

Crossing the Divide

In the dark I could be anywhere, anytime. In that floating place near sleep, I can nudge my thoughts back towards them.

A woman's voice - "Come on, make up your mind, or you'll be late for school" then a young girl's "all right Mummy, I'll have crispies - can I have sugar on them?"

The woman again - is it me? "It's bad for your teeth"

Why didn't I let her? Why did I sound sharp? Why didn't I just scoop her up, breathe her in, and tell her how wonderful she was to me?

Further back, a young man's voice "You going down the disco Friday?"

Now a young woman -

"Dunno, 'spect so - you going?"

Even further back - sounds of a playground - girls singing a skipping song, and the sound of rope hitting the yard repeatedly.

Now, was sudden, and loud.

"Rosemary, wake up - breakfast!" For a minute I don't know which time, which me, then I

move to sit up - then I know. A woman says impatiently

"Wait Rosemary, you know I need the hoist"

Hands maneuver me, position me, and now I'm at the table with other bleary-eyed folk - hair sticking up - mouth dry and foul as the breakfast dishes clatter down in front of us. My heart sinks. What is the point?

The woman looks at me- "Not eating today?" I shake my head, and turn away from the spoon. This one is gentle, our eyes meet, and she takes the slop away. Then it's the drugs trolley, and I swallow mine without fuss. A man across the table refuses his tablets, swears loudly, and stands up. I don't know if he took them in the end. I expect he did; rebellion doesn't usually last long here; people haven't got the energy, or they forget what they were protesting about.

I am wheeled back to my bed, curtains pulled, and a quick whisk with a flannel before I am stiffly inserted into my clothes. No shower this morning then? I don't know whether to be annoyed or pleased. It's certainly a struggle, and undignified - as is everything really. The day moves on - instantly forgettable.

Another morning, bright and noisy, everything aches. I shrink from the hard surfaces, fearing they will bruise me. It's the gentle carer again; she is older than the others, and I see a depth of understanding in her eyes. She offers me toast when I turn away from the cereal bowl.

"Rosemary, you need to eat. I've been told that you refused your dinner yesterday too. If you

don't eat today I will have to refer you. Do you fancy a boiled egg? No? Well let's hope you can manage your lunch later." I try to smile back, but it's an effort, and I'm not sure I achieve it.

"What would I like to eat? I think of dinner dates in my life, and a menu of appetising dishes scroll through my mind - steak béarnaise, salmon en crouete, beef wellington, reminding me also of the past boyfriends who escorted me. They were mostly tall and dark. Funny that I ended up with Steve - blond, and barely my height; He was handsome though, a bit scatter-brained, oh but I loved him - still loved him, though he was gone.

The background noises of the dining room. I rouse myself, here we are again. This time it's lunch.

"Rosemary, eat your dinner love. You still refusing to eat? What a waste. Emma told you didn't she. Come on, open your mouth!" The girl wrestles to get my mouth open, but I keep my teeth clamped tight. How dare she?

I have to breathe, and the spoon slips in. I shoot it back out again. I have never eaten fish pie, and I'm not going to start now. Her face is a picture, and I want to laugh. I seem to be watching this scene from the top of the cupboard - those tablets are having a funny effect - and it's hugely absurd, comical, and pathetic all at the same time. Eventually she gives up. I win, but I don't get my cup of tea.

I feel happier this afternoon, placed in the conservatory where I can see the breeze stirring the trees, and the leaf shadows dancing on the lawn. I doze.

A young boy's voice: "Rosey, come and see what I've found in the pond." That's my brother George. I run across the grass to look, then back away hastily, as he holds up a frog. Screaming and laughing sounds. "Mummy, he's trying to put a frog down my neck".

My mother's voice: "George, Rosemary, think of the poor frog, put it back and come in now. It's nearly teatime; wash your hands and come and sit with me in the kitchen" the longing overwhelms me "If only I could".

I awake to the clattering sound of dishes. Another day? Another meal, another carer. The woman in front of me speaks sharply. "Eat the jelly at least" I say softly "I ate my lunch".

