

## Seasons of Mind

Ruby Lawrence

*"He fell as softly as a tree. There wasn't even a sound..."*

Antoine de Saint-Exupery – The Little Prince

Today's breakfast was a limp affair. They must have employed a new head cook or else the usual one is away somewhere, because it was the worst breakfast I have had for a long time. I couldn't say how long exactly . . . days, months, years? I'm not too good at that, remembering time phrases. Ever since coming here time has merged together in my head, from orderly blocks to a grey, swamping mass. It's harder this way to pick things out, memories and such, which is probably best.

So in came Martha, my nurse. She never fails to say good morning, that manic grin stretching across her big pink face.

"Sarah! And how are you today?" Wonderful Martha, just wonderful. I can't actually voice a reply of course. One-sided conversations with her are one of the many perks of being mute.

"Good? Yes? Let's get you some breakfast shall we?" She flurried around the little room, pushing the chair an inch further under the desk, tugging on a curtain, plumping a pillow. It's a good job they only give us three pieces of furniture or she would bustle around endlessly for hours, that cheery smile glued to her face; asking me little questions though she never has and will never receive a reply.

Finally she wheeled in a squeaking silver trolley and placed my breakfast tray on my lap. I sat in bed with the duvet pulled over my bony legs. The rolls and crinkles in the fabric looked like miniature mountains and valleys, a whole earth's crust spread over me. Martha leaned over me and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear as if arranging a vase of flowers. I have noticed over the years that she rarely looks me in the eye. Is she secretly uncomfortable? Perhaps afraid. Or worse, she pities me. Pity is a bitter slap in the face that confirms your own self-disgust.

The door clicked softly behind her and I was left staring down at my breakfast; two unbuttered slices of toast, curled and burnt at the edges, spattered with a covering of scrambled egg which was tinged a light grey. I looked at it and my stomach twisted inside my body; the thought of eating sending a wave of nausea down my throat. I swallowed, trying to summon the urge to eat, the instinct of hunger, but my tongue felt desiccated in my mouth.

I've heard them down the corridor when they think I'm not listening and they talk about me. "Off" is the word they use – my eating has been "off", apparently. How dare they! I would eat if I didn't feel repulsed by the mess they place under my nose. This place is useless. How can any of us recover from whatever it is they have put us here for if they serve this stuff? It has really begun to get to me recently. It's a good job I never feel hungry.

I reached instead for the glass of orange juice and slowly filled my mouth with the bitter, resentful liquid. I suddenly had an urge to spit it out, paint the vacant walls with mucky yellow drops. I wanted to smash the plate and drag the pieces over the ceiling and crush them in my lonely fingers. Make crimson footprints over the sheets and over my skin. My own little disaster – that would shake them up. Imagine Martha's face; me, the well-

behaved, quiet one, what are you doing Sarah? Why would you make this terrible, terrible mess? Why?

I swallowed.

Today was garden day. We have garden day once a week. I think they have some idea that garden day invigorates us, fills us up with fresh air, revitalises our sorry souls with the great outdoors. In reality it is an escape. A chance, for just a couple of hours, to be out of a four wall box of white paint and tinkering nurses and the lonely company of our aching minds.

I am so bored with myself. I used to try to talk to myself when I first came here but when I did the answering voices evolved into the chorus of others, painfully infuriating, mocking me with their unbearably joyous song. That's when I got so angry I'd scream, and when no sound came out I'd bawl even harder till my throat felt like it was ripping and my breath burnt into my shuddering lungs. The only sounds were my knuckles smashing against the doorframe and thud of the bed as I heaved it across the room like a white, skeletal Hercules. The last time it brought them running, the nurses and some of the doctors too. For the days that followed I was strapped down with buckles across my body and a needle sticking out of my forearm, injecting me with something that slowed my blood down to a soup. I never tried it again.

The garden is beautiful. I always sit alone away from the main lawn (they trust me enough to go that far) in a wooded area, tucked away from the house. The trees are ancient twists of wood rooted so deep in the soil they are like limbs from the ground itself, bent, curled, arthritic fingers of the earth. Their age fascinates me. I know trees can live for hundreds of years, even thousands. All around them so much has changed but their wrinkled bark remains unmoving, stretching up into branches fluttering with green in the sun. I say 'unmoving' yet there is something about a tree which is so alive, the way it groans and creaks in the wind, shifting its weight, how it sighs when a breeze flows through its leaves. If you press an ear against the trunk of tree you can sometimes hear the rhythmic gurgle of the sap from deep inside, the blood of the tree slowly pumping through its veins.

Today I sat with my back against an old willow. The air was crisp and cold, smelling of the beginning of autumn. Through the pink undersides of the willow leaves, I saw the sky, a stark cavernous blue with not a cloud in sight. I closed my eyes for a second and, in the warm velvet blackness that filled my vision came a memory of my mother.

