

Monument

by Rachel Escott, 2007

Strange it is to come back here after so many years. Strange even to want to. This place cuts me with the tight bounds of memory. Sorrow and joy, the two sides to life. It has been a witness to my life, but the joyful came before the pain, and so here am I one last time to honour those memories.

It is late January. All afternoon was heady with a false smell of spring but now the day sighs and turns to the waiting arms of a more seasonal chill. The trees remember their silhouettes. I park the hired car at the end of the little mud lane, rocking through water-filled ruts between hedges that snatch deeper into the lane than I remember. The tides of weekend people no longer contain their growth. Wrapping my scarf firmly against the coming wind, I pass through the old iron-and-rust gate that has not kissed I last came through. I cross the rough field. Old feet in old shoes stumbling on tussocks of the tired grass that is no longer the preserve of picnics but is grazed by seething cows. My memories are equally out of place, unwanted by the profit-watching farmer who now owns the land. Still, as stubborn as old age is, I let the remembered images play before my eyes like the whirring reflection of some other family's life, proudly captured on Super 8 film.

The sun-filled afternoons of girls and youths passing on the riverside path. One smooth golden head was bent to brown. There were soft giggles. Her arms cradled across the cautious breasts beneath a loosely-flung cardigan of the home-made fashion. At the destined hour of that summer, a raw-boned youth held out a swift hand to the unknown girl whose feet had foundered on a tree root in the path, and father and mother began their story.

In spring, when the low sun struck diamonds and sapphires off the dew on the bent and brittle grass stalks, a tiny ruby with fainter diamonds circling was placed on the finger of the girl, the girl whose eyes filled with tears for a passion she was too innocent to name. All this is the story of our family. And the camera should have stilled itself there, the image blurring into a happy ever after.

But the camera keeps rolling. The grass is green now as step by step I scatter the laughing children who once screamed in the frenzy of their games. The hot sun was a spotlight on the brightness of their clothes. The mothers and fathers look on, unswerving in their delight in this field, as their daughters wind daisies and their boys fight. A fall-down, scrape-a-knee and a run to mother. Always mother. Then pick up and run again, the world unchanged and undoubted. Home-made lemonade was cooled in bottles at the water's edge, to slip down the fevered throat at the end of the day while mother's

cool finger's caressed a moist forehead. "He's overexcited." The words floated like truth from above.

The child looked away from his hectic friends to see the mother and father, golden head bent against brown, a world separate from his.

When was it the thin boy became a muscular man of judgement? How did his gaunt arms and hesitant knees firm into assurance? When did he learn to speak with a deep voice that could withhold praise or apportion favour in the telling of the legend? When did the jealousy begin?

The broad river draws me to itself, and I try to find some warmth in its winter existence. The black outlines of the watchful hedges meet at the exact point where the sun is dissolving in the water, drawing blood from the overarching clouds to mingle with the river. My eyes cannot leave that amphitheatre of bright cloud and black land. I am pierced by the pain of the gored sky. Unable to cry even now, I wait for its bleeding to cease. I wait to be released, for the sky to cease its judgement.

There was no blood in our story.

The luminous sky dies quickly and I wrap myself in the dark. The cold is deeper now with damp fingers that stroke my arms beneath my coat and play against the hair at the back of my head. Still the cameras roll, with images dimmed on the black screen.

A ten year old boy with a birthday rod was hesitant at the river's edge, temper building as the invisible nylon thread snagged in the weeds and brought his inexpert curve to a halt. Tears of shame stung the roots of his eyelashes as, with a face red and resentful, he overheard his father. "He'll never learn. He's always been clumsy. He lacks patience to learn."

"Never mind, darling, he'll be better when he's older. You'll be proud of him then." But did he ever make his father proud? The years rolled by, the fumbled cricket bat and broken cycle gave way to hunched shoulders and a distrustful voice, eyes strangely drawn to the ground and an absence of ambition.

I know the path by instinct, blinded though I am by recollection. Before the place where the river curves out of sight behind the trees, a shelter welcomes walkers, with benches to rest on and a view back along this water, a view back upon my life and family. The shelter's angled walls are of glowing wood and the sloping roof ends in a deep pelmet like the canopy of a pleasure boat. This is a place I know and dread. My heart should have bled like the sun has bled. Cold and alone, my knees fail and I sink down onto the bench, feeling the cold of the slowly rotting wood seep through my clothes to the back of my legs. It

is hard to perch here on the two remaining slats. Icy drops land on my head, run off my smooth hair and insinuate themselves inside my collar.

“This shelter was built in memory of my loving father, James Williams, of York and Gloucester, 1994. Enjoy this place as he did.” It is not so very long ago, then, that he died. A childhood ago. But few people come here now. Maybe a tramp, forgiving the shelter’s deficiencies, will on summer nights witness the son’s sorrow? But no-one, not the son, nor the parish, have tended this memorial in years.

As I sit, echoes of mourning come to me. The man who stood at the river of my memory scattered ashes as he cried with bleak tears, alone in the depth of his loss of her, not noticing that other figure standing away from him, crying with bleak tears.

I have no need of light to know the words on the engraved plaque above my head. After all, without those words he would never have been caught. No one would have known that slowly and with admirable skill, he was poisoning me out of his life. But he was always impatient. His urgency to be stronger than his father made him plan this shelter, write this inscription before I was halfway dead. And when my wasting illness worsened into suspicion, the walls of this shelter could not hide him.

Tomorrow, he will be released into whatever life he can make, and I shall drive back along the mud track and return to my own childhood home. I will never come to this place again. For I no longer have a son; but the son never had the father he ought.

The End

Monument

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