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Olive Senior

THE PAIN TREE

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The person who had taken care of me as a child was a woman named Larissa. She no longer worked for my family. And yet the moment I'd arrived home, I had had this vision of Larissa instead of my mother standing there by the front steps waiting to greet me with a gift in her hand. It startled me, it seemed so real, for it was many years since I'd even thought of her. But suddenly I was a child again, so palpable was her presence. It made me feel sad and I didn't know why, for what I'd remembered were the good times we'd had together. I felt cheated of the gift she hadn't delivered, though I knew this to be absurd. Larissa was a poor woman, with nothing to give.

My mother loved to say I was coming home to possess my inheritance. She wrote it like that in her letters.

She also told people I'd chosen to study archaeology because I'd been born in a house with 17th century foundations.

Yes, I would say to myself, built of the finest cut-stone, the mortar hard as iron because it was sweetened with molasses and slave blood.

My mother would have been extremely mortified if she'd heard me say that aloud. For us, the past was a condensed version.

I didn't want to possess anything.

When my parents sent me away to boarding school in England at the age of ten, I had happily gone. I'd managed to stay away for fifteen years but coming home now seemed the right

thing since my father died and my mother was left alone. Duty was something new to me. But I was their only child. I had never given much thought to the life I was born into.

For the first few weeks after my return I dutifully fell into whatever my mother had planned for me, trying to get my bearings, but I had no real sense of connecting with anyone or anything, life here seemed so untouched by the changes in the world. My mother kept talking of what a grand opportunity I had for building up the estate to the grandeur it once had, but all I could think of was how much there was I had to break down. I was already feeling suffocated, only now realising how often in my childhood I had escaped to Larissa.

“Is anyone living in Larissa’s old room?” I asked my mother at breakfast one day.

“Of course not, dear. None of these girls want live-in jobs anymore. They’re all day-workers. Just wait till this country gets the so-called Independence they’re all clamoring for. Then there’ll be nobody to work for us at all.”

She said this with such petulance that I almost laughed. I looked hard at her, at her impeccably made-up face, even at breakfast, her polished nails and her hair. ‘Well preserved’ is the way one would have described her. I thought irreverently that that is perhaps why I had studied archaeology. My mother the well preserved. Carefully layered. The way she had always looked. The way she would look in her grave. I saw nothing of myself in her, in this house, in this life. But then, I saw nothing of myself anywhere.

One day, I left the house and walked down the slope to the old slave barracks hidden behind the trees.

In my childhood, the barracks were used for storage, except for a few rooms that housed the people who worked in the Great House. As I neared, I could see the buildings were

abandoned, maidenhair fern and wild fig sprouting from every crack, the roof beginning to cave in.

I had no difficulty identifying Larissa's from that long line of doors and though I threw open the window as soon as I entered the room, the light that streamed in barely penetrated the dust and cobweb. I went outside and broke off a tree branch and used it to brush some away.

The old iron bed was still there, without a mattress, the wash-stand, the small table and battered wooden chair. I sat on the chair, as I often did as a child, and looked keenly at the walls which were completely covered with pages and pictures cut out of newspapers and magazines and pasted down, all now faded and peeling. This is a part of me, I thought with surprise, for I recognised many of the pictures as those I had helped Larissa to cut out. I got the feeling nothing new had been added since I left.

I used to help Larissa make the paste from cassava starch but the job of sticking the pictures to the wall was hers alone. I brought the newspapers and magazines my parents were done with, and we looked at the pictures together and argued. I liked scenes of faroff lands and old buildings best while her favourites were the Holy Family, the British Royal Family and beautiful clothes. But as time went on, headlines, scenes, whole pages about the War in Europe had taken over. Larissa now wanted me to read all the news to her before she fell to with scissors and paste. With the rapidly changing events, even Jesus got pasted over.

