

A Dramatic Way to Clear the Air

by Christopher Peter

“I’ve always been scared of thunderstorms,” she said. “Pathetic I know, but ...”

This gave Pete all the excuse he needed to stay. He had ushered her into the summerhouse just in time. The slate-grey clouds reared into the heavens, casting the world below in hushed, submissive shadow.

“Well as phobias go I guess it’s understandable – loud noises, lightning ...” Pete had to raise his voice as the storm began its onslaught by hurling down hailstones like white marbles that clattered on the summerhouse roof.

The woman laughed 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.” Pete stole a glance and glimpsed dark brown hair, white forehead, wide green eyes. “I’m Amy, by the way.” He hesitated before touching and then quickly releasing her small pale hand.

“Pete. Pleased to meet you. I’m just coming on shift.” He looked at his watch without noticing the time. “And you ... are you visiting ...?”

“My dad. Mister Dawson ...?”

“Oh ... yes, Charlie ... one of our older residents. I think he’s been here longer than I have. Mind you, I’ve been here less than a year ...” Charles Dawson. Sharp green eyes that didn’t miss much. Always watching. Frail, but with a restless, brittle power. Once Pete overheard him shouting and saw a cleaner flee from his room, sobbing silently.

Pete knew Charlie. But he’d never seen Amy before. “Um ... do you visit often ...?”

A whip-crack of thunder rattled the glass panes. Amy gasped and drew closer; so near that Pete found he couldn’t look at her. He could smell her wet hair, though. He tried and failed to drag some words together.

“So are you a nurse?” she said.

“Care assistant.” He winced. He wished he could have said yes – or, better, that he was a doctor. He glimpsed his reflection in the dark glass. Stooped, hair flecked with early grey. “I’m, um, 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.”

“Yes. I think I will.”

Watery sunlight arrowed through the clouds. The rain was now a delicate curtain of water, sparkling in yellow light.

Pete cleared his throat. “Um, maybe we can make a run for it in a minute ...”

Amy smiled at him. There were lines around her eyes he hadn’t noticed in the gloom of the storm. “Thank you ... I hope I haven’t made you late for work?”

“No, it’s no bother, honestly.” All too soon they were walking across the soaking grass towards the house. A last defiant peal of thunder from the retreating storm rolled over them. Pete stared up at the clouds; coal-black underneath, snow-white above, piling higher and higher. 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 ...”

“Yes.” But Amy was studying the ground as they walked. “You must be wondering why I don’t visit Dad more often.”

“Err ... no, no, of course not. I mean, don’t you ...?”

“I don’t live very close, but even so ... no excuse really. It’s his birthday on Thursday, and 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 was away ...”

They entered the cool shadow of the wood-panelled entrance hall. The mingled smell of disinfectant and furniture polish filled Pete’s head. He felt overpowered by it, as usual.

“Pete, listen ...” Amy stopped and turned to him. In those healing shadows her face was a young girl’s. “I’ve never really asked this before ... “

“Yes?”

“The thing is ... Dad and I ... it’s difficult. It always has been. 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.”

“I’ll come with you if you like.”

“Oh, would you? That’s so kind. I just – you know, just come in with me – if you’ve got nothing else to be doing ...?”

If the building caught fire, that might stop him; off-hand, he couldn’t think of much else. “I’d love – it’ll be fine.”

“Peter?” Maria had materialised. She peered ostentatiously at the clock, spidery black eyebrows raised almost out of sight. Normally that would have been enough to send Pete scuttling off to work without delay. But today was different.

Maria smiled tightly at Amy. “Can I help you ...?”

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

“Ah ...” Something in that word froze the air. “Miss Dawson – would you please come with me?”

Before Pete could breathe again, Maria had hustled Amy away into the office, and she was gone.

Two hours passed before he could slip away from work.

Tina in the office informed him, in low and significant tones, that Charles Dawson had died that morning. He had asked the nurse to be seated at his window to watch the storm. The nurse returned a few minutes later to find him dead where he sat. And then his daughter arrived – funny that – not that you ever saw her usually, never visited, so sad ... where is 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. Oh, and she mentioned you Pete – wants to invite you to the funeral for some reason.

The day grew hot and windows were opened. Pete felt like talking more than usual. Once he thought he heard thunder, but it was only the sound of a plane, high up in the new sky.