A V BRUCE

Peace of My Mind

My mother died in this room four years ago. Now at last I feel at peace here. Through the last long vacation, I sat by the window, writing about her final illness. I had dreaded doing so; some bodily mechanism blocked me from living again through the nights when I lay in bed screaming silently, knowing that there was nothing I could do to turn the clock back. Now that I have imposed an order on those days, I feel a repose that I thought I had lost for good.

In the story of a life, emotional truth is more important than a string of facts. My mother was a brave woman who brushed up against the historic events of the twentieth century. Enough has been said about the events; what I wanted to tell was how she responded to them. Her life was intertwined with mine, especially towards the end, but I have written as little as possible of my own affairs. I hope that I have been fair to my mother. Now that I have told her story, I have found again the peace that I need to write fiction.

I lived with my mother throughout my adult life. People found that strange, I know, but it seemed silly for us both to be in the same town and paying for two separate places to live. We were, after all, the only family each other had—in Britain, that is. Before the Berlin Wall fell, no one imagined that we would ever be able to visit East Germany. There was no way my mother would have been given a visa, after she had fled the country. We went over in 1990, of course. My grandmother was eighty by then. She lived in the smallest of flats on the outskirts of Dresden, under the roof on the fourth floor

of a tenement house. The windows were tiny and in every room the ceilings slanted up from walls one foot high. My chief memory of the visit was of feeling hemmed in by the dark beams that lowered over every conversation.

I was three when we left East Germany, squashed into a car which my father drove over the border in Worbis and on to Cologne. It was the last enterprising thing he did for his family. Having extracted us from our homeland before the so-called anti-fascist protection wall was built to keep us in, he felt the need for rest and appreciation rather than for hard graft. My mother had only a certain modicum of appreciation to hand out to him and by the time I was five she had booted him out. The result is that I know very little of my father. I remember his telling me stories, and drawing pictures to go with them, and I remember his taking me to the Cologne Zoo, where a monkey snatched his hat and made off with it up the rocky outcrops in the ape enclosure. I believe the monkey wanted to exchange the hat for food, but my father refused to play along with it, for I had already made him feed our sandwiches to the elephants. I can't remember how he retrieved his hat, but I expect he must have, for we had little spare money and in those days a hat was something you needed if you were going to be taken seriously. Apart from that memory, what I know about my father is connected with the less attractive sides of my own character, for after he had gone, whenever I was stubborn, dilatory or wilfully silent, I would be told that I was just like him. It seemed disloyal to my mother to attempt to get in touch with him, especially as he seemed so very content not to get in touch with me, and I have never done so. Perhaps I should. In any case, when my mother was offered a job teaching German at the University Language Centre in Oxford, she took me to live there and attend the Dragon School, and that is why I have ended up as a writer who writes in English.

My mother and I got on well, and once I had secured a Fellowship at Oriel, and bought a little house in Mount Street, Jericho, not a mile away from where my mother was working in the Language Centre, there seemed no reason why we should not move in to it together. We rubbed along in as good as perfect harmony for more than fifteen years. My mother's health was unstable, but she enjoyed being able

to cycle around Oxford and escape to Port Meadow from the end of our road. I had good students to teach and the short Oxford terms left me ample space to write. With perfect tact, my mother created the conditions necessary for my creative work. In the vacations, we would breakfast together early; I would be at my desk by nine and from that hour until lunchtime I was guaranteed creative solitude. If the phone rang or a tradesman called my mother told them that I was working. My friends understood this, and never rang me in the morning; if anyone protested, I pointed out to them that, had I worked in an office, I should have been absent in the daytime anyway. It can be difficult for some people to understand the creative life as work. My mother ran the household, making sure that we always had enough of the sort of coffee I like—though of course I would take the car out to shop at the weekends. I was productive and, in a modest way, successful. Faber published my first novel, *Confused Words,* before I was thirty, and *Living Pillars* followed two years later. It was when I was signing books at a promotional event for my third novel, *Grains,* in the Holywell Music Room in the year 2000, that I met Claudia.

