

KATHERINE HAYNES

Dreams of Impossible Cowslips

“So,” said Marcus Summervale, “what do you think?”
Ivy Donovan was about to open her mouth and tell him that she found the title of the book he was working on ‘pretentious’, but then thought better of it and said, “It’s interesting. Grabs the attention.”

“Yes, that’s what I was going for. Something like *Snow Falling on Cedars* or *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. A title which makes you *think*; a Booker title.”

“How far have you got?” asked Ivy.

“I’ve sketched out the first five chapters and written the first two. I’ll read them to you, if you like.”

“Of course,” murmured Ivy. “I’d love to hear them.”

She and Marcus had been dating for four months and she was still a little in awe of him; a man who was a writer. Before they had started going out she hadn’t read any of his books. Having been presented with a signed copy of his short stories on their second date, however, she had felt herself drawn into his imaginary world. Alas, it wasn’t a world she could always make sense of. She appreciated that he must be very clever, but struggled to make sense of his longer sentences, stopping every once in a while to look up a word she wasn’t familiar with.

Marcus wasn’t at all her kind of writer. Ivy described his work as ‘cerebral’ because she didn’t understand it. If he asked her what she thought, she would praise the dreamlike quality of his prose.

She had come to realise that she found his work incomprehensible.

Still in love with him, however, she wouldn't have hurt his feelings for the world by telling him so. She was beginning to feel afraid that if he found out, discovered she was a fraud, he would admire her less, and felt the time was not long off before he would declare her boring. It would be awful if he came to resent their relationship, if he thought her stupid.

"I've been working with a mask," he told her, having come to the end of his reading.

"Working with what?" she said, thinking she might have misheard him.

"A mask," said Marcus. "When I put it on, it makes me feel different; free. It gives me the liberty to write what I want, not to edit myself, to rein myself in. With my other books, I've had a kind of censor in my head, telling me not to use an offensive word, or an incident which might upset a friend if they recognised themselves in one of my characters. Now I don't have to worry about all that. It's like having thrown open the door of a prison."

Ivy hid a smile at his exaggerated language. She couldn't tell the difference between his 'new' writing and his 'old'. On the title page of his manuscript, he had crossed out his name and written Maskus instead.

Away from his study, Marcus was attentive and thoughtful. He made a fuss of Ivy, gave her little presents, made her laugh. She had no complaints about his performance in the bedroom; it was just when he became a 'writer' that she felt a gulf opening between them.

Marcus sent his early chapters to his agent and life suddenly became very busy. While Marcus was writing, Ivy answered the phone, replied to email, sent texts. She all but became his secretary.

There was a lunch at which she finally met his agent, Felicity Hubbard. While Marcus was at the bar getting in a round of drinks, Felicity, who was a dark-haired woman in her forties—large-framed glasses perched on her rather long nose—leant forward and said, "You must look after him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You must nurse Marcus through this. Don't let him be worried about anything, bothered by bills, shopping, that sort of thing. This book is going to be a work of genius and he must be allowed to write

it. Nothing must upset or distract him.”

If she had ever been going to confess that she didn't understand Marcus, that it might be best if they broke up and he found himself a new love, now would have been the moment. Ivy could see herself disappearing. Nobody would be interested in her for herself. She would always be Marcus's girlfriend or fiancée or wife. Well, she could live with that, couldn't she? It wouldn't be so bad to bathe in his reflected glory; be the moon to his sun.

Although well aware that she wasn't right for him, that the two of them weren't well suited, she decided to go along with Felicity's plans. Perhaps she and Marcus would get married once the book was published. After that would come children and she would be involved with them and have less to do with her husband's work. He would be able to afford to employ a proper secretary then.

At night, though, she lay awake after Marcus was asleep and worried about what the future might bring. Was it something lacking in herself which made her incapable of appreciating his work? Sensing that he was on the verge of becoming rich and famous, Ivy determined not to mention her doubts and allowed herself to be swept along in his wake.

Once or twice, she had crept to the door of his study and opened it a little way to watch him at work. The room was an attractive one, with French windows opening onto the garden and Ivy wished she could have made it into a kind of drawing room or sitting room for herself. She could imagine having friends in here for coffee in the morning or tea in the afternoon. She would serve dainty cakes from bone china, gilt-edged plates. On dark, dull afternoons this would be the ideal spot to curl up with a book. Not one of those written by Marcus, she hastily reminded herself.

Marcus sat at a small table placed against the wall. The table had spindly legs and was only large enough to hold his laptop. The mask he wore was made of shiny, golden plastic and covered the upper part of his face. It was shaped like half a sun with rays emerging from its semicircle. “Is it the sun setting or the sun rising, do you think?” he had asked Ivy, his tone light and mocking. “It's the sun rising, of course,” she had said, knowing that this was what he wanted to hear; that his star was in the ascendant. A black and white photograph

of 'Maskus' in his study taken by one of the Sunday newspapers made the mask look as if it were made of metal; bronze, ancient, something far more worthy of a serious writer.

