

The Cure

A Story by William Page

When she saw Peter coming down the muddy path, Martha could have gone out to the porch to greet him, but she didn't. She stood watching him from behind the heavy, sliding glass doors. The rain on the shaded glass blurred his image, and the diffuse, afternoon light seemed to illuminate him from all sides. He wore an old black coat, boots, and trousers that were too short for him. Despite the rain his scarf was hanging out of his pocket, instead of around his neck, and his coat was unbuttoned. He walked with his hands in the pockets of his trousers and his head up, as if he were looking over the roof of the house. He had little delicacy. He lumbered down the hill in a relaxed, ox-like manner—twice straying off the path into the star thistle—and then at the bottom, instead of coming up the steps to the deck, took the path that led to the cliff above the beach.

He hadn't noticed her, which made her feel as if she were spying on him. She watched disappear and then went to her room and took her coat. Before she went out, she pushed open Jeremy's bedroom door. From the hall she stared at his thin face and his emaciated arms, which lay folded over his chest above the blankets. Then she listened: his breathing was shallow, like a child's. Satisfied that he was asleep, she quietly pulled the door shut and buttoned her coat.

As she stepped on the deck, the wind blew from over the cliff into the ravine where the house stood. It howled and flung itself at her as if to stop her. With an effort she pulled the heavy glass door shut. At the edge of the deck she almost slipped on the wet wood, but she caught herself, jumped into the wet grass, and started up the path. Above her the squirrels called to each other with their excited, bird-like screams and leapt among the branches of the pine trees that surrounded the house. Near the top of the cliff she saw Peter turn toward her and then turn away. The rain was thrown into her face, and the wind lifted up her skirt and chilled her. When she reached him, he didn't turn to face her. They both stood looking down at the waves. The smell of seaweed and mud filled her nostrils.

"Your friend is waiting," she shouted when she couldn't bear the silence any longer. She had to yell to be heard over the wind.

He didn't answer. He stared at her for a moment, and then looked back down at the beach where the tide was breaking against the rocks. Beads of rain glistened in his black hair and beard.

"He was spitting blood last night," she yelled. "I don't know what to do anymore. All I can do is clean up the mess."

"You can't do anything," he said, without raising his voice.

"But you can."

"No, I can't. Not anymore. Now it's up to him."

"We must try," she said, yelling louder than before.

"But why must we try? Why?"

"I won't have him die."

"You won't have him die?" he said with sarcasm. "What about him? What if he wants to die?"

“He doesn’t. It’s the pain. The pain makes him give up.”

Above them the clouds rumbled with thunder. Then, suddenly, the rain came down with force. She knew she couldn’t control him here. This was his element, and she was reduced by its grandeur. The rain pelted her, and the wind blew through her thin coat.

“Can we go in?” she shouted, pulling at his arm.

He went first, plodding down the hill in his heavy boots. He didn’t hurry, and once she had to push him along to quicken his pace. At the bottom she grabbed his arm, said, “Not the front door, your boots are muddy. Over here.” She guided him up onto the deck and around to the door that led to the kitchen. She pulled the door open, let him pass, and entered behind him.

“Take off your boots,” she said.

He obeyed her and bent over to pull off his boots. She felt a pang of pleasure at the sight of his massive back and neck.

When he was standing in his stocking feet, she commanded him: “Give me your coat and go stand by the fire. I don’t want you going to him wet and cold.”

She carried his coat to a closet in the hallway, hung it on a hanger, kicked off her wet shoes, and then peeled off her coat and hung it beside his. In her stocking feet she walked down the tiled hall to her bathroom, took a folded towel from the shelf just inside the door, and then made her way to where he stood at the stove. She handed him the towel. He dried his face and hands mechanically and then handed the towel back to her. She took it, dried her face and neck, and then pulled back her hair and wrung a few drops of water from it. She stood on the hearth, feeling the warm, porous brick under her feet. The wind howled over the roof, and the rain beat against the glass doors.

“He asked why you didn’t come yesterday,” she said.

“I have others to see.”

“They can’t be as bad as he is.”

“Which is why I went to them.”

“If you tell him he’s going to die, he will. No matter what he says, he believes in you.”

“I won’t say anything.”

“But you believe it.”

He shifted his hands from in front of the fire to his pockets and moved closer to the stove. “I only know what he wants.”

“You don’t know anything,” she said, impatiently. “Do you think you know him better than I do?”

“I think you delude yourself.”

“About him?”

“About death. You think death is always bad because you’re afraid of it. You think he’s like you.”

