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The Moon

by MaryPat Campbell

While Giles seemed kindly, bright he was not. It took him the best part of an hour to remove the strait jacket. I quietly gave him instructions but he couldn't follow them and became more frustrated and less able to listen to me. At last the cursed jacket was off and I could stretch my arms and spine for the first time since they'd put it on me some hours before. For a few moments I felt liberated.

This short sensation of freedom, however, soon gave way to a sense of discomfort and foreboding. I counted twenty beds along my row, and twenty others to match along the wall opposite. Forty beds and forty men in one big chamber. A small set of drawers stood to one side of each bed, presumably to house the few clothes each man was allowed. Four unlit lamps sat on trestle tables down the middle of the chamber, and six windows punctured the walls high up so that they let in some grimy light but were too high to look out from.

A bell clanged and Giles, who had now disappeared, shouted at me to stir myself when I showed no sign of moving. He gestured with his head in the direction of the door through which I had entered. I got up and walked to the door, unable to see Giles but heard him muttering somewhere among the corners and crevices of the dormitory. Suddenly he swung the door open and motioned me out into the corridor again. Once again he shouted and a small swarthy skinned man appeared as if out of nowhere. This man looked up at me cautiously and said I should follow him downstairs. The look in his eyes reminded me of a dog that has been beaten and can no longer trust any human to be fair minded or trustworthy.

Feeling wary myself of this entire place and everyone I had met so far in it, I put one foot in front of the other in an attempt to calm myself down, not knowing what to expect next as I followed the dog-man back along the corridor and down the stairs again. This time I took my time to look out of the numerous windows all along one side of the lengthy corridor, and what I saw lifted my spirits. Mostly men and some women working in what looked like vegetable gardens, pulling weeds and gathering potatoes, parsnips, carrots and some greens. At least there might be good healthy food here. Every so often, the dog-man would look over his shoulder at me, to check I was still following but also I think to try to get the measure of me.

‘What brings you here then?’ He barked at me.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered, aware of how feeble this must have sounded.

‘You’d best get used to living here, it’s taken me almost a lifetime.’

I wondered what he meant, and began to realise that maybe he had been an inmate himself here once, and had now perhaps graduated to being an attendant to the warders and doctors here. I wanted to ask him more about himself but did not dare.

‘They call me Silas,’ he added and as I had not yet been asked my own name or been introduced to any one since my arrival here, knowing his name gave me a foothold.

Feeling emboldened, I asked Silas who these workers in the gardens were, and if I would be allowed to join them. Sounding annoyed that he had been over familiar with me, he barked back,

‘Not for the likes of me to say what you will be allowed to do here. I’m to deliver you to the Dean to see what’s what.’

It was fast approaching dusk and the bodies of the workers outside took on black silhouetted shapes against the land and sky as the light faded behind them. The scene reminded me of a picture I had once seen in a book about two Flemish painters named Jan and Pieter, and who’s second names I could not now remember. In fact, I could not remember my own name and was grateful no one had yet asked it of me. I imagined this Dean might want to know my name, what would I tell him?

I followed Silas until we came to yet another large wooden door on which he rapped a tight little rhythm. A gruff male voice answered immediately and Silas and myself were ushered inside.

Suddenly I found myself in a room darkening swiftly into the night. An attendant was lighting the lamp on what I presumed was the Dean's desk. The Dean himself sat by an open fire blazing quietly and warmly in a large grate opposite the door. The Dean poked the fire and said something to Silas who turned on his heel and exited the room, casting a sly glance in my direction as he left. I stood there not knowing what to do for quite a few moments while the Dean sifted through some papers on a low table by his chair at the fire.

I looked out the window and in the darkening night sky shimmered the moon, already risen and looking back through the window at me. The moon and I recognised each other and I was suddenly almost tearful to register this recognition.

The Dean put his papers down, took off his spectacles, sighed and looked at me wearily.

'You've been sent here because of your outrageous behaviour in the last institution you were in. We have agreed to take you in here to see what, if anything, we might do with you. Have you anything to say for yourself?'

I kept looking at the moon through the window while the moon steadily looked back at me. I shook my head and said nothing.

'Very well then, I hope you will do as you are bidden, and in time we shall see.'

The Dean pulled a cord dangling by the fireplace and a small bell sounded. Silas came back into the room and was instructed by the Dean to take me to the refectory as it was almost time for the evening meal.