I noticed her in the queue for my table. Her physical type was the one I have always found most attractive. She was thinner than would seem possible for anyone with a normal appetite and had the olive skin and fine bones which native British women never have. She wore very simple clothes—a white shirt over pale jeans—and I remember noticing her warm perfume as she approached my table. I wrote on the flyleaf of her copy of *Grains,* and then she passed me a piece of manuscript paper.

"You mentioned in the Afterword to *Living Pillars,*" she said, "that you had been unable to trace the melody of the Italian folksong. '*Oddio, devo dormire*'. I have found it for you."

I looked down at the paper on which she had written single melodic lines on alternate staves, interspersed with the words to the little goatherd's song. As I mentioned in the Afterword, the song which Marsilio sings as he watches Serefina scale a rockface after a pair of ibexes in *Living Pillars* is one which a peasant sang to me one evening in the Dolomites. I had jotted down the words but the tune escaped me. The manuscript which Claudia handed me was

very slightly crumpled at the edges but the script, in black ink, was delicate and clear. I cannot read music and I looked from the vivid brown eyes down at the desk and back up again, and said, "Oddio..." Then Claudia began to sing.

"Oddio, devo dormire
nient'altro aiutera..."

Her voice was deep and throaty and the needle on the rev counter of my heart spun right up into the danger zone. I took back her copy of *Grains,* which I had just signed, opened it at the flyleaf and wrote beneath my signature, "Thank you VERY much for 'Oddio'!"

That was how I met Claudia and when she wrote to me at Oriel afterwards I was very much aware who she was. It was a short step from there to a walk around the Christ Church Meadow one Sunday afternoon. Claudia held a Rhodes Scholarship to St Antony's and was working for her Master's in modern history, studying the British Labour Party in the post-war years. She talked about her work with the intense seriousness which makes young Germans such a joy to teach; to my great delight she said not one word about my books beyond what she had already written in her first note to me, that they had made her think to herself, 'yes, that's right'. She wanted to teach in schools, she told me—to put her knowledge to some practical use.

I am ashamed to admit that I didn't tell my mother whom I was meeting, that first Sunday. Nor did I confess as time went on that I was spending my evenings doing anything other than attending dinner at High Table in Oriel. I would pick Claudia up from the History Faculty Library in the afternoons after my tutorials were finished and we would wander through the Parks to her bedsit in Park Town, a tiny, high-ceilinged room into which came the afternoon sun, filtered through an ancient lime tree. That Hilary Term, we made love on Claudia's orange metal-framed bed in a rippling green shade to the cool scent of budding leaves. Claudia would make me supper afterwards—always salads, with seeds and bits of tropical fruit in them, the sort that you can only make if you study a recipe book before you go shopping—and tell me her thoughts about the British Labour Party, the class system in England and the general level of education of her fellow postgrads. She was not impressed by

the average student's knowledge of recent history and, in all honesty, I could not disagree, though I tried to help her see how the British tendency to play stupid was part of their national irony. I loved Claudia's seriousness and I found it more refreshing than I dared tell her that she was not engaged in writing a novel.

I feel sometimes as if everyone I know is writing a novel. When pushed to explain why I write, I offer up the usual bromides about how I can do nothing else, that the only thing worse than writing is not writing, etc., but I would never claim that this applied to the general run of humanity. Far too many people seem to think that it holds true for them too. The flip side of doing an interview with a national paper is that you provide thousands of people who can't write with statements about writing to adopt as their own.

