

Mary Jane

Mary Jane was unwell. This didn't feel like the last couple of times she was sick. There had been that time she was sent home from school with the measles and had to be a very good girl and not scratch anything. Or the time she went down with some kind of fever that time after they had all gone on the charabanc to Southend, Mary Jane and her sisters and father in his long coat and Uncle Fred holding hands on the beach with his best friend when no-one was looking and she had dropped her favourite doll into that puddle and then it rained and they all came home.

Doctors with white coats and quiet voices gave her pills to swallow instead of nasty medicine, and there were so many pills. It must be something bad. She had dreams, funny dreams that went round and round as she tossed about in the high bed. Walking through broken glass, something howling in the background. A pond with a little bridge and gold fishes darting around. Tiny charabancs all in a row. A little parlour with a sofa and a chaise longue, a box of dancing shadows in the corner of the room. A miniature harpsichord that made only one note: 'clack!' and a garden with a hump in the middle of the lawn and a big ship with streamers and children coming through a tall wooden gate and so many other things that made no sense at all.

How long has she been sick?

Sometimes people would come into the bedroom and try to say hello but she just wanted to be left to sleep. The same dreams would come around but was she remembering the dreams or just dreaming she remembered? Laughter in the painted corridors of big school, or walking among the green trees by the River. Boys playing on the mound on the lawn in the green garden. An orchestra of the little black harpsichords, all going "Clackety clack" together and sometimes "Ting!" The smell of apple crumble. Washing nappies on a ridged glass skiffleboard or hanging them out in rows of little white squares. Paper bags with sandwiches and an apple. Long ribbons of the little charabancs as far as the eye could see, going over and under and around until she is in one of these on a green lane, a handsome man next to her with a moustache, he had been in the wars but he did not say which ones. He has no hat.

Mary Jane's blanket kept getting tangled up as she turned around and around on the bed in the little room. The room had no fireplace but maybe that too was part of the dreaming. People come to give her more pills, solicitous in low voices. Sometimes they rearrange the bed, find the sheets she has thrown off in her turning and tuck her back in, nice and snug, and the dreams or imaginings came back round as she tries to make sense of what they could mean and who all the people were.

Children coming through the wooden garden gate, each time bigger than the last like Russian dolls one inside the other as they keep coming through and the fish make shapes under the little bridge on the pond. Someone plays on a little harmonium. Another garden with so many grown-ups with drinks and little plates of food. Laughter and gardens and didn't we have a marvellous time. Long lines of people posing in their Sunday best and weddings and a wooden pew in an airy church.

A nurse came into the room.

"Come on Mary Jane, it's your birthday! There are some people here to see you!"

"Leave me alone!" she tried to say, but nothing came out. She just wanted to be alone with her dreams as they were always almost making sense as they came around and around and there was

something just beyond sight, some golden thread that might connect all the people and the ribbons of tiny charabancs and the boat and the gardens and lawns and boys playing and the skiffleboard and the fishes. And the sounds and the voices carry on. "Go home to the baby" says one as banshees howl over the streets of broken glass. "Clackety clackety clack 'ting!' clackety clack," "Carry the man who was born to be King." "My, haven't you all grown!" and "Bloody hatted drivers!" says the man with no hat and somewhere there is this thin line of something in between but it's gone again. So she finds herself up and dressed and into another room where there are so many people and they are all there for her birthday.

And the candles. Oh! the candles!

Mary Jane was a hundred and two.