

Brenda Riches / HELEN'S DAY

Helen wakes to a day she has to get through one way or another and wonders what to do. She could listen to the lilac tree hit the window pane. There's a chair to sit in, to rise from; carpet to walk on. A glass to fill and empty. Cupboard doors to shut. A drawer to open; chair to sit on. Cigarette to light and watch glow in the ashen light of a dark day.

On the shelf where the clock ticks stand pictures of her family. She sees the house crumbling around them, their bodies in the rubble. She sees Jesus nailed to His Cross, the Marys weeping at His Feet, a bright light on the threshold of the hell she can't get away from, no matter what, no matter how. She goes to the closet, puts on her coat, picks up her purse and leaves the house.

For a moment on the porch she wonders where to go this time. Should she walk to the bus stop and wait? Should she sit on the riverbank and count dandelions that grow there, sunny heads in the spring grass? Should she walk to the front gate and back? Should she keep her doctor's appointment?

She sits in the waiting room. As she smokes a cigarette, she notices the pictures on the walls: a faint ship in a fiery haze, a room with a bed and sloping floor, a serene-faced girl wearing a blue and yellow turban, a white horse with his head over a stable door. She hears a voice calling her name, but doesn't respond until a hand touches her shoulder and the voice asks her to come this way please. She stubs out her cigarette, but walks out of the doctor's office.

At the end of the avenue where she lives she meets a woman whose name she can't remember. The woman smiles and says it's a nice day isn't it.

She stops by the neighbourhood church and goes inside where she sits in a wooden pew and imagines altar boys in white surplices moving in the distance. She watches them light tall candles with thin tapers. Hears her quiet breathing. Smells incense. How the candlesticks shine. How still the flames seem. How cold the bench feels: notches in its wood; old wax in the notches.

She hears voices in her head, and sharp words in the voices. They that wait upon the Lord . . . miserable sinner died . . . is my shepherd I shall not . . . shall magnify. . . . As the words walk through her, she thinks of another church where a long time ago she received her name.

A man in robes marked her forehead with water as she cried the devil from her soul. She was a baby who lay in a lace-trimmed crib, or against her mother's breast, or in a pram and looked up at the faces that looked down at her. She watched the leaves that drifted into her hands, gifts she hadn't asked for. She was a child who touched her mother's cheeks, her father's nose; banged a metal spoon on a metal plate; saw her face in the bottom of a cup, and laughed. She learned to count her fingers, ducklings, raindrops, days. How to build little buildings with bricks and careful hands, and how to knock them down with a fist.

Outside her parents lie buried. She stands before their tombstone and watches small insects crawling through the cracks in the stone, over tight growths of moss and lichen, over the epitaph: Beloved father of—, Beloved mother of—. They crawl down the stone and into the earth where flesh rots in darkness.

The world inside her is deeper than death, darker than earth. It, too, houses small insects that find their way through cracks. Spiders, earwigs, beetles, centipedes crawl up from her darkness when she doesn't want them to. Her insects do what they want. There's nothing she can do about that.

If she could tell someone.

If she knew what there was to tell.

If she had something sharp, a nail file perhaps, or a nail, she would scratch her name on her parents' stone. She has nothing.

Someone has weeded the earth around her parents' stone. Someone has thrown away the decayed irises and replaced them with lilacs. She stands for a long time looking while the wind blows through her

hair and into her eyes. But fear blows colder through her soul. If she stands there any longer she will never be able to move away from that sad spot.

So she moves away.

She reads the names of the dear departed, the dearly beloved asleep in Jesus, gone to their rest, their heavenly reward. She touches the moss on the headstones and reads the years, the ages of the dead. Some were babies. Some were young. Some were old. When she tires of walking, she sits on a gravestone so old the name has worn away. She takes out a cigarette and carefully lights it against the wind, cupping her hand. She smokes it till the butt burns her fingers.

