

Sweet Caress

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Sweet Caress

The Many Lives of
Amory Clay

William Boyd

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For Susan

Quelle que soit la durée de votre séjour sur cette petite planète, et quoi qu'il vous advienne, le plus important c'est que vous puissiez – de temps en temps – sentir la caresse exquise de la vie.

(However long your stay on this small planet lasts, and whatever happens during it, the most important thing is that – from time to time – you feel life's sweet caress.)

Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, *Avis de passage* (1957)



Amory Clay in 1928.



PROLOGUE

What drew me down there, I wonder, to the edge of the garden? I remember the summer light – the trees, the bushes, the grass luminously green, basted by the bland, benevolent late-afternoon sun. Was it the light? But there was the laughter, also, coming from where a group of people had gathered by the pond. Someone must have been horsing around making everyone laugh. The light and the laughter, then.

I was in the house, in my bedroom, bored, with the window open wide so I could hear the chatter of conversation from the guests and then the sudden arpeggio of delighted laughter came that made me slip off my bed and go to the window to see the gentlemen and ladies and the marquee and the trestle tables laid out with canapés and punchbowls. I was curious – why were they all making their way towards the pond? What was the source of this merriment? So I hurried downstairs to join them.

And then, halfway across the lawn, I turned and ran back to the house to fetch my camera. Why did I do that? I think I have an idea, now, all these years later. I wanted to capture that moment, that benign congregation in the garden on a warm summer evening in England; to capture it and imprison it forever. Somehow I sensed I could stop time's relentless motion and hold that scene, that split second – with the ladies and the gentlemen in their finery, as they laughed, careless and untroubled. I would catch them fast, eternally, thanks to the properties of my wonderful machine. In my hands I had the power to stop time, or so I fancied.



BOOK ONE: 1908–1927



I. GIRL WITH A CAMERA

THERE WAS A MISTAKE MADE on the day I was born, when I come to think of it. It doesn't seem important, now, but on 7 March 1908 – such a long time ago, it seems, threescore years and ten almost – it made my mother very cross. However, be that as it may, I was born and my father, sternly instructed by my mother, placed an announcement in *The Times*. I was their first child, so the world – the readers of the London *Times* – was duly informed. '7 March 1908, to Beverley and Wilfreda Clay, a son, Amory.'

Why did he say 'son'? To spite his wife, my mother? Or was it some perverse wish that I wasn't in fact a girl, that he didn't want to have a daughter? Was that why he tried to kill me later, I wonder . . . ? By the time I came across the parched yellow cutting hidden in a scrapbook, my father had been dead for decades. Too late to ask him. Another mistake.

Beverley Vernon Clay, my father – but no doubt best known to you and his few readers (most long disappeared) as B. V. Clay. A short-story writer of the early twentieth century – stories mainly of the supernatural sort – failed novelist and all-round man of letters. Born in 1878, died in 1944. This is what the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (third edition) has to say about him:

Clay, Beverley Vernon

B. V. Clay (1878–1944). Writer of short stories. Collected in *The Thankless Task* (1901), *Malevolent Lullaby* (1905), *Guilty*

Pleasures (1907), *The Friday Club* (1910) and others. He wrote several tales of the supernatural of which ‘The Belladonna Benefaction’ is best known. This was dramatised by *Eric Maude* (q.v.) in 1906 and ran for over three years and 1,000 performances in the West End of London (see *Edwardian Theatre*).

It’s not much, is it? Not many words to summarise such a complicated, difficult life, but then it’s more than most of us will receive in the various annals of posterity that record our brief passage of time on this small planet. Funnily enough, I was always confident nothing would ever be written about me, B.V. Clay’s daughter, but it turned out I was wrong . . .

Anyway, I have memories of my father in my very early childhood but I feel I only began to know him when he came back from the war – the Great War, the 1914–18 war – when I was ten and, in a way, when I was already well down the road to becoming the person and the personality that I am today. So it was different having that gap of time that the war imposed, and everyone has since told me he was also a different man himself, when he came back, irrevocably changed by his experiences. I wish I had known him better before that trauma – and who wouldn’t want to travel back in time and encounter their parents before they become their parents? Before ‘mother’ and ‘father’ turned them into figures of domestic myth, forever trapped and fixed in the amber of those appellations and their consequences?

The Clay family.

My father: B.V. Clay.

My mother: Wilfreda Clay (née Reade-Hill) (b.1879).

Me: Amory, firstborn. A girl (b.1908).

Sister: Peggy (b.1914).

Brother: Alexander, always known as Xan (b.1916).

The Clay family.