She storms around the kitchen and grabs tins of food and packets thinking she is making a meal, but all she is doing is moving things around. I try to help, to touch her arm and make her realise but she doesn't even notice this time. The rusty tap spurts into life as she bangs past it, water pattering out over the wall. I turn it off. I pick up the can of 14p baked beans that is rolling across the grubby linoleum, heading for her feet. Now she has opened a cupboard and she is flinging the contents over her shoulder, cheap biscuits, dented cereal boxes, an old squeezey ketchup tube. All the time she is chatting away; "I will just magic something up Sarah! A nice meal for you and your father. Maybe beans on toast, you like that yes? I know he does. He likes cheese on top but none of that, no! We haven't had cheese in for a while have we...Sarah? Sarah?" I got scared every time it happened. I never knew who this father was she spoke of. It was only ever me and her. She turns to look at me. Black coaly smudges of mascara stain her cheeks and tears cut little streams down her skin. There is a desperation clinging to her face; a shocking immovability. The distance between us hits me and my chest twists with how much I love her. This is the moment

where I lose my mother. I feel like I am looking into the eyes of a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, a small, alien creature unable to understand the relentless machine that will soon mow it down.

I don't know what to say. She comes towards me and places her hands on my shoulders. "Come on, say something."

It's only a gentle whisper at first, but when I don't speak it gets louder. She grips harder on my shoulders.

"Say something! Why do you never talk to me?" Her eyes are looking into mine and I want to shout out to her so badly but I can't, I just can't, my throat clenches around inadequate words. Then she gets angry. She shakes me and I fling around like a rag doll. I was small and thin and weighed nothing. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" She screams the words at me.

I rub my eyes with my fist and feel a breeze on my face, the fresh breath of the garden pulls me back.

I remember it so vividly. That night she packed a bag with her things and came into my bedroom. I was sat in bed with a duvet pulled around my shoulders. She came up to me and kissed my forehead, then turned away and walked down the stairs. I remember running out of bed to the top of the stairs and seeing her black hair swing as the door clicked shut behind her. I stumbled down the stairs after her and raced to the door but she had locked it. I pulled so hard my knuckles turned blue. Out the window I saw her get into a yellow taxi. It was raining and dark, only by the street lights could I see the car disappear around a bend. My fist banged and banged on the window. My lips mouthed her name.

It was six days later when the police came, kicked down the door and found me in the kitchen, food everywhere, bread and biscuits, smelling and rotting. What a sight I must have been. A sixteen year old girl, curled up in a slum of a kitchen with a stained blue duvet and an unopened can of 14p bakes beans clutched to my chest. There was hospital and then there was school, which made me worse. And it all ends here.

I look up into the willow tree and the leaves look tender from below, like soft pink strips of flesh. A wind blows and the tree lets out a low sigh, wrapping me up in airstreams and the flutter of leaves.

I have worked it out. The whole situation with the breakfasts, serving me revolting food, it's all a big plan. They think it will stir some reaction in me. It's a test. They discover your weak spot and that's what they use to get you.

Today breakfast was, unbelievably, even worse. Martha came in and I swear the woman was smirking. There was a smug little smirk on her face. Beans on toast. The beans were cold and congealed, the toast black. I stared at it. She looked at me, smiling away. "Come on Sarah. You've got to start eating a decent amount soon or we will have to force you. We don't want that again do we?" Yes you do, I thought. Yes, you fucking do. That's what this is all about.

That was when I made a mistake. I know I shouldn't have done it. But at the time I just wasn't thinking straight, I was angry at them for sneaking around and trying to trick me with their food plan. More than anything, she deserved it.

The plate smashed against her head and she let out a squeal like a pig. She stumbled backwards, her fat body teetering over her heels as she tried to regain her balance, food dripping down her face. One foot got caught behind the other and she fell slowly with a grunt, until her head whacked against the windowsill with a deep crack. Blood seeped through her hair and mixed with the beans and wet bread around her shoulders. Her body

lay still in a remarkably awkward position, her legs folded one way and her torso twisted right round to the other side, arms flopped inward. I couldn't help it. I started laughing. My body shook with it, bursts of silent laughter shaking out of me. All the time she lay there, bleeding away into the food.

After some time my eyes wandered over to the window. I could see the leaves of the trees in the garden and they shifted colour with each gust of wind from light auburn to ruby red. Autumn paints them fiery, warm colours before they shrivel like dying flames into ash.

Soon I will hear their footsteps clattering down the corridor. And if I ever see the trees again their leaves will have fallen, drifted down to the ground to dust away into the earth.