She follows her short shadow along her avenue, down a high-walled narrow lane to the river bridge. Above the water she stands and opens her purse. She takes out a small brandy flask and sips from it while clouds passing in the current below make her tremble. As she sips from the narrow neck of her flask, she grows warm inside. Where are all the blankets that have warmed her? Where are the hands of the mother who used to tuck her in? Bones now in a grave. She tilts her head back to look at the heavy clouds that get heavier all the time, and wishes she could fall into them, but knows that up and down are two different directions, and she has no choice.

She drinks till the flask is empty and the clouds are still. Rain is a faint blessing on her face. She watches raindrops slide down the sleeve of her dark coat and follow its creases to the cuff, then fall to the ground. Soon the bridge, stretching away from her on either side, is shining.

She wonders why she is standing on a bridge.

Is this where she gets off?

Dives off?

Jumps off?

Falls off the world.

When she hits the water, will the pain stop?

She stays till her coat is soaked, then goes home.

In her livingroom, she sits near the window and holds her head between her damp hands. Each drop of rain becomes a thin needle stabbing the glass between her and the lilac she can't touch. The lilac heads are pale blurs that make her think of faces on a railway platform. The pale faces of the lilac hurt her. She holds her head and tries to rock the pain away, but the lilac continues to sway, waving goodbye with pale handkerchiefs.

The window streams with rain and the lilac is a wavering dream sliding into her. Wet petals brush her brain; smooth leaves cling to its cells. Caged in wet branches, she bangs her head against the window and the tree falls away.

She looks through the rain at grey slate roofs and clouds, and fears the absent sun. She is afraid of the wide grey world that has no edges. So she pours herself red wine and lets it touch her inside so she knows she is safe. There in her high-backed chair. Glass after glass she grows safer and the world grows soft and mauve. If she could stay right where she is, with red wine settling the dread inside her, and prettiness all around, anyone could say to her: How are you? and she would be able to say: I'm fine. And she would be fine, if only she could say to time: Stop right there, this is as far as we're going. But time moves her into a place where branches will break and a family will die, and roofs cave in, and it will all come tumbling if she doesn't do something about it.

The rain stops and the sun comes out and dries up the raindrops.

She goes to lie on her bed, where she lights a cigarette and blows its smoke to the ceiling. Faces stare down at her and tell her she is nothing. She sees the scorn in their eyes, curling in the lips of the damned faces that fill her ceiling. Under her bed is a whisky bottle. When she unscrews the lid, she feels herself turning its narrow spiral, following the only grooves she can because that's what she is: stiff metal on hard glass going around its tight thread till off it comes. The neck of the bottle is naked in the light that spins around the rim, lifting her away. Bottle neck to dry mouth—that narrow tunnel with light at one end and the darkness of no light whatever at the other.

Her bed is a quiet coffin. Its nails are loose. Her heart is pounding the nails in.

Her cigarette has left a long crumbling finger of ash.

She can't bear the heavy sunlight, so she gets out of bed and draws the curtains across the bright window. In her dark bed she listens to the hammering.

"Why are you sitting in the dark, Mom?"

Her daughter is a shape in the doorway. She wants her daughter to go away.

"Can I get you some lunch?" her daughter asks.

"I'm all right," she replies.

Her daughter switches on the light. "I'll do the wash now," she says.

"Turn the light off. It costs money."

Her daughter has already left the room.

Inside her is something dreadful that she cannot reach.

"Get out," she says, but it doesn't.

She can't bear the light, so she switches it off and gets back into bed again. Now is not the time to see things clearly: the wholeness of a glass, of a book, the features on photographs, the edges of a table.

She hears the washer rattling. Clothes get wet, get spun, get dried, are worn and washed and dried to be worn and washed and dried again.

Her son stands in the doorway. He switches on the light.

"Switch that off," she tells him. "It costs money." But he doesn't switch it off. He is a stranger by a bedroom door, his coat unbuttoned, but he hasn't taken it off yet. Or has he just put it on?

"How are you?" he asks, and she wonders how she is, and how she is ever going to know.

