ants are plundering the shreds of yellow and pink flesh that have adhered to a peach pit, and their assiduousness is so utter that she has to turn away.

She hurries out, takes a short cut across a field, through some scrubland to the little white church on the hill. It is like a beehive, and she thinks, as she goes towards it, that somehow her anguish will lessen once she gets inside, once she kneels down and prostrates herself before her Maker. The door is locked yet she tries turning the black iron knob in every direction. She walks around to find that the side door is also locked, and then, attempting to climb the pebble wall in order to look in the window, she loses her grip halfway and grazes her knee. She looks apologetically in case she has been seen, but there is no one there. There is simply a ragged rosemary bush and

some broken bottles — the relics of a recent binge. She breaks off a few sprigs of rosemary to put in their bedroom.

"I am doing things as if they are coming back," she says as she searches for wildflowers. Walking down from the chapel she is again assailed by the sight of children, children refreshed from their siestas, pedaling furiously on tricycles and bicycles, children on a rampage through the street, followed by a second gang with feathers in their hair, wielding bows and arrows. Mindlessly she walks, and her steps carry her away from the town towards a wood. It is a young wood and the pine trees have not grown to any reasonable height, but their smell is pleasant and so is the rustle of the russet needles. She listens from time to time for a chorus of birds but realizes that there are none and hears instead the distant sigh of the sea. Some trees have withered, are merely gray, shorn stumps, dry and leafless. They remind her of her anger and once again she recalls last night's scene, that snapshot glued to her retina.

Three youths on motorcycles enter the wood and come bounding across as if intent on destroying themselves and every growing thing. They are like a warring clan, and they shout as they come towards her. She runs into a thicket and, crouching, hides under the trees out of their sight. She can hear them shouting and she thinks that they are calling to her, and now on hands and knees she starts to crawl through the underbrush and make her way by a hidden route back to the town. Scratches do not matter, nor does the fact that her clothing is ripped; her one concern is to get back among people, to escape their ravages and her escalating madness. It is while she is making her way back that the light changes and the young trees begin to sway, like pliant branches. A wind has risen and in the town itself the houses are no longer startling white but a dun color, like houses robbed of their light. Dustbin lids are rolling along the street and not a child or an adult is in sight. All have gone indoors to avoid the storm. On the water itself boats are like baubles, defenseless against the brewing storm. On the terrace, the canvas chairs have fallen over, and so, too, has her little wooden clotheshorse with its tea towels. As she crosses to retrieve them the umbrella table keels forwards and clouts her. Her mind can jump to only one conclusion — she sees Mark and Penny in a sailboat, Penny exclaiming, Mark jumping and tugging at the sails, trying in vain to steer them to safety. She does not know where Penny's parents live and at once runs to their bedroom to look for her passport. The beautiful childlike face that looks out at her from the passport photograph seems to be speaking to her, begging, asking for clemency. She sees them in the middle of the ocean, flung apart by the waves, like ill-starred lovers in a mythological tale. The next moment she tells herself that Mark is a capable sailor and will lead them to safety. Then she is asking aloud where she will bury them, forgetting that they are lost at sea.

"Nonsense . . . nonsense," a voice that is her own shouts, insisting that islanders would not rent a sailing boat on such a day. She runs from room to room, closing doors and windows against a gale that rampages like a beast. Suddenly there is a knock, and putting on a semblance of composure, she runs to open the door, only to find that there is no one there. She stares out in the pitch-black and believes the keening wind to be a messenger of death.

The hours drag on, and in those hours she knows every shade of doubt, of rallying, of terror, and eventually of despair. She remembers a million things, moments of her son's childhood, his wanting to pluck his long curved eyelashes and give them to her, a little painted xylophone he had had, stamps that he collected and displayed so beautifully under single folds of yellow transparent paper. She sees Penny tall and stalklike in her tight jeans and pink T-shirt with pearl droplets stitched to the front, her eyes flashing, dancing on his every whim.

At seven she sets out for a restaurant, believing that by doing so she will hasten their return. A note of optimism grips her. They will be back, and what is more, they will be famished. The restaurant is empty, so that she has a choice of tables. She chooses one near the window and looks out over the sea, which is no longer churning but is gray and scowling in the aftermath of the storm. In fact, she realizes that she cannot look at the sea, so she quickly changes tables. The owner and his daughter, who are laying out other tables, give each other a shrug. She is not welcome. For one thing, she has come too early, and for another she is being stropky about tables. She orders a bottle of the best wine. The daughter brings it with a dish of green olives. At moments, hearing footsteps, Eileen half rises to welcome Mark and Penny, but those who enter are other waiters arriving for work, removing jackets as they cross the floor. Soon the restaurant takes on a festive appearance. The daughter folds the napkins into shapes that look like fezzes and she carries them on a tray, along with vases each containing a single rose. The guitar music is much too harsh, and Eileen asks for it to be put lower, but her request is ignored. Yes, she does admit that Penny and Mark are thoughtless to have stayed out so long and not to be back for pre-dinner drinks, yet she will not scold them, she will make a big fuss over them. She has already asked if there is lobster and has asked for three portions to be put aside. "But suppose they don't come," she asks aloud, as if addressing another

person. The daughter, who decidedly does not like her, hears this and mutters something to her father. Eileen now asks herself irrational questions, such as if they have not arrived by eight, or at the latest by eight thirty, should she eat, and if they do not arrive at all, will she be obliged to pay for the lobsters? She opens her purse and looks at the mauve-tinted checks, flicking her finger along each one, wondering if she has enough money to defray the expenses that most certainly will be hers.

