

A North Light

Gwyneth Jones

A carefree traveller's life is full of evenings like this one. You have the money, you have the looks, you have the style; you even have what used to be called the *letters of introduction*, in the old days. Yet still you find yourself winding along the disturbingly narrow lanes, livid green pasture on either side, a voluptuous sunset overhead, and nowhere to spend the night. The grass, growing in a stiff mohican strip down the middle of the asphalt, confesses that this is a route only used by those high-slung, soot-belching, infuriating tractors. The desk staff at the quaint, olde-worlde (but surprisingly expensive) little inn that just turned you away — with the offensive smugness of a fully booked hostelry in high season — obviously sent you on a wild-goose chase.

Never again! you say to yourself.

But the lure of the open road will prevail. Wanderlust.

"My God, here it is," breathed Camilla.

The house stood four-square and somewhat sinister in its bulk of yellow stone, at the top of one of those endless rank pastures. No trace of a garden, except for a bizarrely suburban machicolation of cypress hedge. The gate at the road announced the services of Jonas O'Driscoll, Builder. Also, vacancies. But vacancies cannot be trusted.

"*Should* be okay," said Sheridan, scanning the whereabouts and liking the isolation. "It's fucking huge for a B&B. Unreal!"

"Not at all," she corrected him. Camilla was always wise to the local ways. "Traditional Irish rural industry needs bedrooms. The only crop that thrives in this country is babies. Breed them up for emigration, ship them out and look forward to a comfortable retirement on their earnings."

"That's cold-blooded, isn't it?"

She laughed. "I like it. It shows a fine ruthlessness. Children as a business venture, why not?" She was childless herself.

"Bring me tangle-curled barefoot peasant girls," groaned Sheridan. "Bring me a reeking cottage with a pig looking out—"

Mine hostess was at the door, a young woman with mouse-brown hair cropped short as a boy's, her large behind embraced in boyish dark blue jeans; pink cheeks, naive round hazel eyes and a cute, piggy turned-up nose. The tourists smothered their giggles as she welcomed them in to a stark, tiled hallway with a huge varnished pine dresser and varnished pine umbrella stand. Pokerwork signs hung on the walls, inscribed with the rules of the B&B (all credit cards, rooms must be vacated, etc.) — Miniature warming pans, decorative tea cloths, china donkeys on a knick-knack

shelf. Everything excruciatingly new. The travellers caught each other's eyes and sighed. Their hostess was Noreen O'Driscoll. She'd had a phone call from the inn, and she could show them to an ensuite room. She beamed naively when they accepted the astonishing price of a night's lodging; displayed flushed puzzlement when they insisted on shaking hands.

Camilla and Sheridan liked to shake hands with the natives. They followed her round denim bottom up the varnished pine stairs, savouring the touch of that scrubbed peasant skin — already worn down (she can't be more than twenty-five or so, poor girl) to the texture of spongy sandpaper.

Room number four, ensuite. How many rooms are there? Maybe six, maybe eight. Maybe it goes on for ever, into the antechambers of hell. Thick yellowy varnished pine, brass numberplates. The wallpaper in number four is the same as in the stairwell: strawberries and strawberry flowers, in shades of pastel brown and pastel apricot. The bed takes up most of the space. The bedding is... pastel apricot, polysomething, with the same debased, dreary strawberries and strawberry flowers. There's a fitted wardrobe, a vanity unit. A window with meagre flimsy curtains provides a magnificent sea view. As they stare at the room, Noreen frankly stares at *them*, these two exotic birds of passage, tall and slender, blonde and sophisticated (he is tall, she is blonde). Her round, bright eyes are filled with a peasant's ingenuous hunger for sensation.

"This is fine," says Sheridan briskly. "We'll take it."

Noreen looks at Cam, a little puzzled. (Camilla must remind Sher that he's in a country where menfolk do not make domestic decisions. It's his place to be silent!) But she also looks very happy. They are welcome, they are accepted, they are fascinating: all is as it should be.