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I was driving back to Barrandale from Oban in the evening – in the haunted gloaming of a Scottish summer – when I saw a wild cat pick its way across the road, not 200 yards from the bridge to the island. I stopped the car at once and switched off the engine, watching and waiting. The cat halted its deliberate progress and turned its head to me, almost haughtily, as if I'd interrupted it. I reached, without thinking, for my camera – my old Leica – and held it up to my eye. Then put it down. There are no photographs more boring than photographs of animals – discuss. I watched the brindled cat – the size of a cocker spaniel – finish its pedantic traverse of the road and slip into the new conifer plantation, promptly becoming invisible. I started the engine and drove on home to the cottage, strangely exhilarated.

I call it 'the cottage', however its true postal designation is 6 Druim Rigg Road, Barrandale Island. As to where numbers 1–5 are, I have no idea, because the cottage sits alone on its small bay and Druim Rigg Road ends with it. It's a solid, two-storey, thick-walled, mid-nineteenth-century, small-roomed house with two chimney stacks and one-storey outbuildings attached on either side. I assumed somebody farmed here a hundred years ago, but all that's gone, now. It has mossy tiled roofs and walls of concrete cladding that had aged to an unpleasant, bilious grey-green and that I had painted white when I moved in.

It fronted the small, unnamed bay and if you turned left, west, you could see the southern tip of Mull and the wind-worked grey expanse of the vast Atlantic beyond.

I came in the front door and Flam, my dog, my black Labrador, gave his one glottal bass bark of welcome. I put away my shopping and then went through to the parlour, my sitting room, to check on the fire. I had a big stove with glass doors set in the chimney recess in which I burned peat bricks. The fire was low so I threw some bricks on it. I liked the concept of burning peat, rather than coal – as if I



The cottage on Barrandale Island, before renovations and repainting, c.1960.

were burning ancient landscapes, whole eons, whole geographies were turning into ash as they heated my house, heated my water.

It was still light so I summoned Flam and we walked down to the bay. I stood on the small crescent beach, as Flam roved around the tide rack and the rock pools, and I watched the day slip into night, noting the wondrous tonal transformations of the sunset on its dimmer switch, how blood-orange can shade imperceptibly into ice-blue on the knife-edge of the horizon, listening to the sea's interminable call for silence – *shh, shh, shh*.

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When I was born – in Edwardian England – ‘Beverley’ was a perfectly acceptable boy’s name (like Evelyn, like Hilary, like Vivian) and I wonder if that was perhaps why my father chose an androgynous name for me: Amory. Names are important, I believe, they shouldn’t be idly opted for – your name becomes your label, your classification – your name is how you refer to yourself. What

could be more crucial? I've only met one other Amory in my life and he was a man – a boring man, incidentally, but unenlivened by his interesting name.

When my sister was born, my father was already away at the war and my mother consulted with her brother, my uncle Greville, on what to call this new child. They decided between them on something 'homely and solid', so family lore has it, and thus the Clays' second daughter was called 'Peggy' – not Margaret, but a straightforward diminutive from the outset. Perhaps it was my mother's counter to 'Amory', the androgynous name she didn't choose. So Peggy came into the world – Peggy, the homely and solid one. Never has a child been so misnamed. In the event, when my father returned home on leave to greet his six-month-old daughter the name was firmly established and she was known to all of us as 'Peg' or 'Peggoty' or 'Peggsy', and there was nothing he could do. He never really liked the name Peggy, and was never wholly loving to Peggy as a result, I believe, as if she were some sort of foundling we'd taken in. You see what I mean about the importance of names. Did Peggy feel she had the wrong name because her father didn't like it, or her, particularly? Was it another mistake? Was that why she changed it later?

As for Alexander, 'Xan', that was mutually consented to. My mother's father, a circuit judge, who died before I was born, was called Alexander. It was my father who shortened it instantly to Xan and that stuck. So, Amory, Peggy and Xan, there we were – the Clay children.

My first memory of my father is of him doing a handstand in the garden at Beckburrow, our house near Claverleigh, in East Sussex. It was something he could do effortlessly – a party trick he had learned as a youngster. Give him a patch of lawn and he would stand easily on his hands and take a few steps. However, after he was wounded in the war he did it less and less, no matter how much we implored him. He said it made his head ache and his

eyes lose focus. When we were very young, though, he needed no urging. He liked doing handstands, he would say, because it readjusted his senses and his perspectives. He would do a handstand and say, 'I look at you girls hanging from your feet like bats and I feel sorry for you, oh, yes, in your topsy-turvy world with the earth above and the sky below. Poor things.' No, no, we would shriek back, no – you're the one upside down, Papa, not us!

I remember him coming back on leave in uniform after Xan was born. Xan was three or four months old so it must have been towards the end of 1916. Xan was born on 1 July 1916, the opening day of the battle of the Somme. It's the only time I recall my father in his uniform – Captain B.V. Clay DSO – the only occasion I can bring him to mind as a soldier. I suppose I must have seen him uniformed at other times but I remember that leave in particular, probably because baby Xan had been born, and my father was holding his son in his arms with a strange, fixed expression on his face.

