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CREATURES



CLARE



CHAMBERS



AUTHOR OF *SMALL PLEASURES*

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UNCORRECTED E-PROOF—NOT FOR SALE

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SHY CREATURES

a novel

Clare Chambers



MARINER BOOKS

New York Boston

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To Peter

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[Chapter 1](#)

1964

In all failed relationships there is a point that passes unnoticed at the time, which can later be identified as the beginning of the decline. For Helen it was the weekend that the Hidden Man came to Westbury Park.

On Friday, she had been preparing the art therapy room for her favourite group of the week—Male Alcoholics—when Gil put his head around the door. Seeing that she was alone, he came in and sat on the corner of her desk, watching as she laid out paper, pencils, charcoal, and paints. A semicircle of easels was arranged around a still life—a wicker chair, draped in velvet cloth beside a table on which sat a vase of tulips, a milk jug and a bowl of eggs. The doors to the two small side rooms, used by patients who preferred to work in privacy, were half open and he sent a glance of enquiry in their direction, which Helen answered with a reassuring shake of the head before he spoke.

“Kath is going down to Deal for the weekend with the children.”

“Really?” There had been false alarms of this nature before and Helen had learnt not to give in to optimism too far in advance.

He nodded. “Her god-daughter has just had a baby and she’s going down there tomorrow to . . . do whatever it is women do on these occasions.

So . . .”

He stared at her with that burning look that he turned quite unconsciously on women of all ages, and his patients, both male and female. Helen had seen this phenomenon at work, but she liked to imagine that it contained a little extra intensity when it was directed at her.

“You could stay at mine?” she ventured. Even though they had been lovers for three years and he had found her a suitable flat and contributed to her rent with just this kind of opportunity in mind, it had been possible no more than half a dozen times.

“If you’ll have me.”

“Well, I suppose. If you don’t make a nuisance of yourself.”

This conversation took place across the width of the room and Helen had continued all the while to sort out materials for the forthcoming class.

No one walking in on the scene would have suspected anything unprofessional in their manner. In the early days of their relationship, when passion made them more reckless, the art therapy studio and its side rooms were often used for assignations. Now, they were more careful, or perhaps less passionate. None of their colleagues, from the medical superintendent to the ward orderlies, had any inkling of the affair and if Helen had ever blushed or smiled more than somewhat in his presence, well, so did everyone else favoured by the full beam of Gil’s attention.

“I’ll be over after lunch tomorrow, then. Kath will have the car, so I suppose I’ll have to walk.”

He was thinking aloud, not fishing for a lift. Helen had no car—just a second-hand scooter, on which she rode the four miles from her flat in South Croydon to Westbury Park each day.

“Good. I’ll cook something nice, then. You’d better go. My men will be here in a minute.”

Gil nodded, raking his hand through his thick hair, which was mostly dark but streaked here and there with grey. By some sorcery of nature or grooming, it was always the same untidy length, just below the collar, but never seemed to grow longer or have been cut suddenly shorter.

“I love you,” he said and was gone, his footsteps echoing down the long corridor.

Helen tuned the radio to the Third Programme. A background of classical music, at a volume to soothe rather than stir, had proved to be the most conducive to an atmosphere of calm and concentration.

The room, thanks to her little touches, was the pleasantest in the entire hospital. The colourful mobiles, stirring gently on their fishing-line frames, the prints by old masters on the wall alongside paintings by the residents of Westbury Park past and present, dried flowers in a vase, screen-printed cushions, and an atmosphere of harmony and order were all her doing.

She put on her overall, a white coat just like the doctors wore, but smeared with paint and charcoal dust. The alcoholics were arriving in a pack as they always did, to avoid confronting art alone. They were quite talentless with pencil or paint and had originally signed up, Helen suspected, in the hope of

nudes. The still life with milk jug and eggs had been a disappointment, but better than falling back on the imagination, which was treacherous terrain indeed. The chief attraction of the class was as a respite from the hours of group therapy which, along with disulfiram, formed the body of their treatment. In the art room there was no requirement to reflect on their addiction or talk about the misfortunes that had brought them low. Instead, they cheerfully mocked each other's and their own efforts and were generous in their praise of anything more or less resembling its subject.