When they were alone, Camilla sniffed the towels and moaned softly. The polyester sheets, cheap enough to start with, are worn to a grisly fungoid sheen; and why in the world, in a house so big, does this "double room" have to be so mean and cramped? It's a battery cage for tourists. "I can't stand these places," muttered Camilla. "I cannot *bear* them. The sheer effrontery! I thought Ireland was supposed to be romantic."

"That's *my* line," said Sheridan. He had to stoop a little to look out of the window. Beyond the pasture, a wide sea shore under a fabulous sweep of sky, but the back of the house is like a builder's yard. A heap of sand under a tarpaulin, a stack of roof tiles. The children are playing: two boys of that touching age between childhood and adolescence, trying to humiliate each other with BMX bike tricks. A girl a little older, chivvying a terrier puppy. A couple of infants. Unseen, above, he smiled on them benignly.

"The light is wonderful."

She could hear the children's voices. "How can you tell? It's nearly dark."

"Exactly." He turned with a knowing grin. "I'm sure you'll find something to do."

Camilla went on grumbling as they carried up their bags, unpacked, and made futile efforts to render the battery cage habitable. But when they ventured into the lower regions, in search of advice about an evening meal, she was the one who accepted the offer of a cup of tea — condemning them to a tête-à-tête with Noreen in the Guests' Lounge and TV Room. Mine hostess brought tea and fairy cakes (one per guest). Later she brought the baby, eight-month-old Roisin, suffering from the colic; told Camilla the names of her other children; confided the state of her husband's business. Camilla tasted the admiration in Noreen's eyes, and drew more of it to herself insensately, out of habit, like a pianist running over her scales: she couldn't help it. She really meant no harm. Why are you dressed as a boy? she wondered. Wouldn't you be more *comfortable* in a nice print frock and an apron? Thus the wheel of fashion turns, and it gets harder and harder to find the true wilderness experience. Peasants the world over have Coca-Cola and Internet access. But their lives (sadly enough, agreeably enough) are no less empty. An attractive stranger is still fascinating, same as she ever was.

Noreen jiggled the grizzling baby with businesslike indifference. Camilla admired the family photographs (Noreen in a huge white dress that would have looked better on a pick-up truck, clasping her red-faced builder to her side). Sheridan sat there in his black biker jacket and his black jeans, one long leg crossed over the other, saying little, grinning secretly. "Jaysus," remarked Noreen, in astonishment. "It seems like we've been friends for ever! And will you look at the time. Jonas'll be home and no dinner cooked!"

They went out to eat at a roadhouse with pretensions (Noreen exhorting them from the doorstep to be careful of "the drunk driving"). In the morning Camilla declined to rise for the Full Irish Breakfast. Folded between sickly polyester surfaces, the smell of bad laundry in her nostrils, she listened to middle-aged Americans tramping heavily down the stairs. She could tell by the sound of their voices that there was nothing worth getting up for in that dining-room. I won't stay another night, she thought. I *won't*. A quarter-hour later, a tap on the door: Noreen with a tray of tea and wheaten bread. "Are yez poorly?" asked the young housewife, gravely concerned. "He says I'm to tell you he's gone out to take a look around the possibilities. He says you'll know what he means."

"Sheridan's a photographer," said Camilla. "He loves the light here. How nice of you to bring me the tea. You shouldn't have. I'm so sorry to be a nuisance."

So Noreen stayed, and talked, and stayed, and told terrible stories about rude unreasonable tourists (Camilla having deftly established that she and Sheridan were actually neither English nor American). Downstairs baby Roisin's grizzling rose to a roar. Camilla heard her, but Noreen didn't. When she left at last her round eyes were as bright as stars, she turned at the door for a lingering glance: came back and patted Camilla's toned and slender forearm with shy, blundering tenderness.

"You have a good lie-in, Camilla. Ye'll be right as rain."

