

THE TWISTED THREAD

Short stories by Mark Bastable

A Splash of Rainbow

Mark Bastable

We gaze at each other in tearful silence as the nurses come and go. They're not as blasé as they pretend, those nurses. They're aware that death is here or hereabouts and they know that there's damn-all they can do about it, so they distract themselves from their impotence by continually changing the water in the vase. They may not be able to save the patient, but they'll be sure to keep the daffodils going till Sunday.

I look at you for hours on end. I study your face – which is, of course, my face too. You seem to have shrunk over these last few weeks. You've aged. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise to me. But I hate to see you like this – in so much pain, so distraught and uncomprehending, gripping the sheets, screwing them up in your fist. I swear, if I could take the agony from you I would. I feel I ought to. The whole mother-daughter thing hasn't really worked that well between us, if we're honest, has it? I regret that terribly.

I hear that you had a set-to with the doctor yesterday. How I'd love to have witnessed it – just to see you being your natural self for a few minutes. Apparently you were all for yanking out tubes and pulling off wires and heading home – as if the busy heat of your outrage could forestall the inevitable; as if Death, pausing in the doorway, would realise how incensed you were and would slink away, muttering, “Well – okay. If you feel *that* strongly about it...”

I think not. Nice try, though.

The monitors bleep in rhythm, like an insistent threat. The sun refracts through the hanging plastic bag of clear gunk, throwing a splash of rainbow across the bed. It'll stretch out and travel upwards towards the pillow as the sun sets. I've watched it every evening and it has become part of the routine here. Feeling so useless, unable to help you in any way, I've become obsessively interested in hospital routine. I look forward to the nurse's offer of a cup of tea at four-thirty, which you always accept and then allow to get cold on the side-table. But the ritual – *sugar? biscuit? leave the teabag in, I like it strong and dark, like my men, haha* – provides a hiatus of normality during which you can forget that this may be the last cup of tea you take with me.

In fact, today's was the last one. I overheard the nurses murmuring amongst themselves – *any time now; hours at best*. I don't suppose they've let you in on that – not after your little scene with the doctor. But the slide of the rainbow up the bed - creeping over the hillock of knees, the brackets of hips, the wired and hopeless chest - is the sweep of a minute-hand counting down to the dying of the light.

I wish I could hold you and comfort you – but I'm incapable of that. I'm speechless and paralysed. My tongue won't do what I want and my hands are flatly uninterested in cooperating. I can't even smile at you. I don't know if it would help if I could. I don't know what's appropriate.

But I know you're mortally afraid – and that's where your anger comes from. Your whole life you've railed against what you couldn't change. And I was always the lightning rod for your frustrated resentment. It earthed through me. Now, faced with the final inevitability, you're furious - and even here, even in the midst of death, even when this is the last exchange between us, you have only one way to express your distress and terror. The pale rainbow reaches my lips and you are on your feet, raging, and I am silent as you rage.

“No! No, Mum, you can't go! Fight! Fight! Stay here! You better bloody stay here, Mum!”

You're picking me up by my shoulders as the monitor drones its steady, final note. Scolding me - tears of hot sorrow scattering down your face.

“You can't leave me! Put up a fight! Come on! *Fight!*”

But this time I can't help you, Laurie. I won't rage. I have no wish to struggle further. The darkness is coming in, seeping over the windowsill, spilling through the open door.

And look - the rainbow has faded from my cheek.