

## THE LIGHTHOUSE

I've made it.

I'm in the lighthouse.

I'm in the lighthouse!

I must have pinched myself at least a hundred times to convince myself that it's all real.

Exhausted and pleased, I look around. From now on, this small house with white walls and friezes is mine. Right now, it's cluttered with boxes, the contents of which are unknown to me. I don't know what I put into them, I can't remember. I was so happy to leave that I packed in a rush, with no system or method. I didn't even take the trouble to write a list of contents on every box. A waste of time, I thought, since I'd have to empty them all as soon as I'd reached my destination. There really are a lot of them. I spent half a day carrying them from the pier to the house, allowing myself only two breaks to connect to the Internet and use the toilet. Never mind. I'll have plenty of time to arrange all my stuff. The most important thing is to locate the food. My stomach keeps grumbling.

Even hunger pangs can't spoil what I'm feeling at the moment: I'm happy. I've managed to make one of my forbidden dreams – perhaps the only one I've ever had – come true: to get my own way. I'm so proud of how I stood up to all those who tried to talk me out of this and urged me to choose a more accessible and trendy destination.

Not that I was unhappy in Rome. After all, Rome is always a beautiful city, if you have the possibility of visiting it. But if you live there, more often than not you don't have

this possibility. It's an occasional realisation, triggered by a sort of epiphany that generally comes upon you while you're walking in the street absent-mindedly and by chance you look up at the sky and notice a golden glow on an exquisite miniature terrace overlooking terracotta rooftops. You think how nice it would be to live in Rome and realise with surprise and a pinch of annoyance that that's exactly where you do live. And then you see what a waste it is to live in a place without being aware of it.

Moreover, I never had anything to say to anyone and, at the same time, I noticed that other people were no longer able to surprise me either. In other words, when you spend your days between one lounge and another and most of your time doing things you've never cared a hoot about, it's just possible you might wish for a change. That's when true torment starts, the moment you say to yourself "what now?" Still, I've been really lucky. I did torture myself night after night, because by then I'd realised that the ubiquitous life I'd led up to then was no longer my cup of tea. One after the other, I discarded the fundamental questions about existence as unfit for purpose, until I came to the last, most important and tragic one in everyone's life: "Could this be what growing up means?" I asked, looking at myself in the mirror, annoyed at noticing a new and very fine line on my forehead. No, I replied, this is something else: it's the specific condition of someone who's had her fill of the community. In my case, excess had maimed. This is how I realised that I was suffering from that elitist, incurable disease called misanthropy.

## THE NEIGHBOURS

This morning, I explored my little island thoroughly. It took me about a quarter of an hour. I have already located a couple of peaceful spots which I think will soon become my favourites: a flat rock on which I could spend hours in the sun, like a sea lion, and a small spur at the foot of the lighthouse, excellent for watching the open – and irresistibly attractive because it's so hard to reach – sea.

But, as it's the fourth day, it's still too soon to have my own "corners" and today I'm content with keeping to the narrow square outside the house, which carries the indisputable advantage of being close to the sofa and the fridge.

I put the canvas on the easel, choose three not too mangy brushes, prepare the rags and the turpentine, open the box with the oil colours, pick up a lighter and gently warm up the screw top of one of the tubes, a trick I learnt while attending a painting class, useful when the paint dries up so much you can't open it. I unscrew the top and squeeze the paste delicately on the palette. I repeat the operation with the other tubes and start to mix them gently.

The painting classes were one final attempt at finding a solution to existential tedium. I remembered that the only semblance of inclination I'd ever manifested is a *penchant* for using colours since early childhood, when I still thought clearly and longed for a future as an artist.

I discovered that I like the consistency of oil paints, their creaminess, their stickiness. And I love the toxic smell released when I paint, something *passé* in these times of ecological

activism, like the smell of petrol, once upon a time, full of lead and of brazen and reckless trust in progress.

Now that I've gone wild with my hues, I pause before the white canvas in front of me. What could I paint? The sea? Too obvious. But how can you pretend it's not there when you're on a tiny island? It's not exactly like an inconvenient guest at a crowded party.

I huff with indecision. Perhaps I should have doubled my supply of navy blue. In this place I have no need for dusky rose madder or yellowy-green cinnabar.

