

Maryanne O'Hara
from *Cascade*

*Your father was ever virtuous;
and holy men, at their death, have good inspirations*
—The Merchant of Venice

I painted it many times: a drowning person's blurred upward view from the bottom of a flooded place. Sometimes the valley I painted was abstract—veering, tilting shapes that closed in on the viewer. More often I made the space recognizable, with smooth stones, long grasses, and someone struggling through thick river mud, Ophelia-like, trying to find a place to breathe.

Loss of your home is such stuff as bad dreams are made on, and during his final days, my father was haunted by drowning dreams. At the sound of his shouts, I'd come awake myself, always shocked to find a husband sleeping beside me. I'd dash across the hall, fearing another heart attack, but by then my father would be lying quietly, gazing at the plaster ceiling.

Probably half the town was having drowning dreams, I'd say. I'd remind him that the reservoir was an old rumor and tick off good reasons why it would never happen. The state had looked to Cascade before. "If it was too expensive to build so far from Boston five years ago," I'd say, "then surely in these hard times—."

Usually, that kind of talk made him feel better and in the morning he'd be rested and fairly optimistic. But the night before his last attack, he hushed me irritably—"Emilia!"—as if I was still a child. His white hair spread across three pillows; his eyes blazed. He was frail, but he was also a lifelong player of Kings—he could still play the part of regal.

"There are so many ways of drowning, my dear."

We passed a moment without speaking. Downstairs, the banjo clock ticked. Across the river, a train blew its horn. My father's stage, where stars like Lionel Barrymore and Kathryn Tranero had taken bows, had been dark last season for the first time in twenty-two years. That darkness was all he thought about.

"We're not going to drown," I said firmly, and slipped from the room before I could confess that I already was under water and had been since September, when the dean of the Museum School called me into his office to say they had not received my tuition, since Rose wrote: *He's been keeping all the bad news from you. I guess the money from the Folio sale wasn't enough to cover everything, after all. He's had to let Annie go, the yardman, everyone but me, and now they're foreclosing on the house. Dr. Proulx says his heart is weak as a baby lamb's.*

Months earlier, my father had scraped money together to pay off mortgages I hadn't even known about, taken out after the first of the staggering stock market losses. He'd found a buyer—a collector from Washington—for his treasured third-issue First Folio. Selling that was like selling an arm, but he'd had no choice. "The worst is over," he assured me, and sent me back to Boston.

One day I was reveling in my third year of studio classes, brushes in hand, winner of two prizes, with plans to graduate Boston and move to New York. The next I was in Cascade, a town I'd really only ever spent my summers in, scrambling for a way to support a man who had

suddenly become old and dependent. For people like us, who really did lose everything, life would seem forever split: Before the Crash/After the Crash.

When I found myself back in Cascade for good, I gave both Cascade and Asa Spaulding a good long look.

Our little town with its pleasant waters had been so fashionable all through the nineteen-tens and twenties, but by that fall, the Cascade Hotel had closed two of its three floors. Merchants who once thrived on the annual summer influx focused on servicing locals year-round instead. Warren Estes closed his boating supplies shop and turned the Water Street property into a filling station. The Handy Grocery ceased its once-popular Picnic Box service, and began giving out bonbons to locals who paid their accounts on time.

Asa Spaulding was Cascade's druggist. In the mid-twenties, after graduating pharmacy college, he'd turned a dusty storefront into a modern drugstore that catered to the summer crowd. He put in a grill, a fountain with a zinc bar, and an oak-and-glass cigar case topped with the brass, casted head of a flame-bearing Turkish sultan. When the summer people left, Asa adapted. Locals still needed medicines and plasters. A Coke was still an affordable treat.

Asa was as prosperous as it was possible to be in Cascade in 1932. He was a likeable, everyone's-big-brother type whom I dated whenever I was home. Reedy and fair, the town girls thought he looked like Lindberg and teased me for keeping him single. He worked long hours and had seemed content with a casual relationship, but once he knew I was home for good, he pursued me with the same single-mindedness with which he'd built Spaulding Drug & Fountain. I think he was secretly grateful my father was sick and our fortunes turned upside-down. It gave him the chance to step in and save us.

The day I said yes to him was the same November day the sheriff knocked on the door, removed his hat, and said he couldn't put off the Springfield National Bank any longer. I had been packing up some of the things I couldn't part with: my brother Timon's tin toys, my mother's Saucony lace wedding veil, her perfume atomizer, dried sticky-yellow inside but still smelling faintly of the *muguet des bois* which she had worn only during theatre season, for luck.

I asked how long did we have, and the sheriff said he could give us a week. He was a lumbering man with big hands, and eyes that apologized for everything his mouth was forced to say. "I'm afraid I'll have to put this up," he said, and pushed a red auction flag into the small patch of front lawn, where it flapped in the chill breeze blowing off the town common.

It was the day before Armistice Day, the anniversary of my mother's and Timon's deaths. I didn't know if that fact was a cruel joke, or some kind of sign. It seemed I would have no choice but to move my father into the unheated playhouse. I closed my eyes, willing my mother to send me guidance from wherever she was. Another knock on the door came and it was Asa, who walked me over to the playhouse, made me stand on the chilly boards, and try to imagine a sick old man really living there. He took my hands in his. His fingers were strong and warm. I knew he was going to ask me to marry him and I tried to think with my head. I wanted to get married sometime, just not yet, and maybe not to Asa.

He was thirty in January, he said. It was time he settled down.

I wasn't the right person for him. I was as foreign as a girl could get in Cascade, and he'd been attracted to all that. Someone like Franny Montgomery, my old town friend, would have made him a better wife. But Asa owned a house, inherited from his mother, a fussy woman who'd liked the best of everything. The house had indoor plumbing, a modern kitchen, and a good radio. It was out on River Road on twenty-two acres, with a lawn sloping down to the

Cascade River. Behind the parlor was a long boring room with even northwestern light that I could turn into a studio. I could put my father in the upstairs back room with its view of the river and make his last years comfortable. The rightness of that decision would have to cancel out the wrongs.