Apparently he had left precise instructions about the naming of his third child: Alexander if he was a boy; Marjorie if a girl. How do I know this? Because sometimes when I was cross with Xan and wanted to tease him I called him 'Marjorie', so it must have been common knowledge. All family histories, personal histories, are as sketchy and unreliable as histories of the Phoenicians, it seems to me. We should note everything down, fill in the wide gaps if we can. Which is why I am writing this, my darlings.

During the war, the man we saw most of, and who lived with us at Beckburrow from time to time, was my mother's younger brother, Greville – my uncle Greville. Greville Reade-Hill had been a photo-reconnaissance observer in the Royal Flying Corps, and was something of a legend owing to the fact that he had stepped unscathed from four crashes until his fifth crash duly broke his right leg in five places and he was invalided out of the service. I remember him in his uniform limping around Beckburrow. And then he transformed himself into Greville Reade-Hill, the society

photographer. He hated being called a ‘society photographer’ even though that was exactly and evidently what he did. ‘I’m a *photographer*,’ he would say, plaintively, ‘impure and not so simple.’ Greville – I never called him uncle, he forbade it – set my life on its course, unknowingly, when he gave me a Kodak Brownie No. 2 as a present for my seventh birthday in 1915. This is the first photograph I ever took.



In the garden at Beckburrow, spring 1915.

Greville Reade-Hill. Let me call him to mind then, just after the war, as his career was beginning to take off, unsteadily but definitely upwards, like a semi-filled hydrogen balloon. He was tall, broad-shouldered and good-looking, real handsomeness marred only by a slightly too large nose. The Reade-Hill nose, not the Clay nose (I have the Reade-Hill nose, as well). A slightly large nose can make you look more interesting, both Greville and I have always agreed – who wants to look ‘conventionally’ handsome or beautiful? Not me, no, thank you very much.

I can’t remember a great deal about that first photograph – that momentous first click of the shutter that was the starting

pistol that set me off on the race for the rest of my life. It was a birthday party – I think my mother’s – held at Beckburrow in the spring of 1915. I seem to recall a marquee in the garden, also. Greville showed me how to load the film into the camera and how to operate it – simplicity itself: look down into the small limpid square of the viewfinder, select your target and press down the little lever at the side. Click. Wind on the film and take another.

I heard the laughter in the garden and ran to find my camera. And then scampered across the lawn and turned the lens on the ladies in their hats and long dresses strolling down towards the beeches at the garden’s end that screened the pond.

Click. I took my photograph.

But my remaining memories of that day are more to do with Greville. As he crouched by me showing me how the camera worked what has stayed in my mind more than anything else was the smell of the pomade or Macassar that he put on his hair – a scent of custard and jasmine. I think it may have been ‘Rowland’s Macassar’ that he wore. He was very fastidious about his clothes and grooming, as if he were always on show in some way or, now I come to think of it, as if he were about to be photographed. Maybe that was it – as someone who photographed people in their finery he became particularly aware of how he was looking, himself, at any hour of the day. I don’t think I ever saw him tousled or dishevelled, except once . . . But we’ll come to that in good time.

Beckburrow, East Sussex, our home. In fact I was born in London, in Hampstead village, where we lived in a rented two-floor maisonette in Well Walk just a hundred yards from the Heath. We left Hampstead when I was two because my father became temporarily rich as a result of the royalties he received from Eric Maude’s dramatisation of his short story, ‘The Belladonna Benefaction’. He used the financial windfall to buy an old house in a four-acre garden half a mile from the village of Claverleigh in East Sussex (between Herstmonceux and Battle). He had a new

kitchen wing added with bedrooms above and installed electric light and central heating – all very newfangled in 1910. Here is what *The Buildings of England: Sussex* had to say about Beckburrow in 1965:

CLAVERLEIGH, a small village with no plan but considerable charm below the South Downs. One winding street ending at a small church, ST JAMES THE LESS at the S end (1744, rebuilt in 1865 in a limp, mongrel version of the classical style) ... BECKBURROW ½ m. E on the lane to Battle, a good capacious C18 tile-roofed cottage with attractive materials – brick, flint, clunch – and remains of timber framing at one gable end. The small mullioned windows of the old facade give an air of immense solidity. Sober neo-Georgian additions (1910) with a heavy-hipped roof. Inoffensive, a home to be lived in rather than an exposition of taste. A good weatherboard BARN.

That was what I always felt about Beckburrow – ‘a home to be lived in’. We were happy there, the Clay family, or so it seemed to me as I was growing up. Even when Papa came home after the war – thin, irritable, unable to write – nothing really seemed to have changed in the place’s benign enfolding atmosphere. We had a nanny, two housemaids, a cook (Mrs Royston who lived in Claverleigh) and a gardener/factotum called Ned Gunn. I went to a dame school in Battle, driven there and back by Ned Gunn in a dog cart, until we acquired our own motor car in 1914 and Ned added ‘chauffeur’ to his list of accomplishments.