I still have to become acquainted with the seascape where I'll be spending the rest of my life. Ever since I arrived, I am constantly surprised whenever I look up at it. It's so wonderful that I doubt I'll ever grow tired of it, even though it's intrinsically monotonous.

To start with, I think the most suitable subject has to be the sea. I'll wait for the sun to set behind the horizon, when the entire sky catches fire, so that I can explore warmer tones.

I put the easel on the ground and glance at the Big Island nearby. I'm a little curious to know who lives there. Yesterday, I sailed all around it in the boat, keeping a certain distance, out of discretion. It looks uninhabited but a power launch is moored at an iron jetty and the windows open and close mysteriously. Then, at night, you can always see lights.

I found a pair of binoculars at home, the only bequest from the previous guardian. When I saw them, lying carelessly by a slit window in the tower, I took it almost as a welcome sign, as though the spirit of my predecessor in these few rooms, glad that I was to live in them now, had decided to leave me a present, something symbolic and traditional, a

useful tool passed from hand to hand until it came to me. It's an old gadget, the worse for wear, the strap is broken and one of the lenses is cracked, but it has unquestionable charm and I've put it among the items I never do without, not even in the toilet, like my mobile phone and a lighter. Up to now I've used them only to watch sea birds and ships on the horizon and, out of good manners, avoided focussing the lenses on the neighbours. However, curiosity is advancing with increasingly determined steps and I don't have enough strength of character to resist.

I use the binoculars to sweep over the profile of the only visible building, observing the windows one by one, then continue my search on the beach. A movement on the rocks attracts my attention: it's a crouching woman, indolently looking for something in the pools left by the low tide, shells or crabs, perhaps, and, were it not for the large straw hat the size of a sombrero, I'd say she is in her birthday suit. Embarrassed, I immediately look away, wondering if the Big Island isn't a nudist colony.

A true artist shouldn't feel uneasy in front of a naked body, that nosy parker curiosity tells me, so maybe some of them will volunteer for your nude sketches, it insists. That would be a good compromise, I admit, raising the binoculars to my eyes again. It's a pathetic excuse, good manners reply.

INVITATION TO DINNER

I am super-excited by the invitation. I just hope my Big Island neighbour is not too invasive. I imagine it wouldn't be appropriate to introduce myself to him as a misanthrope, just to make everything clear from the outset and dampen any enthusiasm. He could get the wrong idea about me. I wouldn't want to give rise to any prejudice. As far as I'm concerned misanthropy is practically a virtue: if you think about it, removing yourself from this overcrowded world could even be viewed as an act of generosity towards your fellow humans. My heart is beating very fast by the time I reach the villa. To my pleasant surprise, I am welcomed like an old friend – there's no one at all to welcome me, as a matter of fact. I knock timidly on the front door, which squeaks on old hinges and opens onto a small hallway and a corridor. A faint aroma of spaghetti with clam sauce guides me, as I feel dazed by hunger, to a splendid terrace overlooking the sea and the sunset.

An elderly gentleman, impeccably dressed in classical style, turns to me and smiles gently.

"Welcome, my dear," he says, handing me a glass of white wine.

I figure this must be the owner, so I quickly introduce myself. I immediately notice his exquisite *savoir faire*. He asks me a couple of questions about my plans and, to draw me out of my embarrassment, quickly changes the subject and casually indicates the house behind him. "How nice to find someone who shares your choices, isn't it, my dear? This is my refuge. I've been living here for a couple of years with my daughter and three other people, now indispensable, who help me get by in the ocean of existence and in the more mundane one of managing the island."

"And will your daughter be joining us for dinner?" I ask.

"No, it's just us. Paoletta is a free spirit, my dear, much more than us, and eats only when she really feels the need to. It wouldn't be fair to upset everybody's habits for the sake of her eccentric requirements."

In the middle of the terrace, behind a large curtain to protect it from humidity, there is a small, round table set for two people. The elderly gentleman invites me to sit down and introduces Dora, the cook, who has just come to serve the pasta. She seems like a friendly, cheerful woman but so busy that she soon leaves us alone and runs back into the house to tackle delicate chores.

