

The Refectory

by MaryPat Campbell

Feeling confident all of a sudden, Ursula continued on her way to the refectory almost colliding with Jones in the doorway. He smiled at her in greeting. Neither of them said anything. The hammering in her heart continued in his presence, and Ursula could not bring herself to say what she wanted to say to Jones, about wanting to join him in his escape.

“I can’t think about that right now. If I do I’ll go crazy. I’ll think about it tomorrow,” she said to herself. She pushed away the fright of engaging with Jones by telling herself that speaking to him in private would be a much better idea, and that she would do it tomorrow.

Ursula and Jones walked in to the refectory side by side, like a newly married couple walking down the aisle. This being Bethlem Hospital and not her father’s cathedral filled with excited wedding guests, they were surrounded by the familiar din of plates, pans and Old William, the kitchen porter who made the worst din of all. The refectory was his territory, and he liked to show his mastery of it by shouting at the top of his voice at everyone to calm down, to not push in the queue, to each take his or her turn quietly and not behave like the mad men and women that they were.

Ursula’s confidence vanished under the weight of the immediate hullabaloo. She stood quietly until it was her turn to receive her platter of food from Old William. In her head was her own personal din, scolding herself bitterly for not asking Jones what she so wanted to ask him. Old William peered at her and boomed,

“What’s the matter with you today then Miss Ursula, not like you to be quiet as a mouse!”

Jones looked sideways at Ursula, also wondering why she was so unusually quiet, unable to guess what was on her mind. Ursula’s familiar vexed self he was used to, but today she was full of loneliness, shyness, wanting to be longed for by Jones, whilst fearing at the same time that none of this could ever be.

The din in her mind took Ursula’s voice away, and struck her dumb. Carrying her platter of food she walked to the table farthest away from Jones, who assumed she was signalling to him to keep away from her. That’s how it seemed to him, as he made his way sadly to another table to sit with the men at the farthest end of the room away from her.