Martha leaned forward, opened the stove, and then took a log from the stack and put it inside. She left the stove door cracked and opened the damper. The flames gulped at the air in short breaths.

“You don’t know anything,” she said without emotion. She felt as if she were trying out these words, words that she didn’t really believe. “You haven’t lain with him like I have. He’s afraid. He doesn’t understand it. He wants to be well.”

She sat on a little stool, facing the fire, and pulled her wet skirt up above her knees. She was aware of him, that he was staring at her legs. She caressed her neck with her hand. It gave her pleasure, but when he saw it, he winced, as if the sight of her gesture gave him pain. He was brooding and silent.

She waited for a moment and then pulled at his arm in order to make him look down at her again. "Don't be arrogant, Peter," she said. "He's a complex man. We have to help him if we can. He's a genius."

"He doesn't know himself."

"He's different. He's not like you or me. You have a gift. You can help him. It's a privilege to be able to help a man like him."

"I don't look at it like that."

"You're being arrogant again."

"You think this disease is outside of him. It's not. His body is rebelling. He's separated himself from his body."

The log inside the stove suddenly caught fire. The flames hissed, drawing the air, and the wood cracked and spit sparks. She felt a flush of heat on her face. The wet material of her skirt clung hotly to her legs.

"You don't know," she said. "He makes plans. He tells me how we're going to go back to Italy when he's cured. He has ideas. He's writing again. If I could steal your gift for a month, I could cure him."

He looked at her legs again. When she felt the weight of his gaze, she pulled her skirt up an inch higher and pushed her legs apart.

"I think you're still angry at me," she said, "after all these years."

"It's not that. It's just not working. I shouldn't have..." But he didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he threw his hands up and sighed loudly.

"You mustn't blame me," she said. "I always liked you, but then there was Jeremy. He needed me. I didn't want to hurt you..."

Peter waved his arm impatiently. "That was fifteen years ago," he said with force. "You made your choice, and I had to accept it. I don't see why we need to talk about it now."

"I feel like you blame me."

"I don't."

His anger weighed on her, but there didn't seem to be anything more for her to say. Outside the thunder rumbled in the distance, and the rain continued to pour down on the roof and deck. From the hearth Martha could see the heavy drops splash on the redwood planks. She watched the storm through the glass doors and thought about her choice and the strange, difficult paths her life had taken her down. After a time she lifted up her skirt and let it fall around her legs. The cloth was warm but still damp. Then she reached out, clamped the door of the stove shut, and closed down the damper.

"It's time," she said.

Jeremy's bedroom was a large, square room with a dark, red-tiled floor. There were two oriental carpets placed on either side of the bed. The head of the bed was against the inside wall, so that Jeremy looked out the three windows at the back of the house, where there was a garden. The rain flowed in streams across the clear, new glass and blurred the bright green winter grass and the duller olive-colored bushes that formed a border in the garden. The wall opposite the door was lined with bookcases, all of which were packed with books. There was also a desk and a chair that faced the garden. On the desk there were more books, a banker's lamp, and some papers. It was all neat and organized. Jeremy was in the bed, dozing. Martha went to him to wake him, but before she reached the bed, he opened his eyes. He looked at her, and then at Peter. He said to Peter, "So you're there, my friend. Come to keep me alive for another few days." His voice was dry and shallow, a whisper.

“I’ll go, if you want.”

“No, we have to prove your colleagues wrong. They said I’d be dead two years ago. The longer I live, the more ridiculous they’ll appear.”

Peter came forward, sat on the bed, and placed his hands on the neck of the sick man.

“Of course, the lymph nodes are still enlarged,” Jeremy said. “The lungs are affected now too. I can’t tell you what it was like last night, just to breathe.”

Peter laid his left hand on the Jeremy’s forehead and then reached around with his other arm and placed the palm of his hand on Jeremy’s chest.

Martha took the chair from the desk and placed it in the doorway. She frowned with concentration. She knew Peter affected Jeremy’s energies, but how he did it confused her. At first she thought that he manipulated his energies with his hands, but now she imagined that the actual movements were unimportant, that his hands were simply a convenient outlet for his power. She wondered what he was seeing and how she could learn to glimpse what he saw.

He helped Jeremy sit up and move to the edge of the bed. Then he stood behind him and positioned his hands on the small of his back.

“What a surprise I was to them,” the sick man said. “If they had read my work, they wouldn’t have suggested an operation. I can’t imagine what they’re saying now.”

“Try and relax.”