When term ended and dinner at High Table was no longer a plausible proposition, I realised that I had to let my mother know what was going on. So Claudia came for tea with us in Mount Street. She was deferential to my mother and my mother reacted by being prickly. It reminded me of the time when I had just started secondary school, when we brought our puppy home and introduced him to the cat in residence. I had told Claudia that my mother had met Brecht several times in her teens, and one of the first things she said was, "Please tell me about Brecht, Frau Sassnitz," and my mother said, "What do you want to know?" as if she hadn't understood that this was a polite gambit. By the end of the afternoon, however, she was telling Claudia about her memories of the Berlin Ensemble and the State Theatre in Dresden and they had shared tales of Munster University, to which Claudia was still attached. And to my relief, after Claudia left, my mother said, "What a nice girl."

They greeted each other in German that day but they spoke in English for, although I understand the language well, my own German limps and it embarrasses my mother to hear me talk it. Claudia continued to visit, and sometimes I would leave her alone with my mother, so that they could get to know each other better, but they never progressed beyond formal talk, even though my mother asked Claudia to call her 'Birgit' and to say 'Du' to her.

"It is unnatural that she is always polite," she said to me. "I can't tell if she is honest."

"I have never met a more honest person than Claudia," I said. "She shows you natural deference, Mutti."

"I wish the girl had more vices. She said she has never even smoked. Imagine that!"

My mother was seldom without a cigarette. She even did the dishes between courses of a dinner party because that gave her the chance to smoke while she washed up. For as long as I can remember, she had a guttural cough that seemed far too resonant for her tiny frame, and she admitted that smoking was bad for her but she used to say that there was no point in living at all if you didn't enjoy your life. My friend Jim Kazes, who painted her, arranged her in an armchair with a cigarette and a dry Martini.

"There are two generations between Claudia and me," my mother said. "The future belongs to her, my mouse. Hers is a different world. She is only just carving out her place in it. You, however, have found your niche. You are building up a corpus of work for posterity."

"You may be right, Mutti," I said, "but I do like Claudia very much."

"I am aware of that," my mother said.

It is difficult, looking back, to separate out the strands of what was going on. At the same time as I was getting to know Claudia better, my mother went down with her final illness. It all started one Saturday afternoon at the end of Trinity Term, when Claudia and I had arranged to go for a walk in Port Meadow. We had a circuit that we often completed, which took just over an hour, and we told my mother that we would probably be back for afternoon tea but that she was not to wait for us. It was idyllic on the Meadow, with the Chilterns a soft purple on the horizon, and drifting clouds crossing the hot sun transforming a golden, shadowy world for minutes at a time into a blue-green-toned one. A breeze from the river rippled the grasses heavy with the scent of hot river mud, and Claudia said that she would like to see the Binsey poplars. She had recently discovered Hopkins' poem about them, and true to form, she could recite the thing, so of course we went on to Binsey. Then, finding ourselves so near to The Trout, we treated ourselves to a drink there. We sat on a bench, leaning against the wall of the pub in the

sun, staring at the water and listening to the ducks. I massaged the muscles in my thighs and was pondering some remark about how odd it was that the English should drink their ale warm, when all at once Claudia started to confide in me.

She had never felt herself understood in the way I seemed to understand her, she said. She trusted me and she wanted me to know about her inmost thoughts. It was her secret wish to write. This was the very last thing I had hoped to hear her say. As is my habit when I don't know how to respond to someone, I said nothing but assumed a pensive expression and put my arm around her. Taking this, presumably, as encouragement, Claudia continued with her list of things she had never told anyone: her stormy relationship with her father; her feelings of loneliness at school; the disappointing sex she had experienced with her first boyfriend. She talked on and on, and what with the drone of her voice, the sun, the ale and the comfortable tiredness from our walk, I found myself nodding off. It was rude of me, but I'd been working hard all week, and listening to Claudia was more like being read to than engaging in a conversation. However, the next thing I knew, I had a hysterical woman on my hands. Was I not able to pay Claudia that ounce of respect, to pay attention when she told me the most intimate details of her life? Had I any idea what an important relationship this was for her, how deeply committed she felt to me? Was she just a—a good 'lay' for me? I sensed how many barriers she had to cross, to come out with a word like that. After she had said it, she stared at me, aghast at herself, and then she grabbed her handbag and set off down the path towards the kissing gate into the Meadow.