It's so simple, so harmless, such a breeze, to elicit the kindness of strangers. The wheaten bread, poisonously tainted with an overdose of soda, was crumbled,

uneaten. Camilla sat up in bed, licking her lips and smiling. She negotiated the battery cage to reach the tiny ensuite, and crouched on the edge of the bath that doubled for a showerstall, which was the only way to get a good look in the mirror above the basin.

"I'm not a *bad* person," she murmured.

Whatever possesses anyone to build a bathroom with a light from the north? An unkind light, clear and shadowless, that picks out every tiny pore. But this is not a luxury hotel. An Irish B&B is not designed to coddle the guest's sensitive *amour-propre*. Passing trade, never passing this way again, too much attention to detail would not be cost-effective. *A fine ruthlessness*, thought Camilla, indulgently, as she applied her make-up. She could afford to be indulgent. She was feeling much better, all the draining little experiences of yesterday soothed.

Outdoors, in the clear light that had painted a disquieting picture on Camilla's mirror, Sheridan walked around the shore of the sea lough. He stopped on a rocky outcrop above the water and sat cross-legged, taking camera lenses out of his bag. A boy of twelve or thirteen came sailing along on a bicycle. The tall man had seen the boy coming from a long way off. Without appearing to do so, he was displaying his wares. The bike swerved to a halt, leaving an impressive skid mark on the gravel track. Sheridan grinned at the sound, and went on thoughtfully laying out his big black truncheons of lenses, his electronic light meters, his tripod. Here comes the boy, the last, late beauty of childhood wrecked by a bullet-headed haircut, magnetically attracted to the stranger: a dignified scowl on his face.

"What'r ye doing?"

"I'm going to take some pictures."

The boy comes closer. Sheridan is an adult, and therefore of no account, but he's dressed like a big teenager, and big teenagers are gods.

"There's seals in the lough. But yez won't see them."

Sheridan shrugged, indifferent to the kind of wildlife that most tourists pursue. "There are seals in a zoo. I'll take pictures of the light and the water." He grinned, as the boy came closer still. "Maybe I'll take pictures of you."

Sheridan drove an ancient Bentley, 1940s vintage, British racing green, a fabulous monster. The car suffered some kind of mechanical failure. It had to be nursed to the town beyond the pretentious roadhouse and left there for diagnosis and treatment. Camilla was not exactly ill, but she was tired out by weeks of travel. She took to her bed in number four, and soon had Noreen waiting on her hand and foot. The passing trade of heavy Americans would have been astonished at this unheard-of behaviour, but they never heard anything about it. Short shrift, in and out, was Noreen's usual way. Her conversation was all reserved for the beautiful stranger. She was in and out of number four all day, sometimes jiggling baby Roisin on her arm, very

concerned at Camilla's birdlike appetite.

"Sure, yez don't eat enough to keep a sparrow alive," she sighed, stroking back Camilla's lovely blonde hair. A little physical intimacy had become natural: a touch here, an arm around the shoulders there, nothing shocking, just like sisters.

"I'm eating very well," protested Camilla, with a gentle smile. "You look after me wonderfully." The mirror in that apology for a bathroom obstinately showed a face more worn and wan than Camilla liked to see, but it was deceptive. She had been at a low ebb, running on empty: she was feeling stronger every day.

"Is the photography a living, then?" asked Noreen curiously, lifting a tray with a soup bowl that had barely been tasted, glancing admiringly at the food refused, that mark of true sophistication. Roisin was on her arm in a sick-stained pyjama suit.

"Oh, yes. A very good living."

"And you?"

Camilla said she didn't have a job. She didn't need one.

"So ye're like... a kept woman?" said Noreen, round-eyed. "Jayus, I couldn't do that. I'd be afraid to do that."

Slightly needled, Camilla laughed. "Oh, no. No, no. What I mean is we work together. He takes the pictures, I write the text, we make beautiful books." Neither of them needs a job. They are financially independent, but it's better not to say so. And it's very true that Sheridan makes a living for himself out of his photography. Very true.

