

PASSING TIME

I never even got to see her. I know that if they'd let me see her, it would have helped. I could have stroked her hair and told her that mummy was there. Not to be afraid. Told her that mummy was sorry she hadn't protected her.

But, oh no, they knew best. There was no point in torturing myself. Gerry could identify her. It would be too traumatic for me. I wouldn't be able to cope. They say I have to give it time. Time. Time is a great healer. Time will give me the strength to go on. In a while the memories will take their rightful place and I will be able to look forward. Maybe have another child.

How can they even think of that? Let alone say it to my face? A replacement. That's what it would be. Something else to fill my life. Another warm, soft body to hold and nurture. Don't they realise she was more than that?

"How are you today, Mrs Pierce? Feeling any better?" The well-meaning voice chirped from beside my stiff white sheets. "Haven't touched your food again. Come, come you must eat otherwise you'll never get well, will you?"

If I just lie here with my eyes shut, she'll give up and go away. Who does she think she is? A square meal isn't going to buck me up. Sometimes they're so stupid these nurses. Treat you as though you're simple. There's nothing wrong with my head, you silly cow. Even Gerry has become one of them. Gerry who lay awake at night worrying. Even he's joined forces with them. It was the silent shudder of his shoulders as he lay there with his back to me. Perhaps if we had touched. Held each other close after it happened we'd be

able to share this together. But it's too late now. It was he who suggested I should come here.

"Of course, you're free to leave whenever you want, love," was his feeble excuse. "I just think you need more help than I can give, you can't go on like this, you're wasting away."

I know I'm bloody wasting away, Gerry. Do you think I can't see what's happening to me? It's not the diagnosis I need but the cure. How do I start to fill the deep, deep hole that's been ripped inside me? How can I ever rid myself of the fact that I wasn't with her when it happened? I was her protector and I let her down. I failed her. Damn these tears. What use are they to her?

My mother came to visit this morning. She couldn't help having a go. Started up like an old recording. I refused to open my eyes but I could picture her sitting there. She'd be wearing her concerned look, especially cultivated. No, that's unfair, I know she cares really.

"Come on Cathy, you've been in here weeks now. When are you going to start getting back on your feet? You've got to start living again. And there's Gerry to consider. You're not the only one who's suffered. He still manages to come in and see you every day. It's not right for you in here. Why not ask Gerry to take you away somewhere? Have a complete break. Do you the world of good."

She hasn't got a clue. A two-week breakaway in some foreign clime is hardly going to erase four years worth of memories. Still, she means well. Perhaps next time we should go and sit in the gardens. This room's pretty gloomy. If I suggested that she'd start to think that I was getting better.

Oh no, that nurse saw me reach for the bread. Now she'll come over and start trying to be jolly. Why can't they just leave me alone? I don't need their comforting words or good intentions. Peace. Peace is what I need.

"So, Mrs Pierce you're feeling hungry, are you? Let me help you finish that off." Her uniform rustles as she positions herself beside me. " Here, open wide. There, now that you've finished why don't you go for a walk in the grounds and get some air? It's a beautiful spring day. There are some chairs down by the lake. The change would do you good."

Maybe if you left me alone instead of treating me like an imbecile I might just do that. God, this food's worse than school dinners. I wonder how much Gerry is paying for all this. He might as well have stuck me in a boarding house by the sea for all the good it's doing me. It's visiting times I can't face. The woman opposite has a little girl about the same age as Laura. Long, dark, curly hair halfway down her back. I used to spend ages brushing Laura's before she went to bed. Beautiful blond mop she had. Always was thick, even as a baby. Got it from my side of the family. Gerry's are dark. Got his eyes though. Deep blue, like cool, cool lakes. She would have been a stunner when she was older. We'll have trouble with the boys Gerry used to say.

After lunch I went down to the lake. I couldn't stand the thought of visiting hour. Couldn't stand watching that little girl come skipping in to greet her mother. It was lovely down by the water. The ducks were swimming and the daffodils were starting to open. The sun was low but still warm and I could feel a slight breeze on my skin. I'd taken a jacket. The one that I always used to wear on our walks. When I put my hand in the pocket I could feel the wrappers from Laura's sweets. They always helped to coax her the last little bit. I gripped my hands so tightly that the nails started to pierce the flesh.