Helen's purpose, as had been made clear at her interview, was to provide them with materials and space and to encourage free expression, but not to teach or diagnose or psychoanalyse or trespass in any way on the work of the medically trained professionals, like Gil. Today, she was distracted from performing even this modest service by thoughts of the weekend ahead. She had failed to share with Gil the complication that was now casting a considerable shadow over their plans.

Three weeks ago, she had accepted an invitation to a family dinner on Saturday night from her brother, Clive, and his wife. The event was to celebrate their daughter's sixteenth birthday and had been in her diary and on her mind as something to look forward to. She was fond of her niece, Lorraine, who was gawky and lacking in confidence, and of Clive, too, up to a point. His wife, June, she just tolerated. Clive had even taken the unusual and thoughtful step of phoning her earlier in the week to ask if she would like their parents to pick her up on their way. She had refused the lift

—her father was an erratic driver with a furious temper behind the wheel, and away from it—but confirmed her attendance. Now, she would have to pull out. It was always the way: Gil's availability could never be counted on until the very last minute; hers was simply assumed. Only sickness would suffice as an excuse at such late notice and it would have to be something significant to justify cancellation.

In contemplating the deception that would soon be necessary, Helen started to feel the intestinal cramping and queasiness that often accompanied the contemplation of her moral failings. By the time she came

to make the fateful call, it might very well not be a lie at all. The other possibility, that she should honour her original commitment and forgo the weekend with Gil, did not even occur to her.

Roland, one of the more diligent members of the group, beckoned her over, rousing her from her brooding. He had started his sketch without considering the layout of the page. Although the vase, jug and bowl were arranged in a cluster on the table, on paper the same elements were spread out in a straight line, evenly spaced and untethered to any background. The eggs—tiny, flattened pebbles—floated freely above the two-dimensional bowl. It was like the work of a six-year-old, and yet this was a man who could operate a metal lathe in a workshop, fix every kind of motorcar engine, and bang out the chords of any tune you could sing on a pub piano.

“It doesn’t look anything like it,” he said, shaking his head. “What am I doing wrong?”

“You’re not doing anything wrong,” Helen said. “There’s no right or wrong about it.”

“But I want to get better or what’s the point?”

For a moment she wondered whether he was talking about his drawing or his addiction. If only he could be cured of the latter it hardly mattered whether he could draw tulips or milk jugs.

“If it’s the composition that you find difficult, perhaps you could focus on just one item.”

“Can I start again?”

“Of course,” said Helen, retrieving the sketch before he could crumple it into a ball. “Don’t destroy this one. We’ll put it in your folder.”

She was scrupulous and superstitious about preserving her patients’

work, keeping it long after they had been discharged. It was both respectful of their efforts and provided evidence of the value of the therapy. Her mentor at the hospital where she worked previously as a volunteer had been emphatic on this point. “You are not here to teach art and your patients are not here to produce art. They are here to get well. It is the *process* of painting or drawing or sculpting that can help with that. But you must still treat the outcome of that process with respect.”

It was an argument on this theme that had first brought her to Gil’s attention soon after her arrival at Westbury Park three years previously. Full of enthusiasm for her new role, she had begun by working long after her prescribed hours, cleaning brushes and palettes, sharpening pencils, wiping

tables, decorating the studio in readiness for the next day. One evening, returning a rinsed coffee mug to the small room in a distant wing of the hospital where staff could go to make hot drinks or play cards on their break, she walked in on three orderlies sitting together weaving a rug.

They had arrived early for their evening shift and were filling the last few precious minutes before they were due on the wards. They glanced up as Helen came in and seeing from her painting overall that she was not a doctor and needed no special deference, ignored her and carried on their conversation.

Rug-making was one of the popular occupational therapies for patients and for a moment Helen smiled at the notion of the staff choosing to relax in just this way. There was something touching in it that spoke of shared humanity. These elevated thoughts withered abruptly as Helen realised that what they were doing was not *making* a rug, but unmaking one, pulling out the strands of wool with metal hooks and tossing them into a bag at their feet.

“What *are* you doing?” she asked, failing to keep a note of astonishment from her voice.

They turned as one and the spokesperson of the three, a solidly built woman with tightly permed curls, said, “We’re just unpicking this blessed carpet, so they can do it all again tomorrow.”