Thumps and yells from downstairs. The children are indoors. There's "a bug going around" which has robbed the oldest boy of his playmates, so he's at home watching television. The girl has stayed in too, for some reason, and therefore also the younger mites. "I hope to God they don't get sick," mutters Noreen bitterly. "It would be like their awkwardness, in August when I have me hands full with the plaguey tourists."

Camilla murmurs something apologetic. But no! Noreen won't hear a word. No! She's *loving* having Camilla here. Looking after Camilla is like a big treat, like going to the pictures. Like going to the hairdresser's she adds, dreamily; and sitting there reading a magazine... The height of Noreen's notions of idle splendour.

Sheridan takes a walk in the lichen-gnarled oak wood by the shore, in the company of a ten-year-old girl. Not the daughter of the B&B, another little girl. He shows her things that she has never known, and tells her the names of flowers and trees which have merely been *flowers*, *trees*, to the barren little mind of the modern peasant. Here's a wood ants' nest, a treacle-brown heap of sifted soil that looks like a small grave: but when you take a second glance the grave is heaving. "Did you know," says Sheridan, "that ants are farmers?" They lie down together, the tall man and the little girl, in the leaf-litter and watch an ant-shepherd teasing a drop of nectar from the pointed belly of one of its aphid charges.

"Holy Jesus God," says the little girl. "It's like a science-fiction film."

"The weak are here to justify the strong," says Sheridan, stroking a drop from another insect with a pointed grassblade, to show how easy it is to milk this crop.

"Jesus," says the little girl, peering intently. "If they were bigger, it would be like a horror movie." She sighed. "Yez knows a lot. It's like talking to the Internet."

"Shall I take your picture now?"

The little girl thinks maybe she ought to run. But she doesn't.

Camilla and Noreen walk by the shore, Noreen pushing a stoutly built tartan upholstered buggy ahead of her. It's what passes for a fine summer day on the west coast of Ireland. There are cars ranked in the car park, battalions of windbreaks; very few foreign tourists. Camilla's thinking of her glimpses of native life before this providential halt. Shovel-faced young women marching along lanes where only tractors and tourists ply, with the baby in the buggy: and you wonder, where is she going? You wonder what kind of life is it she leads. You want to touch her. Now Camilla is *in the picture*. She has penetrated to the heart of the alien world, It's always a thrill, however often repeated.

She has seen Noreen's husband briefly. A kitchen monster, sitting at the table, knife and fork in either fist, red impassive slab of a face. My God, to lie under *that*, while it silently prods children into you... ! But she keeps such thoughts to herself, tucks her arm in Noreen's arm and recounts her adventures as a world traveller, long-haul traveller. The pyramids at Giza, the restaurants of New York. Wise insights. "In West Africa, in the market in Foumban, beside the earth-walled palace of the sultans, did you know you will only find Dutch printed cotton?"

"Is that a fact? Would there not be any native handicrafts there?"

"Noreen, it's a big lie that the colonial powers went to Africa and Asia to plunder the natural resources. That was an afterthought. They went to force new markets for their goods. To sell, not to buy. It's the same with tourists, did you ever think of that? They don't come to *see*, they come to be looked at. Did you ever think of that?"

"I did not!" said Noreen, blinking in bewilderment. "Oh, but I could never call you a *tourist*, Cam. Ye're much more than that to me." Shyly, she clasped Camilla's arm to her well-nourished flank. (The pleasure lies in knowing that it will *go no further*. There will be no consequences, because Camilla isn't staying. Tastes and smells, moments of intensity, never a bill presented.)

They walked on, Noreen silenced for a little by her own outburst. "You know," she said, after a moment or two, "I'm worried about this bug that's going round. Some folk are keeping the children in. D'ye think I should keep them indoors?"

"Them?"

"The kids?"

"Ah." Camilla frowned, and looked away. "Don't worry. *Your* kids are safe."

She didn't explain the emphasis.