The newspaper pages had looked so fresh when we put them up, the ink so black and startling, the headlines imposing on the room names and images that were heavy and ponderous like tolling bells: Dun-kirk, Stalin-grad, Roose-velt, Church-ill. And the most important one, the one facing Larissa's bed with the caption above it saying: "The Contingent Embarking". Larissa and I had spent countless hours searching that picture in vain, trying to find among the hundreds of young men on the deck of the ship, to decipher from the black dots composing the picture, the faces of her two sons.

And it was I, then about eight years old, who had signed for and brought the telegram to Larissa.

The moment she saw what was in my hand she said, “Wait, make me sit down,” even though she was already sitting on the steps outside the barracks. She got up and slowly walked into her room, took off her apron, straightened her cap, sat on the bed and smoothed down her dress, her back straight. I stood in the doorway and read the message. Her youngest son was on a ship that went down. I remember being struck by the phrase, “All hands”.

I never met Larissa’s sons for they were raised by her mother someplace else but she talked of them constantly, especially the youngest whose name was Zebedee. When the war came, both Moses and Zebedee like ten thousand other young men, had rushed off to join the Contingents. So far as I know, Moses was never heard of again, even after the war ended.

I can still see myself reading to Larissa about the loss of Zebedee Breeze. “All hands. All hands,” kept echoing in my head.

Larissa didn't cry. She sat there staring silently at the pictures which covered the walls to a significant depth, for the layers represented not just the many years of her own occupancy, but those of the nameless other women who had passed through that room.

I went to sit very close beside her on the bed and she put her arm around me and we sat like that for a long time. I wanted to speak but my mouth felt very dry and I could hardly get the words out. “He, Zebedee, was a hero,” was all I could think of saying.

Larissa hugged me tightly with both hands then pulled away and resumed staring at the wall. She did it with such intensity, it was as if she expected all the images to fly together and coalesce, finally, into one grand design, to signify something meaningful.

“Zebedee Breeze”, I said to myself, over and over, and his name was like a light wind passing. How could he have drowned?

After a while Larissa got up and washed her face, straightened her clothes, and walked with me back to the house to resume her duties. My parents must have spoken to her, but she took no time off. I never saw her cry that day or any other. She never mentioned her sons.

And something comes to me now that would never have occurred to me then: how when the son of one of my parents’ friends had died, his mother had been treated so tenderly by

everyone, the drama of his illness and death freely shared, the funeral a community event. That mother had worn full black for a year to underline her grief and cried often into her white lace handkerchief which made us all want to cry with her.

Women like Larissa pulled far from their homes and families by the promise of work were not expected to grieve; their sorrow, like their true selves, remaining muted and hidden. Alone in countless little rooms like the one in which I was sitting, they had papered over the layers, smoothed down the edges, till the flat and unreflective surface mirrored the selves they showed to us, the people who employed them.

Was that why we had come to believe that people like Larissa, people who were not us, had no feelings?

I was suddenly flooded with the shame of a memory that I had long hidden from myself. When I was going off to England, I had left without saying goodbye to Larissa, closest companion of my first ten years!

I can see it now. Me the child with boundless energy, raring to go. Larissa calmly grooming me, retying my ribbons, straightening my socks, spinning me around to check that my slip didn't show. Was it just my imagination that she was doing it more slowly than usual? The trunks and suitcases were stowed. My parents were already seated in the car. I was about to get in when Larissa suddenly said, "Wait! I forget. I have something for you." And she rushed off.

I stood there for a moment or two. No one was hurrying me. But with a child's impatience, I couldn't wait. I got into the car and the driver shut the door.

"Tell Larissa bye," I shouted out the window to no one in particular.

"Wait! she coming," one of the workers called out, for quite a group had gathered to see us off. But the driver had put the car in gear and we were moving. I didn't even look back.

I had planned to write to Larissa but had never done so. For a few years I sent her my love via letters to my mother and received hers in return, then even that trickled away. I had

never for one moment wondered what it was she had wanted to give me and turned back for. I had completely forgotten about it, until now.