When my father came home, in those early years after the war, the only real pleasure he seemed to take in life was long walks to the sea, over the Downs, to the beaches at Pevensey and Cooden. He strode out, leading his children and whatever friends and relatives we had with us, like some slightly demented Pied Piper, urging us on. ‘Step we gaily, on we go!’ he would shout back at us as we dawdled and explored.



My mother joined us later with the motor and we would be driven home at the end of the day to Beckburrow. However, once we arrived at the beach, it was immediately obvious how my father's mood changed. The high spirits of the walk gave way to taciturn moodiness as he sat there smoking his pipe staring at the sea. We never gave it much thought. Your father was born moody, my mother would say, always brooding about something. He's a writer who can't write and it's making him fractious. And so we put up with his interminable silences punctuated by the odd demonic rant when his patience finally snapped and he would stalk the house shouting at everyone, bellowing for 'Just a bit of peace and quiet, for the love of Jesus! Is it too much to ask?' We simply made ourselves scarce and Mother would calm him down, leading him back to his study, whispering in his ear. I've no idea what she said to him, but it seemed to work.

Your parents, however strange they may be in actual fact, always seem 'normal' to their offspring. Indeed, the slow realisation of your parents' defining oddness is a harbinger of your developing maturity – a sign that you are growing up, becoming your own person. In those early years at Beckburrow, from our move there until the mid-1920s, nothing seemed much wrong with our little world. Servants came and went, the garden flourished; Peggy appeared to be some kind of infant prodigy on the piano; baby

Xan turned into a somewhat self-contained, thoughtful and almost simple boy who could amuse himself for hours creating elaborate patterns with a handful of sticks and leaves or damming the stream at the bottom of the south lawn, conjuring into being a little empire of rivers and lakes and irrigation channels, setting small balsa-wood rafts off on minuscule voyages of discovery. It would keep him occupied an entire day until he was called in for supper.

What about our Amory? What about me? So far, so run of the mill. After the dame school in Battle came the secondary school in Hastings. Then in 1921 it was announced that I was going away – to be a boarder at Amberfield School for Girls near Worthing. When I left for Amberfield (Mother accompanying me, Ned driving) and we pulled away down the lanes from Beckburrow it was the first time in my life that I registered the full level of hurt, injustice and disappointment that amounted to a betrayal. My mother would hear nothing of it: ‘You’re a lucky girl, it’s a wonderful school, don’t make a fuss. I hate fuss and fusspots.’

I came home in the holidays, of course, but, as the one absentee, felt I was something of an outsider. The barn had been converted into a music room for Peggy, wainscotted, painted, a carpet on the floor and furnished with a baby grand piano, where she was taught by a Madame Duplessis from Brighton. Xan mooned about the garden and the lanes around the house, a solemn boy with a rare, transforming smile. My father appeared to be spending most of the week in London, looking for literary work of some sort. He was given a part-time job as an editor and contributor to the *Strand* magazine and was a reader for various publishing houses. The pot of money from ‘The Belladonna Benefaction’ was running out. A 1919 production in New York closed after a month but cheques continued to arrive in the post, the mysterious enduring legacy of a once successful play. My mother was quite content, it seemed to me, running her big house, or sitting on the bench of the magistrate’s court in Lewes, or initiating and organising charitable works in the East Sussex villages around Claverleigh – fetes, tombolas, bring-and-buy sales.

And Greville would come down occasionally from London. Only Greville was my friend, I felt, and he taught me how to take better photographs, changing my Box Brownie for a 2A Kodak Jnr, with an extending lens on a concertina mount and, one mysterious afternoon, he blacked out the pantry, unpacked his trays and pungent bottles, and showed me the astonishing alchemy involved in taking images trapped on film and, through the application of chemicals – developer, stopper, fixer and washes – turning them miraculously into negatives which could then be printed into black and white photographs.

I still felt this nagging sore of resentment at my banishment, however. One day I generated enough courage to confront my mother and asked her why I had to go away to school when Peggy and Xan could stay at home. My mother sat me down and took my hands. ‘Peggy is a genius,’ she said, breezily, ‘and Xan has problems.’ And that was that, an end to the matter until my father finally went totally insane.

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I feed Flam, my loyal and loving Labrador, and, as the summer night slowly comes on, light the oil lamps. I use my diesel generator to power the small refrigerator, the washing machine and my radio and hi-fi. I don’t want electric light or a television set – and, anyway, I won’t be around much longer, so what’s the point of more home improvements? I live in a comfortable technological limbo, a halfway house: on the one hand laundry, music, the world’s news and ice cubes for my gin and tonic; and, on the other, a peat fire and the particular glow that the oil lamp gives off – the subtle waver of the incandescent wick, the lambent marshmallow, generating that subtle shadow-shift that makes the room more alive, somehow – breathing, pulsing.