I try the spaghetti and mentally prepare myself to accept any story this man wishes to tell me. But my host apparently doesn't feel a need to tell stories, or else he's already run out of topics. He eats in silence, arousing the suspicion in me that it's up to me to entertain him. I therefore quickly search my memory for silly anecdotes or commonplace remarks, desperately exploring the repertory of platitudes one normally uses to start off a conversation. However, he looks happy enough already. He smiles calmly, often looks up to enjoy the view and the cool, light breeze, sips his wine and says nothing.

In the absolute silence that settles between us, the sound of the backwash on the rocks first seems deafening, then drops to a soft whisper. One mouthful after another, I finally realise that I am at a secret initiation rite. The silence, perhaps loaded with questions that require no answers, now has the upper hand and I meekly surrender to it.

MYSTERIES ON THE HORIZON

I look at the lighthouse: it's beautiful, quite elegant, reasonably well formed, even though it leans a little to the side – but then we are in Italy, so it's tradition. The colour is faithful, only lacks the right depth, the shading to make it three-dimensional, but even so its flat, monochrome image has personality. The little cottage at the foot of the tower is completely crooked and without perspective but the brown of the shutters is exactly as it should be and I'm very proud of this after all my attempts at mixing various earth tones. I really think Dora will like it. I put the brushes into a tin that once served as a presentation box for some expensive bottle of spirit, close the box with the paints, throw the lot, including rags and saucers, into a messenger bag and grab the small canvas with two fingers, trying not to get fresh paint on myself.

To meet my artistic needs, the widower has invited me to come here to the Big Island whenever I please, so I came today to make an Impressionist sketch of the view of the lighthouse from the unusual perspective of the iron jetty.

I rush up the path to the villa. I can't wait to have a chat with the cook. Her revelation has aroused my interest. I have therefore totally abandoned my treasure hunt – I had been suspecting for some time that it doesn't exist, and have started wondering about the island's residents.

Dora claims that Paoletta is not the widower's real daughter and I am inclined to believe that she was adopted. I strongly suspect she isn't altogether mentally stable, while the villa's elderly resident shows no sign of madness, and, on the contrary, seems of unshakeably sound mind. Of course, the daughter may have inherited the genes of her



mother, of whom I know nothing, and I confess I've been tempted to ask a few prying questions about her, but then chose to respect that sacrosanct rule to mind your own business, at least until now. I don't understand, however, why she told me to keep it quiet. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's precisely because she asked me to be discreet that I am here today. Secrets have a habit of drawing attention to themselves. It's amazing how easily they can take possession of someone's curiosity.

The door to the villa is wide open and in the entrance corridor I immediately come across the cook, busy washing the floor.

"Hi, Dora, I've brought you a small present. It's my picture of the lighthouse. It's for you, only be careful because the paint is still damp so you could stain yourself."

The cook looks askance at the painting and resumes rubbing the floor forcefully, puffing with the effort.

"I meant to ask you..." I begin, unsure as to which approach to take. Meanwhile, I lean the canvas gently against a wall, to avoid staining the plaster, and throw my bag on a chair, figuring we'll be a while.

Dora stops her work, straightens up and puts a hand on her hip expectantly.

"Hurry up, I haven't got all day."

"What was the widower's wife like? And how did she die?" I ask everything in one breath, possessed by the gossip demon.

The cook emits a brief grunt and goes back to rubbing the terracotta tiles, already impeccably polished, in my opinion. I imagine the same degree of excellence is expected of

her in cleaning as she shows in the kitchen. I realise I'll have to wait for another time to satisfy my curiosity and, a little disappointed, pick up my things to leave.

"He killed his wife, you know," Dora says no sooner have I turned away and stepped out of the hallway. I do a quick u-turn and look at her in disbelief. I don't know whether to call the feeling her words trigger in me dismay. How can the widower have committed such a dreadful act?

She lifts a finger, places it over her lips and winks. And although I am deeply upset, I nod in complicity.

What Dora said has left me with an aftertaste of anxiety. It may just be lies, stories she's made up, but this only increases my queries about all the people living at the villa. If it weren't for the care and attention she puts into the food, I'd think she, too, has a screw loose, and the idea of having a kind of madhouse annexe next to my cliff makes me fear the manifestation of something unpleasant, of a nightmare becoming reality. Tonight, I'll bolt my door and close the shutters. We're not afraid of burglars in the archipelago and keep our doors open, but I'll feel a lot safer knowing that anyone who wants to come in will have to knock, so that I have sufficient time to prepare for the worst.