No sooner has she finished the first glass of wine than the tears start up and the owner, who until then has disliked her, comes over to the table to inquire what is the matter.

"Morto," she says as she looks up at him, and now he becomes solicitous and asks her in broken English to explain to him what the matter is.

"Il mare," she says, and he nods and describes the fury of the storm by puffing out his cheeks and making awesome gulping sounds. Upon hearing her story, he pushes away the wine bottle and tells his daughter, Aurora, to bring cognac. Eileen realizes that it must be grave indeed, because of his ordering the cognac. He recalls a drowning in their little village, the grief and horror, the darkness that descended, and although she cannot understand everything that he is saying, she gets the gist of it and wrings her hands in terror. He crosses to the counter and quickly dials the phone, all the time looking in her direction in case she does an injury to herself. Then as soon as the phone is picked up at the other end, he turns away and talks hurriedly, leaving her to assume the worst. He comes back proudly twirling his mustache and in halting English tells her that no news of a sailing accident has been reported to the lifeboat people.

"Courage, courage, courage," he says, confident that the anguish will turn to laughter before long. By about nine she decides to go back to the house and he assures her that a table will be kept for the hungry ones. Then he dashes to the counter and takes from a jug two roses, which he gallantly gives her, along with his card.

The villa is dark, dark as a tomb, and she runs in and switches on all the lights.

"They'll come in the next five minutes," she says, quite convinced, and even dares to stare up at the wall clock with its spiderlike hands. They do not come. They will not come. The patron of the restaurant is her one friend. He will help her with the formalities, he will talk to the police for her, he will see to it that the divers go down. But what then? What then? she asks, her voice quivering. With each fresh admission she feels that the measure of her delirium is heaped full and that she cannot bear it, yet mind and body dart to the next awful minute. She walks all around the table touching its surface, then into the bathroom and out again, and back and around the table, and then into the two bedrooms, first her own, then theirs, and draws back the covers ceremoniously as if for a honeymoon couple. The clock and woodcuts on the wall are askew and she sets about straightening them. Then she commences a letter to the owner of the villa, who lives in Madrid, explaining why she has had to leave sooner than expected. By doing this she is admitting the worst. She is very calm now and her handwriting clear as a child's. She thinks of Penny's parents, whom she has never met, foresees their grief, their shock, their rage, their disbelief. How could they lose such a daughter, Penny, Penelope, the embodiment of cheer and sunniness? Her father, being an army man, will probably take it better, but what of her mother, the overweight woman whom Penny described as being psychic? Maybe she already knows, has seen her daughter in the depths of the ocean, among the preying fishes. Then, with a grief too awful to countenance, she sees Mark with the bloodshot eyes and recalls his renunciation of her.

There is a beam of headlights in her drive and immediately she rallies, concluding that it is the police, but as she rises she hears the small friendly hoot that is their signal. All of a sudden she feels ridiculous. They come in, bright, tousled, and brimming with news. They tell how they met an Englishman with a metal detector who took them on a tour of the island, showed them old ruins and burial grounds, and how later they went to a hotel and swam in the pool but had to hide underwater each time a waiter went by. They are giddy with happiness.

"Did you sail?" she asks Mark.

"We did, but it got a bit dangerous," Mark says, guessing how she must have panicked. Together he and Penny tell her of a beautiful restaurant where they have been; tables tucked away in corners, the cloths, the flowers, the music, and above all, the scrumptious food — sweet mutton, zucchini and potatoes cooked with mint and butter.

"We're going to take you tomorrow night," Penny says with a smile. It is the first time they have looked at each other since the outburst and Eileen now feels that she is the younger of the two and by far the more insecure. Penny has forgiven her, has forgotten it. The day has brought her closer to Mark and she is all agog.

"We've booked a table," Mark says and wags a finger at Eileen to indicate that they are taking her, that it is to be their treat.

"I think I should go home," she says, lamentably.

"Don't be silly," he says and the look that he gives her is full of both pity and dread. She is on the point of telling him about the day, the scrubland, the youths, the storm, her frenzy, but his eyes, now grave and moist, beg her not to. His eyes ask her to keep this pain, this alarm, to herself.

"What did you do?" he asks nevertheless.

"Oh, lots of jolly things," she says, and the lie has for her, as well as for him, all the sweetness and freshness of truth. For the remainder of the vacation they will behave as if nothing has happened, but of course, something has. They have each looked into the abyss and drawn back, frightened of the primitive forces that lurk there.

"Tomorrow . . ." he says and smiles his old smile.

"Tomorrow . . ." she says, as if there was no storm, no rift, as if the sea outside was a cradle lulling the world to a sweet, guileless sleep.