The steel-blue waves rushed in and out, the mothers sat behind the windbreaks, a somewhat depleted cohort of local boys and girls jumped and splashed in the water. "I suppose all your children are grown up and gone," sighed Noreen, shoving the buggy over recalcitrant tidewrack... and compounded this *faux-pas* by adding hurriedly, "Och, I mean, you must have been married very young!"

"Married?" Camilla dispelled the idea with a laugh, slightly put out that her dark hint has been ignored. "Sheridan and I have been together so long we're almost like brother and sister, but we've never been, ah, officially *married*."

"Not married?" gulped Noreen.

"I've never been married. I like my independence."

"But yez said, you was like, a... a kept woman?"

"That was my joke."

Never married! The buggy gave a jolt that made Roisin wail. Among the family portraits so readily on display in the Guests' Lounge and TV Room, there are several women who have never married, holding ugly babies against their bolster chests. Noreen's astonished gaze is comparing Camilla with those crewel-working great-aunts, finding a place for her among the failed huntresses, old maids...

"You look so young!" she gasped, as if unmarried bliss was in her mind inextricably linked with spinster middle age. "You look like a fashion model!"

Camilla squeezed the housewife's arm more tightly, and leaned close to rub her cool pale cheek against Noreen's warm, rosy one. "I've been young for so long," she murmured, "I can't remember being anything else."

"Ah!" sighed Noreen. "For two pins I'd—"

What would she do? Take Camilla away from all this? The blushing ploughboy, the sophisticated older woman, the configurations are endless; and pity may play a part. It's all grist to Camilla's mill. It's like a transfusion of fresh blood, without any of those ugly, depressing emergency-room details.

Love is the hunger on which we feed.

Sheridan prowled the woods and the shore. Camilla, no longer poorly, haunted the kitchen of the B&B, where Noreen was penned for most of her life, incessantly cooking, stowing the washing machine, ironing dank sheets. Noreen relayed tales of the disastrous epidemic. The boy with the nightmares, and no one in that house gets a wink of sleep. The girl that they rushed to hospital: but then the doctors couldn't find anything wrong. So that was a whole day gone for nothing, with the driving her there and the waiting in the waiting room, and the driving her back. In August, too. Jesus God. *Schadenfreude*. Noreen is miraculously preserved.

Camilla changes the subject. We are all *kept women*, she says. (Noreen has confided that romance is long out of the window with her Jonas.) We can't do without them, can we? We may look like the perfect couple, but the truth is... there are things I — She breaks off, and will say no more.

One day Sheridan came home from his adventures in a thoughtful mood, laid out digital prints on the tired candlewick bedspread, and pondered them with a happy smile. "Time to get the hell out of here," he said. "I'm done."

"The hell is right," said Camilla, glancing and averting her eyes.

"Why so squeamish? I have to live, don't I?"

"I can see why you want to leave!"

He put on his sunglasses, and grinned at her. "No one ever knows. I'm careful."

"Good, because I'm not done. I haven't finished. Not yet."

The dark lenses gave back a double image of her face, so richly shadowed, it's a shame she needs another partner. But two predators can't feed on each other. This is their eroticism, these tastes and smells, this contact at a remove: and it still thrills her. Sheridan always comes first, true. But Camilla likes it that way.

"Go, sister," says Sheridan, the big teenager. "You look like you need a fix."

The car had been repaired. It arrived back at the B&B that evening. They announced their departure the next morning, and settled the bill. Noreen was very sorry to see them go, but she made no fond farewells in front of Camilla's *ersatz* husband. Camilla conveyed, by a sad glance or two, that the sudden decision was not her own; and that she wished they could say goodbye more warmly. She got up about an hour after midnight, Sheridan peacefully unconscious. The sheets, although freshly changed, still had that bad-laundry smell. How does she do it? wondered Camilla, wrapping herself in an elegant blue and white kimono. Poor Noreen is a genius of poor housekeeping, of meagre portions... She went into the ensuite and checked her face. Good God, even the electricity in the mean fluorescent tube seems to come straight from the North Pole. Tiny crow's feet around her eyes, lines between her brows, is that a *broken vein*? Can't be! Never mind. Soon, soon this washed-out hag will disappear. The mirrors of civilization will restore Camilla's beauty, infused with fresh magic. For a last thrill, she walked the immeasurably ugly, pine-varnished passageways of the big lumpen house, possessing it like a ghost. American couples snore peacefully behind their brass number-plates, dreaming of Blarney Castle and the Rock of Cashel. Noreen shares a room and a bed with Jonas, with baby Roisin in her cot. The baby, for a wonder, is not grizzling. But the house is unquiet.

