

THE WOMAN IN THE GARDEN

A woman is walking in the garden. Clematis scrambles over the gate. She follows the path around the edge of the lawn, deep in thought, a small figure below the wall. She is carrying an alabaster box. A late rose hangs from an archway. From time to time she stops, looking at something that catches her attention: hellebore in flower, a wren hopping into the undergrowth, a puddle left by night rain. From somewhere the words of St Augustine had come into her mind: *my questioning of the Heavens and the Earth is my thought, and their answer is their beauty.*

It's early in the morning on the first day of the week. She has just come from the grave. He has gone, he has been taken from her, from them all. A page has been brutally torn from the book of her life, mutilating it. A raindrop hangs from the tip of a sycamore leaf, ready to fall. She remembers the look in his dying eyes, of resignation, of grief beyond words, of desolation. The grey lips, the swollen eyelids, the cold skin. The mangled feet blue with death, ripped skin, exposed sinews, raw muscle, the blood, the blood. The spilling of love, so beautiful and so pure, the love he taught her, mocked by the learned people who sneered that such beauty is an ornament of a bourgeois mentality. They, the clever who have forgotten how to love, dare not believe in beauty because its naked truth demands too much courage. They are afraid, because love and beauty demand surrender, and to surrender you must be brave enough to give up everything you thought you had. The beauty of the unwashed corpse, lying alone in the tomb, thin and caked in blood, had moved and possessed her. All she could think to do was to dress the wounded feet with the ointment she had brought with her, and to wipe them tenderly with her hair, mixed with her tears.

The leaf floats off the branch on to the wet grass. She clasps the box in her hand more tightly, remembering. In the bare tree above her a thrush lets loose a melody, pouring out music into the silence of the enclosed garden. In this peaceful place men have worked a small plot of land and ordered it, planted it with flowers and shrubs, herbs and trees for every season, built paths, trimmed and clipped hedges, dug a pond and made a fountain, espaliered fruit trees.

They have kept bushes pruned and soil weeded and grass tended through the year. Now winter is coming.

She turns the corner to walk along the easterly wall, into the faint light of the dawning day. She sees a man ahead of her, indistinct in the haze. He is standing under an ash tree, bare-branched but for keys bunched in silhouette against a pale sky. A stranger. The gardener, presumably. As she draws nearer, she smiles briefly, politely, then looks down as she continues on her way, absorbed in her sorrow. She has gone a few steps further when he speaks her name. She stops, heart beating violently. Frightened, alone in a walled garden with a stranger. She can either ignore the voice and walk away, or she can turn.

She turns. He is still standing where she'd passed him. Now the light is on his face and she sees who he is. He speaks her name again.

No word comes.

It is he. He, the one whose love, whose understanding, whose humanity, had changed her, completed her search, illuminated her life. She steps towards him.

His arms are held outwards from the sides of this body, as if to hold her. But he says, very gently,

'Don't touch me.'

At that moment she knows everything. There is nothing more to know. There are no words for what she understands.

'Come, sit with me before I have to go.'

They walk side by side across the lawn to a stone bench beside the fountain. Shadows of fish flick under the surface of the water.

And this is what he says to her.

'You, because you are a gentle soul, see beauty and know it as love. Beauty, like love, is mocked by many, but beauty itself is untouched by scorn. Beauty is a cure for the human soul, afflicted as it is and corrupted by ugliness and cruelty. In the depths of beauty lies the sacred mystery, just as a sacrament contains a hidden grace. It is beauty that opens our eyes to the sacred, awakening us to mystery.'

She looks at him.

'It is a beautiful thing you did with your precious oils, and with your tears, when you tended my wounded feet. You saw beauty even in the pain. Unlike some, you see the invisible in the visible. Do not be sad: the page you think is ripped out of the book of your life, that tore your heart and left the chapter empty, is not lost. Each page in the book of your life is inscribed with the trace of someone you met along your path, and when their story comes to an end, the page will be translated. All the leaves, scattered through the universe, will be gathered by the hand of God and bound into one volume in a library where every page is open to all.'

The still water of the pond reflects dying bulrushes.

'It is beauty, child, that will console you in your grief.'

She watches him walk away into the light until she can no longer see him. His last words hang in the silence.

'Now, go to our friends and tell them these things I have told you.'

(C) Ingrid Soren, January 2010

after *THE SACRED MADE REAL* exhibition at the National Gallery, London