I felt shame, not just for the way I had treated Larissa, but for a whole way of life I had inherited. People who mattered, we believed, resided in the Great House. It was we who made History, a series of events unfolding with each generation.

And yet, I realised now, it was in this room, Larissa's, that I had first learnt that history is not dates or abstraction but a space where memory becomes layered and textured. What is real is what you carry around inside of you.

This thought came unbidden: that only those who are born rich can afford the luxury of not wanting to own anything. We can try it on as a way of avoiding complicity. But in my heart of hearts I know: my inheritance already possesses me.

What Larissa wanted more than anything was the one thing a poor woman could never afford: beautiful clothes.

Sometimes when she and I had come to paste new pictures on the wall, we went a little bit crazy and ripped at torn edges with glee, digging deep down into the layers and pulling up old pages that had stuck together, revealing earlier times and treasures.

"Look Larissa," I would cry, and read aloud: 'Full white underskirts with 19 inch flounce carrying three insertions of Real Linen Torchon lace three inches wide.' Three inches, Larissa! 'Edging at foot to match. Only ten shillings and sixpence'."

"Oh Lord," Larissa would say and clap her hands, "just the thing for me!"

After our laughter subsided, Larissa would carefully lay down her new pictures to cover over what we had ripped up. She did it slowly and carefully but sometimes her hands would pause, as if her thoughts were already travelling.

Meeting the past like this in Larissa's room, I began to feel almost faint: as if the walls were crawling in towards me, the layers of fractured images thickening, shrinking the space, absorbing the light coming through the window and from the open door until I felt I was inside a tomb surrounded by hieroglyphics: images of war and the crucified Christ, princesses and movie stars, cowboys and curly-haired children, pampered cats and dogs, lions and zebras in zoos, long-haired girls strutting the latest fashions, ads for beauty creams, toothpaste and motor cars. Images of people who were never like the people who had occupied this room.

What had these pictures meant to them, the women who had lived here? What were they like, really, these women who were such close witnesses to our lives? Women who were here one day then going – , gone – , like Larissa. Leaving no forwarding address because we had never asked them for any.

Larissa's room with its silent layers of sorrow so humbly borne suffocated me. I had this urge to strip the walls, tear the layers apart. I felt such rage, I rose and put both hands against the wall facing me and I pushed, wanting to send it tumbling, all of it. Such rage that my hands battered at the walls. War! I couldn't stop, couldn't stop my fingers digging into the layers of paper, gouging and ripping. This is where these women buried their rage. Here! I sent huge sheets flying. Here! Half a wall of paper down in one big clump. Over there! Digging down now, struggling with layers of centuries, almost falling over as the big pieces came away in my hands. I couldn't stop scratching at the fragments left behind, wanting to destroy it all, till my nails were broken to the quick and bleeding.

I came to my senses in that dust-laden room sobbing loudly and holding clumps of rotting old paper in my hand, fragments flying about, clinging to my hair and clothing, sticking to my nose,

my mouth, clogging my throat. I coughed and sneezed and spun around shaking my hair like a mad dog, setting the fragments spinning too, joining the dust motes floating in the sunlight streaming in.

What a mess I was!

Ashamed, I finally summoned up the nerve to look at my handiwork. There were places that could never be stripped, the layers so old they were forever bonded to the walls, in some parts I had managed to strip the walls down to reveal the dark ugly stains from centuries of glue and printers ink and whatever else can stain. The walls were an abstract collage now: no single recognisable image was left. Without meaning to, I had erased the previous occupants.

I felt sick at my behaviour, as if I had committed a desecration. Larissa's room. I had no right.

But the longer I sat in the room the more I realised it was giving off no disturbing emanations. What I had done had neither added to nor diminished it. The rage had not been the women's but mine. In the wider scheme of things, it was a gesture without meaning. The women like Larissa would always be one step ahead, rooms like this serving only as temporary refuge. They knew from the history of their mothers and their mothers before them, they would always move on. To other rooms elsewhere. To raise for a while children not their own who – like their own – would repay them with indifference or ingratitude – or death.

