

Something or someone I have loved

By Peggy Denimal

I should have tried harder to stop her leaving that day. I knew it was a dangerous day from the way the wind hurled the leaves up off the woodland path like a small child throwing objects in a fit of anger. I felt the incoming storm like an electric current running through my fingertips as I ran them across the backs of damp rocks abutting the riverbed. I felt it in the way the trees clawed desperately at my overcoat as I walked the pathway home to the cottage. They were trying to get my attention, to stop me in my tracks and scream "You mustn't let her go!"

I tried, I did. Sometimes I wonder if I just tell myself this over and over to try to assuage some of the guilt, but in my memory, I know I told her not to go. I said it was too dangerous and to wait until the storm had passed. But she just turned towards me and gave me that one sided smile of hers. That dear sweet jam on crumpet smile. I would give anything to see that smile again.

She stood there, coat in hand leaning on the back of the old wooden chair and said "Oh don't be so silly Francis, all will be fine. I'll be back before you know it and it'll be cheese sandwiches and fresh milk for tea."

She always had a way of calming that churning fizz in my stomach. When I was a child, I used to get so worked up about any old thing. Things like a squirrel running past the window and making me jump, or an overturned cup spilling water over my precious artwork. Things that now I know are as significant as a footprint in the pre tidal sand. But at the time, all my feelings felt wide and impossible like the topmost part of a valley. They would bubble up inside my chest and radiate to the rest of my body so much so that I could not stop myself shaking.

And there, in those moments is where she would be. Her arms were wide enough to hold those gargantuan feelings easily. She would say "it's one of those whoopsy moments again Francis" and lead me to the kitchen

where she would take her old camp coffee tin down off the dusty shelf where she kept all the dried herbs, conkers, and seeds she had collected. The tin was filled with old screws, sand, and broken bits of seashells and it made the most satisfying sound when shaken. It reminded me of the crunch of a horse's hoof on gravel or feet over frozen grass.

She would take me to a warm spot by the fire and place the tin inside my hands between her own and then say "shake Francis, as fast as you can.... faster, like this! Like a cantering bull," Together we shook until I thought at any moment the tin was going to fly right up into the eaves where the blackbirds nest, and a smile gradually began to break out from the corners of my mouth. Then, slowly, very slowly, and never taking her eyes off of my own, she would reduce the speed of the shaking. Slower and slower still, until finally it stopped and a huge breath would fall out of me, taking all my feelings with it. Then she would take my hand and place it on my chest under her own and say "Feel here. That's your heart Francis, it's calm now."

I don't know how many tears of mine rained down on the lid of that old camp coffee tin over the years. I had no choice but to just let them fall onto the tin between us because my hands were always clasped between hers, one side warm from the heat of the fire beside us, one side cold. After she was gone, I sat for hours under the kitchen table turning the tin over and over in my hands, imagining how I might fill it with an ocean's worth of tears. How it could be a perpetual fountain if I let it.

She just had that way about her. An ability to calm my heart when it was racing faster than it could endure. That's what she did that morning, when she bustled around collecting stray pennies and dropping them into her skirt pockets, heading towards the door mumbling that it was "just mummy nature letting us know that she's still there." I wish she was still here. Why didn't I stop her?