Barrandale doesn’t really deserve to be called an island. It’s separated from the mainland of the west of Scotland by a narrow

‘sound’, maybe fifty or sixty feet across at its widest. And the sound is bridged, the ‘Bridge over the Atlantic’ as we locals grandiosely like to term it. There’s another island with another more famous, grander, older, stone bridge (ours is made of girders and railway sleepers but is ten feet longer, which makes us feel ever so slightly more superior: we cross a larger portion of the Atlantic). Still, Barrandale is irrefutably an island, and driving over the bridge – over the sound – establishes, almost unknowingly, an island mentality.

My separate schooling, it turned out – so I learned later – was the result of a will. The death of a great-aunt (Audrey, on my mother’s side) conferred on the Clay family a sum of money for the education of Amory, great-niece and firstborn. My father’s steadily diminishing and erratic income couldn’t have coped with the termly fees demanded by Amberfield, but, if I hadn’t been sent there, or somewhere similar, the benefaction wouldn’t have been forthcoming. Completely strange, unknown currents can shape our lives. Why didn’t my parents tell me? Why did they pretend it was their decision? I was taken away from the familiar comforts and securities of Beckburrow and I was meant to be grateful, the privileged one.

My mother was a tall, bespectacled, somewhat cumbersome woman. She managed to conceal whatever affection she might have felt for her children with great success. She had two expressions she used all the time: ‘I don’t like a fuss’ and ‘Put that in your pipe and smoke it’. She was always patient with us but in a way that seemed to suggest her mind was elsewhere, that she had more interesting things she could be doing. We always called her ‘Mother’, as if it was a category, a definition, and didn’t reflect our relationship, as if we were saying ‘ironmonger’ or ‘historian’. Here’s the sort of exchange that would ensue:

ME: Mother, could I have another helping of blancmange, please?

MOTHER: No.

ME: Why not? There’s plenty left.

MOTHER: Because I say so.

ME: But that's not fair!

MOTHER: Well you'll just have to put that in your pipe and smoke it, won't you?



*My mother on Cooden beach in the 1920s.
Taken with my 2A Kodak Jnr. Xan is laughing behind her.*

I never saw any real expression of affection between my mother and my father – and at the same time I have to admit I never saw any signs of resentment or hostility.

My father's father, Edwin Clay, was a miner from Staffordshire who went to night classes at a Mechanics' Institute, educated himself, qualified himself, and ended his career as a director of Edgeware & Rackham, the publishers, where he eventually became the managing editor of five trade magazines that served the building industry. He grew wealthy enough to send his two sons to private schools. My father, a clever boy, won an exhibition

to Lincoln College, Oxford, and became a professional writer (his younger brother, Walter, died at the Battle of Jutland, 1915). The one-generation jump was remarkable, I suppose, and yet I always sensed in my father that familiar mixture of pride at his achievements combined with – not shame, but a diffidence, an insecurity: an English social insecurity. Would anyone take him seriously, a miner's son, as a writer? I believe that part of the reason for buying Beckburrow and enlarging it and living the county life must have been to prove to himself that those insecurities were now worthless and wholly cancelled out. He had become thoroughly middle class; a successful writer of several well-received books married to a judge's daughter, with three children, living in a large and covetable big house in the East Sussex countryside. Yet he was not entirely a happy man. And then the war came and everything went wrong.

I think tonight I might begin to sort out all those old boxes of photographs. Or maybe not.

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It is 1925. The Amberfield School for Girls, Worthing. My best friend Millicent Lowther stuck on the false moustache and smoothed it down with her fingertips.

'It was all I could find,' she said. 'They seemed only to have beards.'

'It's perfect,' I said. 'I only want to get an idea of the sensation.'

We were sitting on the floor, our backs to the wall. I leant forward and kissed her gently, lips to lips, no great pressure.

'Don't pout,' I said, not pulling away. 'Men don't pout.' The contact with the false moustache wasn't unpleasant, although, given the choice, I'd always prefer a clean-shaven top lip. I moved slightly, changed the angle, feeling the prickle of the bristles on my cheek. No, it was tolerable.

We older girls regularly practised kissing at Amberfield but I have to say the experience wasn't much different from kissing your

fingers or the inside of your upper arm. Having never kissed a man, and I was now seventeen years old, I wasn't sure what all the fuss was about, as my mother would have said.

We broke apart.

'Any moustache pash?' Millicent asked.

'Not really. It's just that Greville's grown one and I wanted to see what it might feel like.'

'Gorgeous Greville. Why don't you invite him to visit?'

'Because I don't want you specimens ogling him. Did you get the fags?'

We bought cigarettes from one of the young Amberfield gardeners, a gormless lad with a harelip called Roy.

'Oh, yes,' Millicent said and fished in her pockets, producing a small wrap of paper and a box of matches. I liked Millicent a great deal – she was smart and sardonic, almost as sardonic as me – but I would have preferred her to have fuller lips, the better to practise kissing – her upper lip was almost non-existent.

I screwed one of the small Woodbines into the ebony cigarette holder that I had stolen from my mother.