The other two laughed, not maliciously, but it was still a jangling affront to Helen.

“Why on earth would you do that?” Helen asked. She had promised herself she would keep her head down as a new member of staff, fit in, make friends, and avoid conflict, and already she was on the edge of a quarrel.

“We haven’t got enough wool for them to keep making more and more rugs. And where would we put them all? Anyway, they don’t care.”

Helen didn’t need to ask who “they” were. “Who told you to do this?”

“We’ve always done it,” one of the other women said, with slightly less confidence. “We just haven’t got the wool.”

“Right.” Helen took a breath and composed herself. In the uncodified but nonetheless unchallengeable hierarchy of Westbury Park, ward orderlies were (just) below her and it would therefore be unconscionable to berate

them for doing no more than their job. She needed to go higher. “May I borrow this?” She indicated the bag of wool scraps. “I’ll return it.”

The three women nodded, humouring her. Helen could imagine the exchange of tutting and eye-rolling that would ensue as soon as she departed.

It so happened that Dr. Rudden’s office was the first that she came to as she stalked the corridors looking for somewhere to vent her frustration.

They had not been properly introduced at this point, although she had attended a staff meeting at which he was present, along with the medical superintendent, psychotherapists, social workers, nurses, and occupational and physical therapists. She had noticed him only to the extent that he was the most handsome man in the room, from a field offering no serious competition, but he had mostly kept his head down, writing or doodling on a pad.

She knocked firmly—there was no point in timidity now; she needed to keep things on the boil if she was to carry this through—and a voice said,

“Come in.”

He was sitting behind his desk, with his chair angled towards the tall windows, looking out onto the green lawns, where patients still wandered in the early evening sunshine. A cigarette smouldered in an overflowing ashtray, sending a column of smoke up to an already overcast ceiling. On the wall behind him was a print of Richard Dadd’s *Titania Sleeping*—a painting Helen knew well and would have remarked on, in other circumstances.

He swung his feet off the window ledge and stood up, raising his eyebrows in welcome. “Hello . . . ?”

“Helen Hansford.”

“Helen Hansford. The new art therapist. What can I do for you?” His voice was attractive, soothing, but she didn’t want to be soothed—yet.

“I’m in a bit of a rage, actually.” She held up the bag of wool. “I’ve just come across a group of orderlies unpicking a rug made by patients in OT so that they can do it all over again tomorrow. Were you aware of this?” She dropped the bag on an expanse of leather desktop undisturbed by paperwork of any kind.

He avoided the question, asking instead, “This offends you?”

“Yes. It offends me. It’s disrespectful to the patients; it belittles their efforts and it’s just poor practice.”

He nodded slowly. “But if it’s the process rather than the outcome that is therapeutic . . .”

“Even so, they should be able to see and enjoy the product of their work.”

With a motion of his hand, he invited her to sit down, but she shook her head. It was easier to remain indignant when standing.

“Perhaps if you think of it in the same light as doing a jigsaw or building a house of cards, where the satisfaction doesn’t come from the idea of creating something permanent—”

“It’s not the same at all!” She could feel her voice rising up the scale.

“No one expects those things to last. But rug-making is a craft and a rug is a useful thing. It would look very nice in the day room.”

He looked at her through narrowed eyes for a long moment, as though her words warranted deep and considered reflection. The pause grew intimidating and Helen was the first to crack.

“And they were taking it apart with such relish. It made me wonder who was mad and who was sane around here.”

“Well, that’s a very healthy attitude to hold,” he said. “Though we don’t use the word ‘mad’ any more. Not of the patients, anyway.” He seemed to be enjoying himself. “If I can’t persuade you to sit down, do you mind if I do? My back is playing up.”

“Please, go ahead.”

He resettled himself in his chair, without releasing her from his gaze.

“You’re quite right, of course. I agree with you.”

“In any case,” said Helen, who had not caught up with this surrender and didn’t want a valid point to go to waste, “has anyone bothered to ask the patients what they think?”

“You’re right. I agree with you,” he repeated. “What would you have me do? I suppose the problem is materials?”

“Yes. That’s what they said. I’m sure they were only trying to help,”

Helen conceded, disarmed now in spite of herself.

“Always money,” he sighed. “Well, leave it with me.”

“Thank you . . . Dr. Rudden.”