Camilla followed a trail of sound — buzzes and clicks and muted thunderclaps. Silently, she opened a door and saw the BMX boy there in the shadows, with his back to her, lost in contemplation of the graphics on his TV screen. His little hands

were moving incessantly, *clicketty clicketty clicketty*. Camilla knew the names of all the children. This one was Declan, the ten-year-old, fortunately immune to the virus that's going round. He's actually a little young for that virus: the bud not quite bursting, the sap not yet on the rise, but he'd be immune anyway. There are rules. She slipped into the room and stood behind him, wondering about passions that she did not share. She was standing so close, it was amazing that the child didn't turn around. Over his shoulder she could see her own face reflected on the screen, clearly visible within the racetrack image.

Declan turned and saw nothing (an adult woman, a mother, a featureless conduit). Without changing expression, he turned back and resumed his game.

Shuddering with horror, Camilla retreated: and that's Noreen's diet. That's all the feeding her poor starved soul ever gets.

She went down to the TV Lounge, feeling morally justified. I'm not a bad person. Not entirely greedy. I give as well as take! A quarter of an hour, and Noreen appeared, red-faced with sleep, her crop-head tousled, bundled up in a dreadful dressing-gown. "I thought I heard... Ough, Camilla *what is it?*"

Camilla was weeping, stifling her sobs with fists clenched against her teeth.

She was beside herself. It was some time before she could be persuaded to talk. In choked, half sentences, covering her face, she told the story.

Her suspicions. Her certainty. The terrible burden.

"I can't prove it," she explained. "But I know, more surely every time it happens. *He steals something from them...* How can I say it? They surrender to him."

"Jesus God. Ye're saying he interferes with them?"

"No!" wailed Camilla. "That's *nothing*. I'm saying he takes the life out of them."

"But, Camilla, nobody's died!"

"No! He doesn't kill them, he's too clever for that. They die later, of something else, an accident, the flu; I've kept track. I know it happens. But he never gets the blame. What's worse is when they live, but it would be better if they didn't, because *they're like him*. I've known that happen, too."

The harshly furnished room listened in shock. The big TV screen gazed sombrely.

Camilla showed Noreen the photographs. The young housewife trembled. She babbled of "the polis". Camilla said, *then he'd kill me*. Oh, God, I don't want to die!

"I had to tell you," she wept. "I just had to tell. Oh, Noreen, *the things I know*—"

And then the broken whispers, the breath coming fast. The last protests, the surrender. Noreen agrees abjectly that she will not raise the alarm. Shivering, sickened, she is deflowered, degraded, made complicit in something monstrous... and she loves it.

For Camilla too, the experience was deeply satisfying.

She left the room, and crept back to number four.

A flash caught her as she opened the door, her lips still wet, features softened and eyes blind with afterglow. "Gotcha!" cried Sheridan, brandishing the camera, grinning; and she laughed. It was almost as if he'd kissed her. He turned away, and checked the preview screen. "Hmm." He sounded disappointed; or maybe puzzled.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing."

They left the big, stark yellow house early in the morning. Camilla found the moment of departure oddly disappointing. She would have liked to see Noreen again. She would have liked to see some consciousness, a touch of pallor; some shamed disquiet in the young housewife's eyes. But it's time to make a clean getaway. Noreen will wake up unsure that anything really happened in the night (she'll probably never miss what Camilla took from her): and that's the way it's supposed to be. In and out without a trace, love them and leave them.

