

Nightmare

by MaryPat Campbell

They say fear exists only in our imagination. Comforting words, but untrue. Last night sanity and balance deserted me. I'm not sure what happened or if I can put words on it but I will try.

It started with a nightmare that woke me up in the small hours. Cold sweat drenched my body, but the familiar sounds of my fellow inmates snoring, wheezing, some keening or quietly crying calmed me in a way that I would never have thought possible when I came here a few years ago.

A sliver of moon shone in the high windows on the wall opposite my bed, it seemed to pierce my eyes with its sharp sickle edges. A large bird flew past the same window, momentarily blotting out the moon and I thought I could hear its wings flap. A loud wailing began somewhere else in the building. I sat up and listened, no one stirred. The bird and the moon joined the dreams of my companions still restlessly sleeping.

I put on my tunic and padded towards the big door, usually kept locked at night. Last night, Silas, the dormitory keeper, for some reason had not locked it. I opened it as quietly as I could and stepped out into the bigger corridor. I realised then that the wailing came from outside in the kitchen garden. I could see a woman silhouetted in the moonlight near the apple trees, then with a leap of my heart I realised it was Ursula. I ran down the corridor, down two flights of steps to the garden door, left ajar. A cold damp breeze assailed me, but I hardly noticed it. I ran towards Ursula with my arms out and called her name softly so as not to wake anyone and cause a fuss.

Ursula was crying and wailing and twisting about, as if her feet were planted in the ground. She was covered in mud, her hair wet with rain. She didn't see me at first and screamed louder when she saw me approach. I tried to soothe her and tell her it was me, Jones, coming to help her. She roared at me to leave her alone, let her die here if necessary. I took her by the shoulders and shook her, shouted at her to stop making such a noise so that I could begin to understand what had happened to her. She continued to shout and push me away.

Lights were lit in the hospital windows overlooking the garden, wardens were shouting and running down the stone steps with lanterns swinging in their hands, and before I knew what was happening, I was grabbed from behind and forced onto the muddy ground. Ursula continued to shout, and four men pinned me to the ground and bawled at me to stop fighting them.

I quietened then, and heard Ursula's wild voice fading away as other wardens lifted and pulled her back into the building by her arms and legs. Two of the wardens holding me down shouted obscenities at me, and said I would be brought before the superintendent in the morning. I was roughly hoisted to my feet, muddied and wet, and hurried back to my dormitory with a warden each side of me, pinning my arms behind my back. They shouted at Silas, for not locking the door, they shouted at me to go and clean myself up and wait for daylight.

I sat on my bed, dumb and completely puzzled. Had I really shaken Ursula? Did she and they not understand that I was trying to help? How would I explain myself come daylight to the superintendent? What would happen now about the work I was to do with him about the inheritance from my father the Bishop?

I sat on my bed with a pool of mud beneath me, my feet soaked and dirty, my clothes destroyed from being torn by the wardens as they jostled me in their rough hands. My heart thumped in my chest. I fell silent and stared into the grey dawn as it came silently through the window where the moon had been not long before. I heard my companions stir and wake themselves, with mumbled incoherent questions. I curled up and lay on my mud-streaked bed and tried to make sense of what had happened.