

FROM *AUTHENTICITY*, A NOVEL

BY DEIRDRE MADDEN¹

Chapter Thirty-Five

As she turns on to the narrow track, a single sheep high on the slope notices her. Bleating, it moves down the hill, and is joined by two, three others, then quickly six, ten, twenty, more, until every sheep on the slope is heading her way. 'You creatures,' she calls laughing, 'I have nothing to give you,' as they cluster by the wire that separates the track from the field. She can hardly hear her own voice over the loud humming sound of their bleating. Their backs are all stained indigo; and they run alongside the wire, tripping and tumbling, following her as she walks along until another line of wire halts their progress, penning them in. As she walks on up the valley, she can hear their sad weird cries gradually dying away.

The track stays close to the course of a river for some distance, so that she has the slope of the hill on one side and the tumbling peaty water on the other, until suddenly it rises steeply, leaving the river far below with the rowans that fringe it, with its pools and stones. The land opens out and is unfenced now. The rowans, she thinks, the rowans ... She comes here in all seasons. She has never been out of Ireland – she never will be – but she cannot think that there is anything anywhere more vivid than the rowans when they have their berries on a clear cold day when the sky is bare – the red of the berries, the green of the leaves, the hard blue of the sky. Even the Mediterranean, she thinks, cannot offer such strong and powerful colours. But it is not like that today, for now everything is grey and dun and soft blue, muted colours of green, the old gold of faded bracken.

When human memory has been outlived, the landscape remembers. She passes potato drills from the last century, low soft shadowy ridges in the thin soil. She passes the ruins of a farmhouse, forlorn now, its windows all shattered, its front door rotted and fallen, the roof collapsed in on itself, like a fire late at night. A pert wren vanishes. The track along which she is walking is not the original route up the valley but then the track cuts into the old path, which is bounded by drystone walls. Panting from the steepness of the climb, she stops. Looking back, she can see where the old road ran straight down, the stones of its walls broken and tumbled now, but still there, resilient, because the landscape does remember. In the distance she can see other grey ruins, deserted houses, and she finds it strange how utterly and completely the human community has gone from this mountainside.

1 Deirdre Madden, *Authenticity* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002): 370-374. Reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher.

There are few trees now – a few tough hawthorns, their branches and trunks covered with lichens. She is tired but has almost reached her destination. Every time she comes here she returns to the same place, to a particular fold in the mountains. The path continues on from the point where she stops but not for much further. She settles down between the stones that form a crude seat. She is out of the wind here, and she looks back down the valley, where the slopes softly interlock. In the foreground, directly in her line of vision, there is a single thorn. The sky is a crown of light, drifting, theatrical. It is not a fine day and the sky is constantly changing. She lies back and watches huge torn grey clouds move swiftly overhead, expanding, contracting, like liquid added to another liquid, like coloured ink in water; the same fringed dissolving quality. She likes it when this happens at night, when huge wild clouds are blown swiftly over a wild moon.

Once, many years earlier, a strange and beautiful thing happened to her here. She was sitting on that day where she is sitting now, leaning back against the side of the hill with its low plants, its grasses and ferns. She had fallen into a sort of half-hypnotised, half-enchanted state, thinking of the landscape in which she was sitting but not in a willed or forced way, receptive rather than seeking to impose a thought or idea. She was aware of her own breathing, rising and falling, rising and falling; aware of the great slope of the mountain on which she sat. And then all at once she realised that the ground beneath her was alive. The earth was alive. It was as though the land against which she was leaning was the flank of a massive animal. And the sky too, the moving, shaggy clouds, the tumbling river, the thorn, the stones themselves, everything, everything, interconnected and living and complete. It was a sacred, astounding moment, and it passed as swiftly as the rushing clouds. She has never told anyone and she has certainly never forgotten it. This is why she has come to this place today, why she constantly returns. She feels she can enter here into the life of things in a way that is not possible otherwise or elsewhere. It has become a place as of which one might say, 'This is where we saw the kingfisher.' 'This is where we found the rare wild orchid.' One comes back not in the hope of finding such things again, but in gratitude for the mystery that was revealed there once.