'Just Woodbines,' Millicent said. 'Very infra dig, I'm afraid.'

'You can't expect a poor proletarian like Roy to smoke Craven "A".'

'Roy, the hoi polloi. I suppose not, but they do burn my throat, rather.'

'While your head spins.'

I lit Millicent's cigarette and then my own and we puffed smoke up at the ceiling. We were in my 'darkroom', a broom cupboard outside the chemistry laboratory.

'Thank the Lord your chemicals pong so,' Millicent said. 'What is that smell?'

'Fixer. It's called hypo.'

'I'm not surprised no one's ever descried cigarette smoke in your little cubbyhole.'

'Not once. Is "descried" the *mot juste*?'

‘It’s a word that should be used more often,’ Millicent said, a little smugly, I thought, as if she had invented the verb herself, spontaneously.

‘But correctly,’ I admonished.

‘Pedant. Annoying pedant.’

‘Apart from us, only the Child Killer comes in here, and she loves me.’

‘Is she a femme, do you think, the Child Killer?’

‘No. I think she’s sexless . . .’ I drew on my Woodbine, feeling the head-reel. ‘I don’t think she really knows what she’s feeling.’ The Child Killer was in fact called Miss Milburn, the science teacher, and I owed her a great deal. She had given me this broom cupboard and encouraged me to set up my dark room in it. She had dense unplucked eyebrows that almost met over her nose, hence her nickname.

‘But aren’t we femmes?’ Millicent asked. ‘Kissing each other like this?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘We only do it to educate ourselves, to see what it’d be like with a man. We’re not bitter, my dear.’ ‘Bitter’ was Amberfield slang for ‘perverted’.

‘Then why do you want to kiss your uncle? *Eugh!*’

‘Simple – I’m in love with him.’

‘And you say you’re not bitter!’

‘He’s the handsomest, funniest, kindest, most sardonic man I’ve ever met. If you were ever in his presence – not that you’ll ever be – you’d understand.’

‘It just seems a bit odd to me.’

‘Everything in life is a bit odd, when you come to think of it.’ I was quoting my father – it was something he’d say from time to time.

Millicent stood up, cigarette between her lips, and squeezed her small breasts.

‘I just can’t imagine a man doing this to me . . . Rubbing my bosoms. How would I feel, react? I might want to punch him.’

‘That’s why it’s just as well we try everything here, first. One day we’ll get out of this jungle, we’ll be free. We need to have some idea of what’s going to be what.’

‘It’s all right for you,’ Millicent said, grudgingly. ‘The world you move in – writers, society photographers . . . My father’s a timber merchant.’

‘Your secret’s safe with me.’

‘Minx! Queen of the minxes!’

‘I’m not a snob, Millicent. My grandfather was a Staffordshire miner.’

‘I’d rather my father was a writer than a timber merchant, that’s all I’m saying,’ Millicent carefully removed her false moustache and stubbed out her Woodbine.

‘Any more kissing?’ she asked. ‘We haven’t tried it with tongues.’

‘Bitter woman! You should be ashamed of yourself.’ I clambered to my feet and went to look at my photographs drying on their line of string. A bell rang in a distant corridor.

‘I think I’m meant to be supervising some of the younger specimens,’ she said. ‘See you later, darling.’

She left and I carefully unpegged the photos. I didn’t print every negative I developed as I didn’t want to waste paper on contact sheets. I would scrutinise the negative with a magnifying glass and was often very confident of the choice I eventually made. The decision to print was somehow key to what I felt about the photograph and each one that I selected would be given a title. I don’t know why I did this – some vague painterly connection, I suppose – but in bestowing a title the photograph lived on in my mind more easily and permanently. I could recall almost every photograph that I’d printed – a memory archive – an album in my head. I think also that the whole process of photography still seemed astonishing at that stage of my life. The abidingly magical process of trapping an image on film through the brief exposure of light and then, through the precisely monitored agency of

chemicals and paper, producing a monochrome picture of that instant of time still possessed its alluring sorcery.

Now, Millicent having gone, summoned by her bell, I took down my three new photographs – stiff, dry – and laid them out on the small table at the end of the box room. I had called the three photographs ‘Xan, Flying’, ‘Boy with Bat and Hat’ and ‘At the Lido’. I was pleased with them all, particularly ‘Xan, Flying’.

One hot day the previous August we’d gone down to the Westbourne Swimming Club Lido in Hove where they had a one-acre, unheated salt-water pool with a twenty-five-foot diving board at one end. It took Xan three jumps before I was happy that I’d truly captured him in mid-air.

I wrote the titles on the back of the prints in a soft pencil, added the date, and slipped them into my loose album. All three photographs were similar in that they were candid shots of people in movement. I liked taking photographs of people in action – walking, coming down steps, running, jumping and, most importantly, not looking into the lens. I loved the way the camera could capture that unreflecting suspended animation, an image of somebody halted utterly in time – their next step, their next gesture, next movement, forever incomplete. Stopped just like that – by me – with the click of a shutter. Even then I think I was aware that only photography could do that – so confidently, so effortlessly – only photography could pull off that magic trick of stopping time; that millisecond of our existence captured, allowing us to live forever.