I thought I was taking possession, but the room had already been condemned.

I got up and leaned out the window and was surprised at how fresh and clean the air felt. I offered up my face, my hair, my arms to the wind that was lightly blowing and I closed my eyes so it would wash away the last fragments of paper and cobweb. O Zebedee Breeze! The name of Larissa's son had seemed so magical to me as a child I had often whispered it to myself, and as I whispered it now, it conjured up the long-forgotten image of Larissa and the Pain Tree.

A few days after I had brought the news of Zebedee's death to Larissa, I saw her walking back and forth in the yard, searching the ground for something. Finally, she bent and picked up what I discovered afterwards was a nail. Then she took up a stone and walked a little way into the bushes. I was so curious, I followed her, but something told me not to reveal myself.

She stopped when she reached the cedar tree and I watched as she stood for a good while with her head bent close to the tree and her lips moving as if she were praying. Then she pounded the trunk of the tree with the stone, threw the stone down, and strode off without looking back. When I went and examined the tree, I saw that she had hammered in a nail. But I was even more astonished when I noticed there were many nails hammered right into the trunk.

At first, I sensed that this was something so private I should keep quiet about it. But I couldn't help it, one day I did ask Larissa why she had put the nail into the tree.

"Don't is the Pain Tree?" she asked in a surprised voice, as if that was something everyone knew.

"What do you mean by Pain Tree?"

"Eh, where you come from, girl?" Larissa exclaimed. "Don't is the tree you give your pain to?"

I must have looked puzzled still for she took the trouble to explain. "Let us say, Lorraine, I feel a heavy burden, too heavy for me to bear, if I give the nail to the tree and ask it to take my burden from me, is so it go. Then I get relief."

"So you one put all those nails in the tree?" I asked, for I could not imagine one person having so much pain.

She looked embarrassed then she said, "Not all of them. I find some when I come here. That's how I know is a Pain Tree."

"You mean, other people do this?"

"Of course", she said. "Plenty people do it." Then she paused and said almost to herself, "What else to do"?

After that, whenever I remembered, I would go and look at the tree but I never detected any new nails. Perhaps if I had been older and wiser I would have interpreted this differently, but at the time I took it to mean that Larissa felt no more pain.

Once or twice when I was particularly unhappy, I had myself gone to the tree to try and drive a nail in. But I did so without conviction and the magic didn't work for me, the nails bent and never went in properly and I ended up throwing both nail and stone away in disgust.

"Maybe people like you don't need the Pain Tree," Larissa had said after my second or third try.

It was the only time I ever felt uncomfortable with her.

Leaving Larissa's room, I deliberately left the door and window wide open for the breeze to blow through and I went outside and stood on the steps of the barracks to get my bearings, for the landscape had vastly changed. Then I literally waded into the bushes, looking for a cedar. I had decided to try and find the Pain Tree.

It took me a while and at first I couldn't believe I had found the right tree for what had been a sapling was now of massive growth, its trunk straight and tall, its canopy high in the air.

I didn't expect to see any nail marks, for the place where they had been pounded in was now way above the ground, but I knew they were there and I kept walking around the tree and looking up until finally with the sun striking at the right angle – and, yes, it might have been my imagination – I caught a glint of something metallic and what looked like pockmarks high up on the trunk.

Standing there, gazing upwards, it came to me why Larissa and all those women had kept on giving the tree their pain, like prayers. Because they knew no matter what else happened in their lives, the tree would keep on bearing them up, higher and higher, year after year.

I had the uncomfortable feeling that I should be grieving not for them, but for myself. People like me would always inherit the land, but they were the ones who already possessed the Earth.

Before I went back to the house, I spent a long time searching the ground for a nail and when I found one, I picked up a stone and I went and stood close to the tree and whispered to it and then I carefully positioned the nail and pounded it with the stone, and it went straight in.