She was in the background, of course, when the magazines sent people to conduct interviews. One very young, haughty girl treated her like a servant, as if she were there just to make the tea and hand round the biscuits. Ivy felt a small surge of joy when Marcus slipped his arm about her and said, "Ivy is my muse. I couldn't have done this without her." The girl, who had been hanging on his every word until this moment—eager and excited—scowled, clearly jealous.

"He's mine," thought Ivy. "I'm lucky to have him, to be with him."

She began to dream of a time in which they became a golden couple; he the esteemed and celebrated novelist; she the quiet, beautiful, slightly mysterious wife, who was his inspiration.

Wife. Marcus hadn't yet asked her to marry him, but she was sure he would. Once the book had burst upon the world to win every literary prize, Marcus would take her out to a secluded little dinner—just the two of them—and she would leave the restaurant with an engagement ring on her finger. In her mind's eye she saw a golden gem; a tiger's-eye, perhaps, or a yellow topaz.

Ivy began to feel a little superior to her friends and neighbours, even to members of her family. At work, she began to feel distant from her colleagues. This was her old life, which was soon to be over. The large department store in which she stood behind a counter three days a week and smiled, was polite to people she had never met before and would never see again, where she took money, processed card payments and wrapped exquisite little gifts in boxes tied with cream-coloured ribbon would know her no more. Her future lay in other shops, where the books of Marcus Summervale would line the shelves, be piled upon tables and displayed in windows. She saw a future in which she would accompany him to libraries and schools where he would read his work to a rapt audience.

Again she wondered if they would have children of their own. Brilliant offspring to follow in their father's footsteps. Ivy made more of an effort to be attractive to Marcus. She had her hair cut in a flattering style, paid attention to her nails and make-up, tried to eat well, to exercise and to update her wardrobe.

At last, the book was done. *Dreams of Impossible Cowslips* was published. Marcus appeared on television, looking nervous and boyish. Ivy sat on the edge of the sofa, eyes glued to the screen as he was being interviewed, going through an agony of shyness on his behalf. Unconsciously, she twisted the material of her skirt between her hands and bit her lip. She was glad when the segment of the programme featuring Marcus finished. Radio interviews were less stressful.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Marcus had said, handing her a copy of the book. Indeed, it was handsomely produced, with an embossed cover, shining with gold-edged cowslips.

“Oh, Marcus, you must be so proud!”

Now would come the dreaded time when she would actually have to read the book, try to make sense of it, tell Marcus what she thought of it.

“Look!” he said, turning the leaves. Ivy saw her name on a page. He had dedicated the book to her.

“Darling,” she said, “darling.”

Overwhelmed, she kissed him. It was easier than putting her feelings into words.

The book was not a success. Despite all the hype and the promising reviews *Dreams of Impossible Cowslips* didn’t sell. Ivy was dismayed that its publication seemed to have made people realise there were earlier books by Marcus Summervale. She saw volumes of his work in nearly every charity shop. *Dreams of Impossible Cowslips* was remaindered. Stacks of copies gathered dust in the discount shops. No one Ivy knew said they had read it.

She herself had struggled through long, meandering paragraphs, baffled by why the heroine loved the hero, puzzled as to why the field they met in never seemed to change. Was it a ghost? Were they ghosts? Was the whole thing some dream of one of the characters?

Ivy learned the odd little phrase here and there, so she could quote Marcus’s own words to him, but the book’s poor reception caused him to take both her hands in his and say, “Please, darling, don’t.”

All the hopes and plans Ivy had harboured came to nothing. She

continued to smile brightly at customers, to eat lunch in the staff canteen, to catch the train home. Days when she wasn't working and weekends were spent at the house Marcus had been left by his late father.

"It's disappointing, I know, but people will come round in time. They'll realise it's good—"

"Good! I wanted it to be more than good. I wanted it to be... immortal."

It was inevitable that Marcus should feel low following the reaction to what he had hoped would prove to be his masterpiece, but Ivy was determined to try and cheer him up, to get him writing again.

"What are you going to do next?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'll never write another word."

"Marcus, don't be silly. You're a writer. It doesn't matter about publishers and reviewers and all that. It's the writing itself that matters. That's what you've always told me. *Dreams of Impossible Cowslips* may be unappreciated, but it'll become a classic, you'll be famous—"

"I want to be famous now!"

There. He had said it. For all his fine words about the writing's being the only thing that mattered, for all his posing and posturing, wearing the mask, what it really boiled down to was that he wanted celebrity.

"Did you hope to be rich, too?" said Ivy coldly.

Marcus laughed, somewhat bitterly.

"Well, it would have been nice to move away from this dump!"