Two days later I was in the sixth-form study room taking part in a staring match with Laura Hassall. It was her challenge but I knew I would win – I always won staring matches. We were allowed to speak to each other, deliberately to provoke a lapse in concentration or to distract so eye contact was broken.

‘Stanley Baldwin’s been assassinated,’ Laura said.

‘Poor. Very poor.’

‘No. He has.’

‘Good. Horrible man.’



'Xan, Flying', 1924.



'At the Lido', 1924.



'Boy with Bat and Hat' (Xan Clay), 1924.

We kept staring at each other, faces two feet apart, chins propped on our hands, eye to eye. Everyone else in the room was working at their prep, not bothering remotely with our contest.

'Laura?'

'Yes?'

'Romulus and Remus. Heard of them?'

'Ah . . . *Yeshhh.*' She said it as a dullard would, irritated.

'Then, imagine,' I said, in a speculative tone, as if the idea had just occurred to me, 'imagine that Rome had been founded by Remus – and not Romulus.'

'Yes . . . So what?'

'In that case, the city would be called Reme.'

Laura thought about this, instinctively, and lost. Her gaze flickered.

‘Damnation! Shit and damnation!’

There was a knock at the door and a junior specimen appeared. She looked straight at me. Junior specimens were not allowed to talk unless spoken to.

‘What is it, you odious child?’ I said.

‘God wants you.’

‘God’ was our headmistress, Miss Grace Ashe. I was wary of Miss Ashe – I suspected that she saw through me, saw my very nature. I knocked on the door of her office and waited, conscious that I was a bit on edge, that I was feeling nervy, not at my best. Such an evening summons was rare. I heard her say ‘Come!’ and I checked my uniform, smoothed the creases from the knees of my beige lisle stockings, and pushed the door open.

Miss Ashe’s ‘office’ did not live up to the name – it was a sitting room, with a large burr-walnut bureau covered in papers and files set in an alcove. I could have been in a country house. The carpet was a navy blue with a scarlet border; a sofa faced two armchairs, all in white linen loose covers, across a long padded tapestry stool with books placed on it. The wallpaper had a cream and coffee-coloured stripe and the room’s paintings were real and modern, stylised landscapes and still lifes painted by Miss Ashe’s brother, Ivo (who had died in the war). Pale blue hessian curtains were allowed to bulk their hems on the floor and the table lamps burned dimly behind mottled parchment shades. Taste was being exhibited here, I realised, confident yet understated.

Miss Ashe was in her early forties, so we had calculated, pale and slim with her dark auburn hair combed tightly back from her brow to be gathered into a complex knotted bun. We all agreed she was ‘chic’. Millicent and I had decided she looked like a retired prima ballerina. We were all, in truth, rather frightened and in awe of her and her elegant, impassive demeanour, but I made it my strategy never to show this. I tried to be uncharacteristically breezy and gay with her and I think she was consequently rather annoyed by my attitude, aware it

was feigned for her benefit. She was always rather short and stern with me. No smiles, as a norm.

But she was smiling now as she waved me to a chair. I was disarmed, for a second or two.

‘Evening, Miss Ashe,’ I said, trying to regain the upper hand. ‘That’s a beautiful bracelet.’

She looked at the heavy silver and Bakelite bracelet on her wrist as if she’d forgotten she’d put it on.

‘Thank you, Amory. Do sit.’

She sat down herself and reached for a cardboard file and opened it on her knee. She was wearing an emerald-green afternoon frock, trimmed with a lemon-yellow scarf at the neck. She flipped up the lid of a silver cigarette box on the table beside her chair, took out a cigarette, searched for a lighter, and lit her cigarette, all the time keeping her eyes on the open file. We’d noticed how Miss Ashe pointedly smoked in front of the older girls – it was a provocation. Thus provoked, I spoke.

‘I suppose that’s my dossier.’

She looked up. ‘It’s your *file*. All pupils have a file.’

‘All the facts.’

‘All the facts we know . . .’ She cocked her head, as if she were taking me in better. Pale blue eyes, unblinking. I didn’t want to start a staring match with Miss Ashe, so I lowered mine and picked invisible fluff off my skirt.

‘I’m sure there are many more “facts” we’re unaware of.’

‘I don’t think so, Miss Ashe.’ I smiled, sweetly. ‘I’ve nothing to hide.’

‘Really? You’re an open book, are you, Amory?’

‘For those who can read me.’

She laughed, seeming genuinely amused at my remark and I felt the beginnings of a blush creep up my neck and warm my cheeks and ears. Stupid Amory, I thought. Say as little as possible. Miss Ashe was scrutinising my file again.