She went into the kitchen for a moment, and stood looking around. The smells of kippers, blood-pudding, and laundry that's been dried indoors mingled sickeningly. Camilla felt suddenly, deeply disoriented. The *taste* of Noreen's life was in her throat; she had a horrible, momentary vision of somehow staying here, *being trapped here*, with the slab of a husband, the indifferent children, the sonorous Americans chewing overcooked bacon in that drear, meagre dining-room. She felt she had become transparent, suffocated—

Sheridan tooted on the Bentley's horn.

"Sssh!" muttered Camilla, and hurried out to join him.

The big car drove away.

Noreen was up in time to hear them go. She'd had a sleepless night, but no staying in bed for Noreen. No one to bring her a tray. She had the breakfast for the guests to cook, Jonas in a poor temper, the children giving her hell and the baby fretful. But she was smiling. She stood in the porch and listened to the deep purr of the big car's engine. There they go, the beautiful people. She was fingering a rectangle of chaste cream pasteboard, simply inscribed *Camilla Siibu*. Nothing else, no address, no phone number: that's arrogance, isn't it? But it doesn't matter. You never do see them again, the passing trade. She tucked the card into the drawer, where she kept a select collection of such trophies.

"I have *lovely* guests, sometimes," she murmured. "It's *lovely* to have them."

And she returned to her domestic servitude, with a gleam of secret triumph in that beaming, rapacious smile; her naive hazel eyes no longer hungry, but replete.

They called ahead and booked a room in a place as far removed from that

primitive B&B as money could buy. The country house hotel set in its own lush grounds: now this is more like it. Sheridan handed over the keys to the Bentley. Camilla flashed an automatically dazzling smile at the boy who took their luggage, and was faintly surprised to receive no eye-kick of appreciation in return.

They walked into the hotel, and how wide the lobby seemed. It was not crowded but full of people. No one glanced her way. Or if they did, by chance, happen to look in Camilla's direction, they appeared to see nothing. By the time they reached the desk, she was feeling disquieted, and strangely weary, as if that short walk had been a long trek across empty tundra. Camilla's progress through the human world has been, for so long, a continuous sip, sip, at the nectar of attention. Full-blown seduction is an occasional indulgence (she's not an addict, like Sheridan!). Her eternal beauty, everlasting youth, is nourished by subtler means. She doesn't even have to think about it, she is so used to eliciting the response. The admiration that comes back to her, from almost any human being, male or female, young or old, is her daily bread, the air she breathes. Beautiful people feed like this. The rest are there to be fed upon. That's the law of nature.

All the way up to their room, Sheridan placidly silent and indifferent beside her, she could not stop herself from peering at the glass walls of the lift, at a passing chambermaid, at the bellboy waiting for his tip. Nothing. She might as well be invisible. *What's happened to me?*

"What's wrong with you, Cam?"

"Nothing," she says, sitting in the middle of the vast acreage of their room, on the king-sized bed, sumptuous with pillows; the white sheets crisp and fragrant. But where's Noreen, with her humble, hungry eyes? "I think I'll have a shower."

She went into the bathroom.

As long as you can look at yourself in the mirror, you're not too far gone. That's what Sheridan says. One day all the mirrors will be empty, and sometimes, tired of the endless repetitive toil of her delicate feeding, she has looked forward to the day when there will be no more subtlety, when they will have no choice but to be monsters. Really, neither of them wants to cross that borderline. It will be a kind of death. It's a fate they prefer to put off as long as possible. But this is something else.

A fair-haired woman's face looks back at her, naked and weary: a little pale, a few fine lines, a few faint broken veins in the cheeks. There's nothing unusual about this reflection. It's neither old nor very young, neither beautiful nor ugly: there's certainly no mark of immortal evil. Oh, God, she whispers — the redeemed, the newly mortal. *What's happened to me?* She turns her face, she turns her face. It's no use. Wherever she looks, every light is coming, pure and clear, straight from the north.