His beautiful house! Was that how he really thought of it? Ivy had come to love this place. How little they understood one another, after all.

"Don't be sad, darling. Begin another book. Start it tomorrow morning."

"I can't!"

"Of course you can. I have faith in you."

Marcus looked at her with a strange expression on his face and Ivy seemed to shrivel up inside, as if he had seen through her lie. After all, she couldn't even begin to comprehend what his work was

about. She had just been along for the ride, using him as her meal ticket.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said, “after all, I’ve nobody to disturb me. No visitors, no phone calls. It’s all gone very quiet lately, hasn’t it?”

Ivy licked her lips.

“Yes, just for the moment. Your next book will do well. I know it will. All the interviews will start again. It’ll all come back. Just you wait and see.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Marcus again.

He held her gently, kissed her. Kissed her on the mouth and on the hair.

That had been on a Saturday night. Ivy had climbed into bed with him, clung to him like her namesake, then, drowsy after wine and lovemaking, she had fallen asleep.

Ivy woke to find herself alone. The room was bright and she realised it must be well into the morning.

“Marcus?”

Ivy got up, used the bathroom, padded downstairs in her bare feet. Marcus wasn’t in the kitchen and there was no smell of coffee brewing. Yawning, she went from room to room. The door of the study was open and papers moved in a draught from the French windows, which stood open to the garden. Ivy walked out over steps and flagstones and dew-spangled grass to find Marcus.

The sun-shaped mask lay discarded on the path. Marcus had hanged himself from a tree.

Although he hadn’t asked her to marry him and she hadn’t been his wife, Marcus left everything to Ivy and everybody treated her as his widow.

On the day of the funeral, she winced when someone told her how well she looked in black. She was aware of getting out of the car, of having someone steer her gently by the elbow as she made her way through the churchyard.

It was a horrible place. The churchyard seemed to stretch for miles. It was square and flat, with no levels and very few big, elaborate

tombs. Gravestones stood in row upon row in the bleak landscape, grey beneath grey sky. The only flowers were the ones standing in vases or urns; the only trees were sparse and distant. Ivy would have hated to be buried here.

The church was cold and Ivy shivered in her good coat. She knelt and stood and sat as she was directed to, sang the hymns. Had Marcus been religious? She had no faith herself and they had never spoken about God or what they believed in. “His sun has set, anyway,” Ivy thought to herself, wondering what had become of the mask. Maskus. Mask us. Didn’t we *all* wear masks? Hadn’t she been playing at being the writer’s muse? She wondered idly how much money Marcus had left her. Would she be able to give up her part-time job? At least she could leave the flat she rented and move into his house. Some good had come of his death, after all. She was still young; other lovers might come into her life.

She felt nothing as Marcus’s coffin glided away and a red curtain slid across, signifying that it was gone. Where would he have wanted his ashes to be scattered? Again, it was something they had never discussed.

It was almost a relief when the service was over. Ivy felt a little lighter as she stood, could scarcely understand why some of the congregation were crying softly.

Felicity approached her and said in a stage whisper, “You will be his literary executor. We must see if there are any stories or other manuscripts which haven’t been published. You’ll need to collect his letters, or diaries he may have kept.”

“Why?” said Ivy. “What’s the point?”

“It sounds harsh, heartless, but there’s nothing like death—suicide in particular—to boost an artist’s sales. Take it from me, there will be tremendous interest in Marcus. He’ll be famous. You’ll make a lot of money.”

Ivy backed away from her.

“Oh,” said Felicity, “I know you don’t want to hear this now, but once you’ve stopped grieving you’ll see that this is good business sense. Marcus wanted fame, didn’t he? You can do that for him, keep his name alive, keep his memory green, further his career, albeit posthumously.”

“Shut up!” hissed Ivy. “Just shut up!”

She turned away from the other woman, shocked to realise that Felicity was right and that she, Ivy, would do all she could to secure her future. She would make as much money out of Marcus as possible. She was excited at the idea and appalled to find herself so materialistic, so very, very wicked.

They emerged from the church, blinking as they left the porch. Ivy couldn't understand why there was a little clutch of people blocking her path, pointing and exclaiming.

“Excuse me,” she said and they parted to make way for her.

The grass which had been growing scantily around the gravestones, and in which not so much as a daisy had been visible, was now studded and smothered with cowslips.

“It's impossible,” gasped Ivy, “impossible!”

She and the others looked at one another in wonder. At some future date, they would come up with a logical explanation for this ‘freak of nature’ but just at that moment they felt the touch of the uncanny.

As she walked back to the waiting limousine, Ivy could see yellow flowers to the left and the right of her, crowding along the borders of the pathway, packed tightly around the memorials to the dead, and she felt she was destined to see them in her mind's eye for the rest of her life, that her dreams would be haunted always by visions of impossible cowslips.