“They’re butchers,” Jeremy said under his breath, and then began to cough.

Peter took the invalid in his arms and held him at the back of the head, and then he took a wad of tissues from the bedside table. “Spit it out,” he said. “Spit it out.”

The sick man coughed, spat, spat a second time, and then collapsed in the other’s arms. He seemed terribly uncomfortable. His lungs struggled to assimilate the air as if it were poison. Peter held the sick man’s chest, as if he could pull the air into his lungs with his hands. He held him for some time while the other tried to catch his breath. He waited until Jeremy was calm, and then placed his hands on the sick man’s back again, but Jeremy began to cough immediately, this time violently. Peter removed his hands, waited for him to recover, and then stood. “It’s all I can do for today,” he said.

He stared at his patient as one might look at a suffering animal. Martha looked at Peter. He seemed spent, relaxed, as if he had made love and now wondered at the strangeness of his partner. There was sweat on his brow, and the hair around his temples stood out. His face looked flushed and empty, and his eyes seemed to hold more curiosity than compassion.

Jeremy, on the other hand, was a picture of helplessness. He sat back on the pillows with his arms dangling at his sides. His thin, diminished legs stuck out from his nightshirt and made him look like a hatched insect. He stared at the sheets in front of him and tried to catch his breath by breathing shortly. His skin was pale, almost transparent, so that blue arteries stood out on his hands, his legs, and the sides of his forehead. After he caught his breath, he lay down on the mattress and pulled the blankets over his wasted body. His face, despite its pained look, remained handsome. The hair around his temples was gray, and the thin mustache he wore was still neatly trimmed. His gray eyes, high forehead, and straight nose were not disfigured by his years of illness; it even occurred to Martha that his thinness and his hollowed cheeks accented his features. His illness had given him a distant, saint-like dignity.

Peter walked to where Martha sat. “He’ll need to rest for a while,” he said, making his way around her chair.

As she stood, Jeremy looked at her and then shut his eyes. She saw a lifetime in his look, everything: joy, betrayal, pain, passion, guilt, and finally acceptance.

She caught up with Peter in the front room. He had taken his coat from the closet and was putting it on near the sliding glass doors. Outside the wind blew the rain against the thick glass.

"Give him hot tea when he wakes up," he said. "Do you still have the herbs I gave you?"

"Yes."

"I don't know how much more I can do. The changes can be very dramatic for the body. I have to be careful."

"Wouldn't it be better if you came every day?"

"I have other patients," he said, bending over to pick up his boots.

"But he's your friend."

He set his boots down on the tile and sighed. "You always say that, as a kind of reproach. But what kind of friendship did we have? Yes, we *were* friends, but that was a long time ago."

"But you could have come to visit."

"I could have visited him, and he could have visited me, but we didn't."

"I always thought you stopped coming because of me."

"Maybe I did, at first. I can't remember."

"We have to help him."

He turned and stared at the glass door in front of him. "I can't do anything if he's given up."

"But why would he want to die?"

"You tell me."

"I think he wants to live."

"Maybe you're right, I don't know. But I've seen cases like this before. It's like he's not even here anymore. Maybe he wants to move on, and we're keeping him back."

"We can't just let him die."

"Why not? If it's what he wants. It's you he stays for."

"Me?"

"What else?"

"There's his work."

"We've been through this before. When I first started treating him and he was better for a while, he said he was only repeating what he had done years ago."

"But it's different now. He was writing yesterday. I don't understand how you can talk like this; you're a healer. You have a responsibility to do all you can. He's suffering, and you can help him. You have an obligation to use your gift when you can."

"I have to depend on my own understanding," he said, looking at his boots on the floor in front of him. "I can't help everybody. I have to limit myself. I only have so much energy."

"If you could teach me what you do," she said. "I could heal him."

He said nothing to this. He looked at her and scratched the back of his neck.

She sat on a stool with her back to the kitchen counter, facing her reflection in the sliding glass door and tried to remember what he had done at the bed earlier. She wanted to put it together with what she had seen on his other visits. It was clear to her that he improvised each time, but she imagined that there must be a formula. Some of the movements were the same, but others must have been dependent on Jeremy's symptoms, which changed from week to week. She wondered how he knew what to do. What were his guidelines? What did he see that she didn't? She knew that his method was dependent on a perception of the body's energies, but how could she gain that perception? She squinted at him and tried to feel what he was feeling. She wanted to take on his way of looking, his mood, and his attitude. At first a part of her resisted, but then she flowed over to where he stood. With all her concentration, she watched herself, and

tried to see her body as he would see it. She took on his hardness and his desire. A part of her wanted to let it go, to return to what was familiar, but she held onto it until a space inside her cracked. It was like a sky that suddenly cleared and opened on a world she had never known. Then she knew what she had to do.