Sitting in that same spot now, she loses track of time. Her thoughts drift. She thinks about her own life in a vague, open-ended way, wondering what will happen to her in the years to come. On her wrist she wears a gold watch and she studies it with pleasure, thinking of the man who gave it to her. At night before she goes to sleep she places it carefully in its flat leather box and then sets it open on the dressing table beside her, so that it will be the first thing she sees in the morning when she wakes. The watch has a lozenge-shaped face and a supple gold bracelet, as if fashioned from the skin of some fabulous mythical fish. As she looks at it today, she realises that all her cherished thoughts of the future are an illusion. The things she is thinking about have not yet happened and there is no guarantee they ever will happen; there is no fixed promise that anything will happen, that there is a future. Just at that moment, she hears someone approach.

A stranger. A hill walker. It is rare for her to meet anyone on this path. Once, in winter, she met a shepherd and his dog out foddering sheep, and on two or three other occasions she has met hikers like this man. He has been on up the valley beyond where the path runs out and far on into the mountains, and now he is returning. He stops and they greet each other. The man is exceptionally tall and somewhat eccentrically dressed. He is wearing heavy walking boots and thick socks, the short trousers of an alpine hiker. The effect is faintly ridiculous and she tries not to laugh. On his head is a knitted woollen hat as tight as the cap of an acorn on a nut. His face is flushed and excited.

'Have you had a good day?'

'It was marvellous.'

'How far did you get?'

'Up beyond the watershed so that you could see down into the next valley, and then back down again into this one.'

'Are you out from Dublin?'

He nods. 'And you, you live locally?'

She nods in her turn.

'You're fortunate to be able to come up here,' he says, 'whenever you want.'

He thinks of the long drive back to the city, of the traffic, of the river of tail lights before him. He thinks of the suburban house to which he will return, of his family, of all the constraints of his life during the week to come. For a moment he envies this stranger so much and not just for where she lives but for her youth, her happiness. She is in her early twenties with thick curling hair, and grey eyes in an open trusting face. There is no evidence of her having already made any of those simple, fatal errors that can close a life down. She is wearing a tweed skirt and thick stockings, a dark blue jacket and a green scarf. 'It'll rain soon,' he says. 'I doubt if we'll make it back down before it breaks.'

'I don't mind. I like walking in the rain.' As he looks at her, he is overcome by an inexplicable sense of pity and compassion for this stranger. He has no idea why this should be but all at once it makes him feel close to her.

'When I was up in the mountains today something happened.'

She listens as he struggles to find words to convey the experience he has had. He evokes the physical aspect of the landscape that had triggered it – the brown velvet flanks of the mountain, the heather and thick bracken. In the silence a single bird was calling. The shifting light and the stones, the faraway pine forests, black as a winter lake: he tells her of all these things and of how, under his gaze, they had suddenly opened to afford him a remarkable insight into their nature. When he has finished they remain in silence for a few moments.

And then she says, 'Exactly the same thing happened to me here once.'

The valley is now a tunnel of light. The strong blink of sun that heralds rain reaches its pitch of intensity. He suggests that she walk back down the valley with him; she thanks him and stands up, brushes a few wisps of dry grass from her skirt. They set

off together and walk in companionable silence. The rain begins to fall and the sky darkens, all is greyness. She pulls her scarf up over her head. They walk through soft veils of rain under slow clouds. They pass the thorn, the broken wall that marks the abandoned road, they pass the empty farmhouse. They descend to the tree line, to where the hawthorns and the rowans grow, to where the river flows, its peaty water falling over stones. They see the sheep muster. When they reach the point where the track meets the road there is a man tending a bonfire and he greets them. They stand opposite him and all three look into the flames. The man's face, seen through the haze of the heat, gives the impression of something seen through water. They feel simultaneously the heat of the fire and the chill of the rain; there is a smell of smoke and decay. They take leave of each other standing by the bonfire to return to their lives, to fulfil their destinies.

Neither of them ever forgot the other. Neither of them ever spoke to anyone else of what had happened that day. They never met again.