‘You passed all subjects at School Certificate with distinction.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you decided to drop maths, science and Greek.’

‘I’m more interested in—’

‘History, French and English. What’s your subsidiary?’ She turned a page.

‘Geography.’

She made a note and then closed the file, looking at me directly again.

‘Are you happy here at Amberfield, Amory?’

‘Would you define “happy” for me, Miss Ashe?’

‘You’re answering a question with a question. Playing for time. Just be honest – but don’t say you’re bored. I don’t care if a girl is stupid or bad but to be bored is a defeat, *un échec*. If you’re bored with life you might as well die.’

Something about Miss Ashe’s absolute assurance stung me. Without thinking I blurted out an answer.

‘If you want me to be honest, then I feel I’m disintegrating, here. I’m not a groaner, Miss Ashe – I know you hate groaners as much as you hate boredom – but I feel . . . lifeless. Everything’s insincere, sterile and spineless. Sometimes I feel inhuman, a robot—’ I stopped. I was already regretting abandoning my usual poise.

‘Goodness me. I’d never have guessed.’ Miss Ashe very carefully stubbed out her cigarette.

You fool, Amory, I said to myself, angry. You’ve let her win. I stared at a book on the stool between us: *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler.

‘Interesting language you use,’ Miss Ashe said.

‘Sorry?’

‘Disintegrating, lifeless, spineless, inhuman, robot. It’s just a school, Amory. We’re trying to teach you, to equip you for your adult life. We’re not some kind of autocratic regime trying to crush the life from you.’

‘I feel I’m stagnating. Trapped in this gutless, antisocial jungle—’
I stopped for the second time. I’d run out of words.

‘Well, you can certainly express yourself, Amory. Which is a gift. Very colourful. Which brings me to the point of this delightful encounter.’ She stood up and went to her desk to pick up a slip of paper.

‘I’m very pleased to tell you,’ she said with a certain formality, turning and crossing the carpet towards me, ‘that you’ve won the Roxburgh Essay Prize. Five guineas. I’ll make the announcement at prayers this evening. But you may tell your closest friends in the meantime.’ She handed me the slip of paper – that turned out to be a cheque. I failed to conceal my surprise as I took it from her. I wasn’t sure why I had spontaneously decided to enter the competition. Perhaps it was because this year’s subject had intrigued me: ‘Is it really “modern” to be modern?’ In any event I had entered, written the essay, and here I was, the winner.

Miss Ashe sat down and studied me. I stared at the cheque, realising I could now buy the new camera I coveted, the Butcher ‘Klimax’.

‘I was thinking, Amory, about Oxford.’

‘Oxford?’

‘After Higher School Certificate, you come back for a term and prepare for Oxford entrance. The Senior History Scholarship at Somerville, to be precise. I think you’d stand an excellent chance, judging by your work – and the essay you wrote.’

Miss Ashe was a graduate of Somerville College. I was aware that I was about to become a protégée, now this suggestion had been made.

‘But I don’t want to go to Oxford,’ I said.

‘That’s a very stupid remark.’

‘I don’t want to go to any university in particular.’

‘You want to “live”, I suppose.’

I could sense Miss Ashe was now quite irritated. The tide in this confrontation was turning my way.

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘It’s entirely possible to “live” while you’re at university, you know.’

‘I’d rather do something else.’

‘And what do you want to do, Amory?’

‘I want to be a photographer.’

‘An intriguing and rewarding hobby. Miss Milburn has told me about your darkroom.’

‘I want to be a professional photographer.’

Miss Ashe stared at me, as if I were mocking her in some abstruse way. As if I’d said I wanted to become a professional prostitute.

‘But you can’t do that,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’re a—’ She managed to stop herself saying ‘woman’.
‘Because it’s not a reliable profession. For someone like you.’

‘I can try, can’t I?’

‘Of course you can, Amory, my dear. But remember that going to university doesn’t preclude a career as a “photographer”. And you’ll have a degree, something to fall back on. Give Somerville some thought, I urge you.’ She stood and crossed the room again to place my file on her desk. The meeting with God was over. I made for the door but she stopped me with a raised palm.

‘I almost forgot. Your father telephoned me this morning. He asked if he could take you out for tea tomorrow afternoon.’

‘He did? But it’s Wednesday tomorrow.’

‘You can have an exeat. I’ll gladly waive the usual rules. Consider it as a bonus to the Roxburgh Prize.’

I frowned. ‘Why does he want to take me out to tea?’

‘He said he had something to discuss with you, face to face. He didn’t want to put it in a letter.’ Miss Ashe looked at me, almost with kindness, I felt, sensing my puzzlement shading quickly into

alarm. 'Have you any idea what he wants to talk to you about?' she asked, her hand briefly on my shoulder.

'It must be some sort of family matter, I suppose. I can't think what else.'

Miss Ashe smiled. 'He sounded very positive and cheerful. Maybe it's good news.'