A sudden bolt of lightning branches out in the sky. The thunderclap follows much later and very faintly. The clouds, increasingly pierced through by the rays of the sun, finally seem to yield and dissolve. The storm won't come close, I know that now, and yet I don't feel at peace tonight.

Who are my neighbours, really? I wonder with mounting anxiety. What has brought them here? Though I am certain of my own motivations, I am beginning to harbour doubts about theirs. Are they hiding something or is this just a suggestion triggered by that gossip of a cook?

I am sure the widower, with whom I always spend pleasant evenings, is one of the most transparent, sincere people I know and I cannot believe any of Dora's revelations. Naturally, I admit that the fact we don't talk much doesn't encourage an exchange of information. And, thinking about it, I realise that I know almost nothing about him. That's actually why I value him. Neither of us has felt the need to talk about him or herself, or felt the urge to discover the other person's full history. Such a Spartan, bare relationship is truly unique and precious in this day and age.

Still, the cook's minor indiscretions and insinuations are fuelling new doubts inside me. It's true to say that whenever you meet someone new, you never truly know who he or she is. Moreover, I had never thought about the fact that people can remain strangers despite frequent contact.

I shudder and hold my arms tight over my chest. It's almost chilly tonight. Maybe it's time to go back into the house. I can't bear the thought of letting myself be conditioned by that lying cook. Better not think about her words or about the Big Island or its residents anymore. Tomorrow, I'll try to devote myself to painting.

THE WIDOWER HAS GONE

There's much commotion on the iron jetty. Fortunately nobody pays attention to my small boat or me, so, after mooring next to a patrol vessel, I go to the villa to see Dora. Judging by the number of people who've rushed to the Big Island, I suspect the widower must have been a big shot, which increases my esteem for him. It's a matter of great inspiration to all of us misanthropes that he should have chosen to abandon power, authority and influence to come here and do nothing.

Seeing all these strangers walking freely around the jetty, from the beach to the house, calling out to one another in loud voices, practically taking possession of the place, feels to me like an act of desecration, a violation of my elderly friend's hermitage without the least respect.

I see the secretary chatting to a man, probably the highest ranking police officer, and I slip behind his back, stepping into the house. There is no trace of Paoletta. I imagine she is wisely holed up in her room, the way she always is, to avoid unpleasant encounters. A brute stops me from going into the kitchen and commands me to turn back. I can't make out what's happening behind him. All I can see is what looks like a pair of shoes outside the French window, and a body on the ground. The policeman makes an eloquent gesture at me and I obey and, slightly troubled, walk back down the corridor to the small lounge.

Dora is alone, slumped on a chair, blowing her nose sonorously. She is shaken by a new sob as soon as she sees me and I approach, crouch and squeeze her trembling hands.

"What the hell happened?" I ask her, bewildered.

She sniffs and gives a deep sigh. "How should I know?" she moans.

"But is this possible?" I insist.

"He was obviously a strange man, everyone knew that, but not that he could commit suicide," she complains.

An unpleasant sensation runs up my spine, a shudder perhaps. What is she saying? What does she mean? That it was him? Why should he have? I wonder, increasingly confused. Can a man so rewarded by solitude and satisfied with his life away from society not have been happy? I cannot believe that a misanthrope can ever kill himself. I'd understand his doing it if he'd been forced to live in contact with many of his fellow humans, but not here, in this gilded, peaceful retreat. A doubt bursts forth, elbowing its way among so many others: what if the widower wasn't a real misanthrope? Then another, subtler doubt comes forward, taking advantage of the path opened in my mind: and what about me? Perhaps I'm not one either? I chase them away without hesitation. It can't be true. I knew this man, he was like me – no, better than me in the way he had organised his life. What the cook has said to me cannot be true.

A racket behind the door interrupts my doubts and Dora's sobs. We both rush out of the room to find out what's going on. In the corridor, a group of men parade in respectful silence, carrying a stretcher on which lies a large black sack containing the body of my friend.

I lean against the door jamb and, with a heavy heart, slide down until I'm sitting on the floor.

Everything seems unreal. This isn't the same place as it was yesterday. Dora is not the same. Even I am probably no longer the same. And the widower... the widower has gone.