

A Dramatic Way to Clear the Air (long version) by Christopher Peter

“I’ve always been scared of thunder storms. Always. Pathetic I know, but ...”

Pete was pleased actually – it gave him an excuse to stay. He had ushered the young woman into the summerhouse just in time. The slate-grey clouds had been hungrily blotting out the light, rearing vertiginously into the heavens, only to pause for dramatic effect just at the point of release as if relishing the way their crushing might cast the world beneath into hushed, submissive shadow. That brief respite allowed the two scurrying ants to gain shelter just as the first fat raindrops began to patter onto the lawn.

“Well as phobias go I guess it’s understandable – I mean, loud noises, lightning ...” Pete had to raise his voice toward the end of the sentence as the storm, by way of underlining his words, commenced its onslaught by hurling down hailstones like white marbles, roaring and clattering onto the summerhouse roof.

The young woman laughed ever so slightly hysterically. “You’re just being kind. Really, it’s only rain isn’t it? And electricity in the clouds. It can’t hurt you – well, unless you get struck, but how likely is that?” Pete stole a shy glance at his companion, catching a glimpse of dark brown hair plastered across a smooth white, glistening forehead over wide blue-green eyes. The glorious fragrance of wet grass and spring flowers stole over his senses.

“I’m Amy, by the way.” He hesitated before touching and then quickly releasing the proffered small white hand. *Soft.*

“Pete. Please to meet you. I’m ... err ... just coming on duty. Probably be late now, but we’d never have made the house without getting drenched.” He consulted his watch automatically, and immediately forget what it had said. “And you ... are you visiting ...?”

“My Dad. Do you know him ... Mister Dawson ...?”

“Oh ... yes, Charlie – Mister Dawson ... he’s one of our older residents. In fact, I think he’s been here longer than I have. Mind you, I’ve been here less than a year ...” Charles Dawson – tall, bent, intense bright eyes (blue-green, in fact), a man of few guarded words. He was frail but there was a power about him. Once Pete had overheard him shouting – as strident and shocking as gun fire – and seen a cleaner flee from his room, sobbing silently. Ever since then Pete had been slightly wary of him.

Then he realised he’d never seen this Amy before. “Um ... do you visit often ...?”

A whip-crack of thunder rattled the glass panes beside them. Amy gasped and drew closer; so close that Pete found he couldn’t really look at her. He could smell her wet hair, though, and for a few seconds that seemed to pulverise his mind into stricken silence – whatever words he tried to string together darted away before they could be caught.

“So are you a nurse?”

“Care assistant.” He winced at the brazen truth, but it was out of his mouth before he could think of altering it. He wished he could have said yes – or, better, that he was a doctor. “I’m thinking of taking the nursing course though ...”

“Do you enjoy working here?”

“Yes. I like ... I like caring for people. It’s interesting ...”

“I think you should do it. Do the course. Don’t waste time. Just do it.”

“I will. I think I will.”

The room brightened abruptly as a watery sun arrowed through the clouds. The rain was lighter now, a delicate curtain of water sparkling in the yellow light.

Pete cleared his throat. "It's passing now. Maybe we can make a run for it in a minute ..."

Amy smiled at him. She looked tired but relieved, as if emerging from a long wakeful night; there were lines around her eyes he hadn't noticed in the gloom. "Well, thanks for ... I hope I haven't made you too late for work. Should have brought an umbrella – didn't see the forecast ..."

"No, no, not at all. No bother, honestly." All too soon they were out and walking across the wet grass towards the sprawling Victorian house. A last defiant peal of thunder rolled over them from the retreating storm. Pete found himself transfixed by the clouds, deathly-dark underneath and snow-white above, piling higher and higher into the farthest heavens. His neck ached with the effort of seeing the very top of them, their outline painfully sharp against deep clean blue. "Beautiful isn't it? The sky ... amazing."

"Yes." Amy seemed to spare only the briefest glance upwards; for the most part she was studying the grass as they walked. Silence, and then: "You must be wondering why I don't visit Dad more often."

"Err ... no, no, of course not. I mean, don't you ...?"

"Once or twice a year to be honest. I don't live very close, but even so ... it's his birthday on Thursday, did you know that?"

"Oh ... no ..."

"No reason why you should. Today's the only day this week I could make it. I always try to get here for that. Christmas too, but last year I couldn't ... was away ..."

"What about your birthday? Doesn't he want to see you then?"

"Oh no." Her laugh was short and uncomfortably contemptuous. "Not *mine*. I like to ... do other things then. He never ... well you know."

They entered the cool shadow of the wood-panelled entrance hall. The incongruously mingled smell of disinfectant and furniture polish filled his nostrils and mouth; its strength still surprised him every day. "If you ring the bell, someone will come ..."

"I know. Listen ..."

She stopped and turned to face him. In those healing shadows her face was a young girl's, open and earnest. "Pete, I've ... I've never really asked this before, but ... well ..."

"Yes?" The echoing guttural tick of the grandfather clock measure out the interminable silence until she spoke again.

"The thing is ... Dad and I ... it's difficult. It's always been – well you don't want to know about that. But ... I've always really wanted someone to come in with me, when I go to his room, but I've never felt able to – you know, ask."

"Won't he see you in the lounge?" Pete silently cursed himself – this was not the moment for well-meaning suggestions.

"No, he never has. I mean, I could ask again ..."

"Oh no. Not if that's where he feels most comfortable. I'll come with you if you like."

“Oh, would you? That’s so kind. I just – you know, just come in with me – it won’t take too long – if you’ve got nothing else to be doing ...?”

If the building starts burning down, that might stop me. Off-hand, I can’t think of much else. “Oh, I’ll just check, but it should be fine. I’d love – it’ll be fine.”

“Peter? There you are.” Matron was suddenly behind them. She peered ostentatiously at the clock and then back at Pete, spidery black eyebrows raised almost out of sight. The words “you’re late” could not have been more clearly spoken if they had been flashed in blue neon across the walls. Normally that one expression would have been enough to send Pete scuttling off in a defensive frenzy of work for the following eight hours; but today his head was in the clouds. Today was different.

“Can I help you madam ...?”

“Yes, please. Amy Dawson. Here to see my father ...”

“Yes, we’re ...” Pete was cut short by Matron.

“Ah. Mr Dawson, yes. Miss Dawson, would you please come with me?” Her words froze the air. The clock missed a stroke.

Before Pete could breathe again, Matron had hustled Amy away into the little office; before he knew it, Sylvia had appeared and taken him to the dining room. “Bloody temp not turned up again. I’m phoning that agency ...”

It was over an hour before he saw the opportunity to slip out and back to the entrance hall. No sign of Amy. Tina on Reception informed him, in her low and significant tones, that Mr Dawson had died earlier that morning. He had asked the nurse to be seated at his window to watch the storm. The nurse came back to retrieve her notes a few minutes later, to find him dead where he sat. And then his daughter had arrived not half an hour after – funny that – not that you ever saw her usually, she never visited, so sad ... where’s she now? Oh she left a while ago. Don’t suppose we’ll see her again now. Too busy planning how to spend the inheritance no doubt ...

Pete spent most of the rest of that day in the lounge. He felt like talking more than usual. The day grew hot and windows were opened. Once he thought he heard thunder, but it was the sound of a plane, high up in the calm sky.