I never know what to say when women get themselves into that state. I don't know if all women do it or if it has just happened to be my misfortune to get mixed up with women who have a streak of madness in them. A friend told me when we were students, "If a woman storms off telling you she never wants to see you again, that is code for 'Please come after me'." Following a screaming woman was the very last thing I wanted to do on a hot Saturday afternoon. However, I could see Claudia setting a good pace on the riverbank, and I remembered that she had left her briefcase in our house, and that if I didn't catch up with her, she would get to Mount Street

before I did, and my mother would open the door to her on her own. And then there would be all hell to pay. So I set off after her. She played the injured child for at least two thirds of the way, and then I presume she began to visualise the encounter with my mother and became silent instead.

But it was irrelevant what state she was in because we returned to the house two hours later than I had said so that my mother seized the microphone on her own account. She was lying on her bed, and she was sobbing, and she was furious with us.

"I didn't know what had happened to you. I tried to call your mobile but it just rang in the living room and I didn't know Claudia's number. I was on the point of calling the police; I have been listening to the local news to see if there was an accident."

Claudia watched in silence from the doorway as I rushed to my mother. She was breathing fast, and her cheeks and throat were flushed; the dip at the top of her breastbone had turned a dull red from where she had pushed down on it with her thumb as she clutched at her T-shirt.

"You are in a terrible state," I said.

"I can't help it. It goes right back to when you were small and I was responsible for you on my own and you were always running off. I remember the war, you know, when bad things really did happen to children."

My mother went straight to bed and stayed there for the evening; Claudia and I went into the kitchen and she set about fixing me supper. My head was in turmoil. I felt guilty about upsetting my mother, angry with her for making a scene and furious with myself for giving her the opportunity. I also dreaded in the pit of my stomach the moment when Claudia would address the tantrum she had earlier. She chopped and fried and stirred in silence, looking at me occasionally and looking away again. I didn't feel like talking, so I didn't talk even though I knew that this was a red rag to a woman. When I said to Claudia at the end of the meal that I thought I wanted to be by myself, she apologised for her outburst, and I hugged her. The hug became one of those lingering ones but I knew that I needed a peaceful evening and I said again that it was best if she went, and that I would call her.

By nightfall, my mother was running a fever, and at two in the morning she fell in the corridor on her way back from the loo. The bookcase she clutched at when she fell tipped over and landed on her leg, breaking it in a complicated way so that the doctors at the hospital had to set it using a structure like a towel rail from which pins were screwed into the bone at three-inch intervals. After they had done this, they checked over the rest of her and told her that her lungs were riddled with cancer and that the disease was spreading fast. When she was sent home, the nurses who visited came from the Hospice.

It was several days before I let Claudia know what had happened. This was a tactical mistake for of course, not knowing about my mother, she assumed that my silence was in reaction to her behaviour. When she heard what had happened, she put her feelings to one side but as I found out later, they were in cold storage and I had not heard the last of them. She was booked up to teach on a summer school in Berkeley, California, and I encouraged her to go. I was not unhappy that she was out of the way when my mother needed me.

My mother made a pretty good job of being a brave invalid. For much of the time she claimed to be proud that her liver was still in excellent condition thanks to all the dry martinis. There were moments, though, when everything became too much for her—the pain, the ignominy of having a syringe driver strapped to her to control it, the way the good-hearted hospice nurses spoke to her as if she were a child—and she wept like an infant. I put my arms around her to comfort her, but I felt distant as if I were acting out instructions.

She was worried about what would happen to me when she was no longer there.

"Claudia is very young," she said to me one evening. "She doesn't know yet what she wants. I do wonder if she will be a good support for you. I can't bear to think of you having your life disrupted by someone else's agenda."