"What you say? It's too much? It's not too much - go on try it" I accept the spoon, and move the jellied lump around my mouth. The orange tang is very strong and I swallow to be rid of it. At that moment, there is a loud belch from a woman sitting close to me, and her whole meal is vomited back on to the table. The smell is overpowering and I almost cry. I did eat my lunch today - to please them because I am scared that they might force feed me with a tube into my stomach. I'm not sure if they can do that without permission, but I am appalled at the possibility; they could keep me alive indefinitely.

Later, or is it the next day, a carer sits beside me and takes my hand. "Rosemary, my name is Sarah, and I am here to see that our residents have everything they need and are as comfortable and happy with us as we can make them" the sobbing gradually eases away.

"So, I have been shown your notes, and together with your lack of appetite, it seems you have little interest in your fellow residents, or any of our social events" I look at her during the pause. What can I say? Playing throw and catch the ball with jolly Kylie, or joining in with 'I do like to be beside the seaside' at the sing-along, makes me want to die. I say: "I like to go out" my mouth feels too dry to make the words properly, so I reach for some water. "I like to go out" Sarah's face brightens at my response.

"Oh, of course - the weather has been just awful lately, so we haven't had our monthly outings have we? -staffing's an issue too"

The last bit was more to herself.

"You leave that with me, my dear; we're into April now, and I'm sure we'll be getting better days soon. Now, there we are, we'll make a deal. I'll arrange a trip, but you must promise me that you'll eat, you have to be well enough for me to include you in the outing. Is there anywhere you'd particularly enjoy - town, or the park, down by the old boating lake? In the meantime I'm going to increase the dosage of your tablets to help you along. Ok?" I nod, not really listening after boating lake. I remember Steve -rolled up shirtsleeves, his tanned muscular arms flexing as he rowed us across the lake. I want to go to the park.

The stronger tablets make me drowsy, but that's a good thing. I feel more there than here, now, and there is a much nicer place to be. The outing was scheduled for Thursday, and every morning I struggle back to the surface, and ask "Is it Thursday?" and one day it is.

There is the buzz of preparation. Most of the carers are new to me, but I recognise the carer in charge is Isobel, a big capable woman, but not friendly. Once we're on the bus she talks to the driver, but the new carers make an effort to talk to the residents.

"How're you doing Rosemary?" one asks me. "I heard you were keen to come out today"

"Steve loves the park" I say. She looks about her uncertainly,

"Oh he's not HERE " I say, almost laughing at the idea of my wonderfully fit Steve sitting on a bus full of geriatrics - I try not to think of myself. I look out of the window to follow the route, but it is difficult. "Where are we?" I ask

"Just turning into Queensway" I strain my eyes to recognise landmarks, after all I've spent my whole life in this town - but it could be any town, anywhere. Mcdonalds, Costa coffee, Wilkinsons, I feel a bit giddy and close my eyes. The park will be the same; I'll feel nearer to him there - I know it's mad, but I almost think I will see him.

It's not the same - a huge disappointment. Where is the floral clock? The rhododendron bushes that hugged the benches, making secluded alcoves for lovers...the neat flower beds? Worst of all the boating lake has gone. I look around at the flat open space; an enormous children's playground, a smart decked area, with tasteful planting, and a boardwalk out to the cafe - much grander than it ever was. A cloud over the sun reflects my mood.

I sit quietly as we're organised around tables, and Isobel and the others bring drinks and cakes. I

try to be somewhere else, but it's hard.

"The coffee here is crap" says one of the girls "Why didn't we take them into town, there's a new coffee shop opened we could have tried. Looks like it's gonna rain anyway. We're gonna get well soaked out here" I shudder at the thought of a new coffee shop - to be honest I don't like new anything - but they're ear-splittingly noisy too, and I don't think I could stand it.

When we've finished, Isobel suggests wheeling us around for a bit before we get back in the bus, and I try to enjoy the experience.

"It's not gonna rain - look the sun's coming out again" says my pusher as we turn a corner, and there it is - the boating lake, looking the same, wonderfully the same, as the sun lights up the scene, on cue. Families walking, couples hand in hand, and if I screw up my eyes, yes, there we are - rowing past the end of the island, and under the bridge - Steve pulling strongly on the oars. I feel it, I believe it - it is tremendous.

"Well I'm freezing, it's really boring round here" says Mabel's carer over our heads. "Let's make sure we go into town next time. I smile because it doesn't matter anymore. I know I won't be here for the next time; Steve is just over the bridge, and he's waiting for me.