"How are you?" she asks him.

"Fine," he says.

"Do you want some lunch?"

"I'll manage," he says.

She hears the fridge door open, hears him take a plate from the cupboard, hears him unscrew a jar. He is fine. He will manage.

"Do you want something to eat?" Is he back in the room? Her eyes are closed because she can't bear the light.

"No thank you."

"A cup of tea?"

"Very well." Just to stop his questions, she will drink the tea he makes for her, will swallow the pill he gives her, will lie back and wait for the world to stop hurting, for her children to go.

The things that hurt have broken edges. A cup and saucer patterned with roses cause her pain. A silver teaspoon with her initials on it causes her pain. The veins on her son's hands, the silence

in his eyes. She drinks the tea. Takes the pill. Tells him to switch off the light, it costs money. Then she lies back.

In the darkness she touches the fingers of one hand with the fingers of the other. They feel like bones. Where's the skin? Here's the ring her husband put on her finger when she was someone else in a long white dress walking out of a church through a tunnel of raised lances whose pennants fluttered like leaves. Her ring is loose. She is afraid she will one day lose it. She touches her knuckles: rough and scaly, dry as kindling. She touches the wrists she wants to slit but won't because the pill works.

And now she is walking serenely along a white stone path at night, bushes on either side, growing out of dark soil. White petals gleam in the moonlight. A breeze cools her face. The moon is kind and has a sad smile. She is the moon's child. She is guided over the white stones. Her white dress swirls round her. She will live forever after sleep has led her to the end of the white stone path.

When she wakes, she reaches out and takes a cigarette and strikes a match that flares against the darkness long enough for her to suck her cigarette alive. She leans back against the pillow and pulls the cool smoke into her lungs, and knows she is alone.

She has tried. She has tried to brush her hair with an arm made of lead. Tried to take her sickness by the shoulders and shake it. She has made decisions: every day to wake at seven, take a bath, cook breakfast, do the shopping, read a book, sit in the garden and enjoy the flowers, make lunch, drink milk, nap for no longer than an hour, change her clothes, brush her hair, write letters, mail them, make supper, talk to her husband of the day's events.

She has tried to fight the knowledge that she is alone in spite of the people who touch her. She can't wash her hair, make her face up into the young it isn't, choose what clothes to wear any old thing will do now that the grass is withering, the flower fading and the word of the lord is a mouth forming a silent O.

She gets up and goes into the livingroom. She writes her name in the dust of the desk top. Her name—the only clean thing in the room. She sits in the high-backed chair, closes her eyes, and feels life pulsing in her head.

She looks at the ticking clock. It's half past two.

The room loses its furniture. Once upon a time there was a table where she sat; its hardness hurt her elbows and it offered no softness for her head. Once upon a time there was a couch where she lay; its softness made her sink when she wanted to soar. Once upon a time there was a cabinet with glass doors framed in laquered wood; it contained liquor bottles. She holds the void like a child in her arms and feels the space from which all things have been taken.

She goes to the closet, puts on her coat, picks up her purse and leaves the house, stepping lightly over gravel, over pavement, step after step along a long road that takes her away from home. Her coat slaps gently at her knees and her feet grow warm. She holds her purse tucked firmly under her arm.

She enters a small shop and buys a can of gasoline. She smiles at the shopkeeper who smiles back. "Thank you," she says as she leaves. "You're welcome," he says. "Have a pleasant day."

She walks easily to the park, through the park, through a small gate in a wooden fence and into a meadow, to a lean-to shed near a cricket pavilion. Outside the shed she takes off her watch, her coat and her ring. She sets them on the ground, takes a book of matches from her purse, then puts the purse on the ground. She goes into the shed.

She unscrews the lid of the can.

Slowly she empties the gasoline over herself.

She stands drenched.

She opens the book of matches.

She pulls a match out of the book.

Strikes it.

She steps out flaring, raising her right arm like a dancer, like a witness. She makes no sound.