I defended Claudia, but I hated to hear my mother looking into a future which I could not look into myself. I tried to stop her talking like this but she said, "You don't realise how valuable life is, my mouse. You think you do, but you don't. Don't waste your one chance."

She repeated those last two words, 'one chance', a day or so later, squeezing my hand in hers but soon my opinionated mother stopped speaking. She just watched me intensely. The doctor arranged for her to have an oxygen machine at her bedside and the hospice nurses began to stay the night. The towel rail was still pinned to her leg, which created a peculiar silhouette with the bedclothes, like an aqueduct over a motorway. I was not there when she took her last breath but the nurse told me it was peaceful.

The day after my mother died, I asked Claudia on the telephone if she would marry me and she said 'yes'. She had three weeks of her Berkeley course still to run but she said nothing about coming home early. It was not until I asked her directly if she could change her plans and return to Oxford that she agreed to talk to the management about finding a substitute.

Once Claudia was there in the house with me, I found to my horror that she wanted to be with me all the time. I had never wished so strongly to hold onto my routine but Claudia disrupted it completely, talking to me until late in the evenings, comforting me when I wept at night and then sleeping late in the mornings so that I could not start work at my usual time.

I told her, when she challenged my need for a routine, that this alone linked me to normality. I had made over the guest room to her use but she said that, having abandoned her work for the summer, she was in no mood for reading so she spent the mornings playing the piano in the room next to my study. She made some attempt to run the house but everything she did jarred: she bought Columbian coffee instead of Viennese, she fed me salads, when I craved my mother's salted potato quarters, and she left my shirts to dry before she ironed them so that the creases did not come out properly. I was not used to having to explain my wishes and the first weeks of bereavement were the worst time to learn to do so tactfully. Rather than complain, I chose to keep silent. One evening the inevitable happened. I had just told Claudia that I would make myself up a bed on the sofa to sleep in solitude.

"I threw in my work to come over for you," Claudia shouted, "but now you just want to be by yourself. You don't want me here. I can't do anything right."

"I can't help it," I said. "My mother just died. The whole world feels unreal to me."

"Well, let's at least cope together. You asked me to marry you. That's changed my world too. We need to talk."

"Well, go on then, talk," I said. "You want to talk? Talk. Go on. Talk."

Without saying a word, Claudia snatched up the Pleiade Apollinaire that she had given me as an engagement present and stormed out of the room. She left with her suitcase within the hour. It soon became clear that we were no longer engaged to be married. I sent her a cheque for £200 to cover some of the fee she lost from Berkeley, but she never cashed it. A year later, she found employment in an American university and I hear occasionally from friends about her academic success. I am happy for her.

I conceived the project of writing a biography of my mother when she first became ill. Writing it was a cathartic process. Documents from her childhood were hard to find but she had taken photographs with her when she left the GDR and through the Technical University in Dresden I was able to find people who had known her and my father. Her English friends were glad to help me.

There seemed no point in mentioning Claudia in the biography. She had played a minor part in my mother's life and now that she played no part in my own, I did not want to draw her to the attention of the media. It was not necessary to stretch the truth. I made no mention of my mother's Last Words—we don't all say witty things in our last moments after all, and I am sure many of the famous quotes are apocryphal—and in the Epilogue I wrote honestly of how alone I felt in my bereavement.

I have found my way back into my routine now. I am making good progress with my new novel, which I am calling *Nature is a Temple.* The biography of my mother has been well reviewed and I hear that it was even praised in the *New Yorker.* My agent sent me an electronic copy of that review but I went out this morning to buy the print edition as I prefer to keep a file of hard copy reviews, at least if they are favourable. It was when I was reading the journal over lunch that I was struck by the title of the short story—*Peace of*

My Mind—and noticed Claudia's name beside it. I turned to page 74 and started to read.

'My mother died in this room four years ago. Now at last I feel at peace here.'