The lakeside was deserted when I arrived but an old man soon joined me. He had to be helped down by two nurses, who tucked him up in a tartan blanket. He looked about a hundred, though I found out he'd had his eightieth the day before. Apparently nobody came. The nurses think everyone here is an idiot. They talk about you as though you're not there. You could hear them commiserating all the way back up the path.

I didn't want to talk. It was only after about half an hour that I looked across. I wasn't sure at first but after a second glance there was no mistaking the tears glistening on his cheeks. As he turned his head towards me I saw the look in his eyes.

There's something about a person that's known real sorrow. You can see behind the mask they put on to fool you. The eyes hold the key. You know that deep down is an insufferable pain. I knew as I watched the tears that he had reached his limit.

"She would have loved it yesterday."

"I'm sorry?" His voice was so quiet that I had to lean forward to hear him. "Edith, my wife, she would have loved it."

I shifted in my chair to face him. "Has she been gone long?"

"Over twenty years now." One arthritic hand fumbled in his pocket for a hankie.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I don't wish to bore you with an old man's troubles."

"No trouble at all," I replied making an effort to sound gay. "I understand it was your birthday. Did you have an nice time?"

"Oh, they do try hard here, but it wasn't a patch on the old days. They've given up on me. I hear them talking. They think I can't hear them. But I know what's going on. I haven't lost my marbles yet. Don't you let them give up on you, my dear."

The knarled hand grasped hold of mine and he stared straight past my defensive screen into my eyes. He reminded me of my grandfather. How I wished he was alive. He wouldn't have lectured me like my mother. He would have understood. Two figures in white appeared. They started to prise his hand from mine. I wanted to tell them to stop but somehow I just sat there.

"Now, Mr Thompkins, what's all this nonsense about. Who's given up on you?" They were kind voices who helped him from his chair. "Come along with us and we'll make you a nice cup of tea."

I returned to the lakeside most afternoons. Mr Thompkins would often join me. We would sit and watch the ducks move noisily across the water, or the starlings gather high above us in the trees that stretched out over the grass. Often we sat in silence, he with the plaid rug over his frail knees, but gradually we talked about things that had passed. He told me of his life with Edith and how lonely he'd been since she'd gone. Wishing that he'd loved her more. That he'd done things differently. They'd had a son but he'd been killed abroad when he was a teenager. Edith had found it difficult to get over. Mr Thompkins had busied himself in work not noticing the effect it was having until it was too late. I never mentioned Laura, but he knew.

"I knew it was you, that first day," he said turning to stare at me. "Nothing's a secret here. I'd heard them talking about the poor woman who couldn't get over the loss of her daughter. The moment I saw your eyes I knew it was you."

A sharp pain stabbed my heart and I felt the tears go rolling down my cheeks in huge uncontrollable waves.

"It's good to cry, Cathy," he murmured kindly. "I've spent the last twenty years fighting it. Asking why me? Why my wife and son? What had I done to deserve it?"

As I fumbled for a tissue I felt his hand gently cover mine.

"You mustn't waste your life like I did. I've been too engrossed in regret and bitterness to see the value of what I'd got left. You're young. Your husband loves you. Don't waste time looking for answers because there are none. Hold onto what you have before you turn around and find you can't walk out of here."

As spring turned into summer our panorama changed. Colourful baskets of geranium and lobelia appeared about the grounds. Swans glided across the still water and the days became hot. I looked forward to our talks. We'd sit for a while then I'd watch the birds with half closed eyes waiting while he dozed.

It came as no surprise that afternoon to see the nurse approaching with the news. There was something in her step that told me. He'd died, as he'd wanted, peacefully in his sleep. I was glad for him that it had happened.

Visiting time. I carefully arrange the tartan rug over the end of my bed. Mrs Wainright's daughter will come skipping in as usual. Her hair's been cut. It doesn't fly about her face anymore like it used to. Next bed along, the new woman's mother always comes in around now. And Gerry, faithful Gerry. He never stopped coming to see me, even when I wouldn't open my eyes. I can see him pacing the corridor now. He's carrying a bunch of yellow roses. I expect they're from the garden. He always loved to busy himself out there. Those beige trousers are hanging off him. They used to pull a bit around the waist. It's time I got out of here. It would be good to go off somewhere together again. We could pack up the car and see where it takes us. We used to do that a lot years ago.