She stood up from the chair to break the spell. He stood looking at her, still in his stocking feet. He seemed broken and guilty. His desire for her made him hate himself.

“I guess I should go,” he said.

“Let me pay you first. Come back to my room. The money is there.”

She led him down the hall. Her room was smaller than Jeremy’s. The tiled floors were bare, and the only furniture was a double bed with brass posts, an old wooden chair, and a small night table with a telephone and a clock. The two windows in the room had shutters, and they were closed. She went to the far window, pulled it open, and pushed the shutters out. Before she could shut the window again, a cool, wet breeze blew into the room and brought with it the perfume of evergreen. Peter watched her from the door.

The light from the window that illuminated the room was pale and without shadow. She went to the bed and sat on the mattress. “Come here,” she commanded.

He came and stood over her. She felt his gaze as if it were a physical weight. The smell of his wet hair and damp clothes accented his desirous, animal-like presence. She took a small jewelry box from the drawer of the night table, placed it on her lap, and counted out five fifty-dollar notes. He took the money, but he handed two of the bills back to her.

“For the last two visits,” he said.

“You should charge more,” she said. “We can afford it.”

“I don’t need more.”

“You need a new coat.”

“I have another,” he said, stuffing the banknotes into his shirt pocket. “I just don’t wear it. I like this one better.”

She put the money back in the box. “When will you come next?”

“On Thursday.”

“That’s three days.”

“It’s a long way for me to come. It’s forty-five minutes each way.”

“Then why won’t you let me pay you more?”

She opened the jewelry box again, but he waved his hand impatiently. “It’s not the money,” he said. “I’ve been coming for two years now. It’s hard for me too.”

She set the box on the table. “He won’t go to a hospital.”

“I don’t blame him.”

“Peter,” she said, forcing him to look at her.

“What?”

“Will you help me?”

“How?”

She stood, unbuttoned her dress in the back, and pulled it down to her waist. “Do you still think I’m beautiful?” she said, taking his hands and placing them on her breasts.

“Yes,” he said without emotion, “you are beautiful.”

His hands were cold. He touched her breasts awkwardly, and then he moved his hands to her neck, held her head from behind, and looked into her eyes. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

She placed her hand under his coat, undid a button on his shirt, and caressed the coarse black hair on his chest. "Don't you see?" she said. "If you make love to me, I'll be able to help him."

At first he just looked at her as if he didn't understand, but then he took his hands away from her neck and began to laugh. He laughed loudly and shook his head back and forth. "You're crazy," he said. "Really crazy."

But she knew he would do it. She pulled her dress down over her hips, stepped out of it, and hung it over the chair. Then she lay on the bed and pulled off her stockings and underwear.

He watched her undress and then began to undress himself.

"Hurry," she said. "It's cold."

"Get underneath the blankets."

"You mustn't stay."

"I won't."

He lay on top of her for a while, warming her under the covers. His weight pinned her to the bed and made her feel weak. But when he began to move on top of her, she pushed up his hairy chest and wrapped her legs around him and moved with him. It didn't take long. His desire was made bold and quick by his anger.

Afterwards, she lay very still and felt his energy inside her. He lay next to her, touching her skin. He was breathing heavily. The coarse hair on his arms and chest made her skin itch, and the warm smell of their lovemaking was unpleasantly sour to her. When he reached his arm out to caress her, she said, "Please, you must go. He'll be awake soon."

She didn't look at him or move in the bed. Even when he finished dressing and said, "I'm going," she didn't turn toward him.

"You'll come on Thursday?" she asked, shutting her eyes.

"I said I would," he said, sounding offended.

When she heard him leave, she slowly raised herself from the bed, went to her bathroom, and put on her robe. In the mirror she saw her face. She hardly recognized herself; her beauty shocked her. She stared at her reflection until she found herself buried behind her eyes. Her presence surfaced as if it were a swimmer coming up for air. She knew what she had to do. With concentration she walked carefully across the hall to his room. At his door she paused and listened, and when she knew he was asleep, she crept up to his bed and let her robe fall. Then she sat on the edge of the mattress, carefully pulled her legs up, and slid her body underneath the blankets. Still feeling Peter's warmth inside her, she closed her eyes and waited for him to awake.