

Seasons of Remembrance
by Serena Habib

Summer

Jenny walks by children riding their bikes and families having picnics, her disheartened frown a stark contrast to the smiling faces around her. She looks around, taking in her surroundings. She turns right, and walks for a few minutes. She turns left, and walks back to the same spot. As her hazel eyes fill with tears, lines form around her chin and her freckled forehead. Jenny can't remember her way home.

Jenny:

I suddenly realize that I've been walking in circles for an hour, and I remember my usual ten-minute route home.

"Joe, dear, I got the medication for you", I call to my husband, climbing the stairs to find him reading in our bedroom.

"Thanks, honey!". I hand it to him. He has a peculiar expression on his face.

"Jenny, I thought you were picking up Advil."

"I was". I look over at the cough medicine I've just handed to him. "But then I just thought you could use that for the cough you get sometimes..." I trail off, slightly confused but convinced that I had a good reason. "Sorry about that. I'll go get you the Advil. I don't know what's going on with me today."

"You're probably just tired. We all have those days. Just yesterday, I walked right by our house on my way home, totally lost in thought." Joe wraps his arm around me. "Get

some rest, I'll go later." I lean into him, kissing the soft spot right above his temple. I feel comforted by the fact that today will pass, and I'll feel better tomorrow.

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I'm hearing my novel before bed. *A Walk to Remember*, one of my favourites. The man beside me turns out the light. I rest the book on my night table, and lie down to face him.

"I love you", he says, resting his head on the pillow.

"I love you too, Landon", I say, my voice barely a whisper. Wait, that's not right. The man is already in a deep sleep, so he doesn't react. I know I love him, yet I can't recall his name. I search for his name, wracking my brain until sleep gets the better of me.

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"Joe, what time are we leaving?"

"We're leaving at 11, as we do every Sunday. You still have a couple hours, don't stress."

"Joe, can you remind me what time we're leaving?"

"In 45 minutes, honey."

"Jo, when are we leaving again?"

"Soon, darling."

"Oh, I remember now! 11! Sorry, I don't know what's up with me. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

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I look at myself in the mirror. My capris are bunching up at the crotch. If my crotch had changed so drastically, Joe would've mentioned it. It feels weird to move my legs like this, as if there is extra fabric in my way.

Oh, they're on backwards!

I take them off. Put them back on again. I fall onto the bed. Oops. I put both my legs in one.

I stare at the article of clothing in front of me. I hold it up, turn it inside out, then outside in. I shake it and try to put it upside down or right side up...I've got no damn clue how to put this thing on.

"Joe? Can you help me?"

Joe comes and we manage to get them on. He keeps running his hand through his head of curls, and I try to laugh it off to ease his concern. "Pants really seem to get the better of me these days. Maybe I should just wear skirts and dresses. Like when we were young, and I used to wear them so you'd have easier access."

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Maybe I should join a nudist colony," I suggest, trying to elicit a chuckle out of him.

"Maybe you should get more sleep."

I don't remind him that I slept ten hours last night.

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I grab my mittens for the warm weather, taking in the pretty stocks on our lawn. I notice a few red petals drift away with the soft breeze, and realize that they are the red and

white carnations I planted in the spring. For a moment there, I had just forgotten what carnations looked like. I follow the petals with my eyes, feeling myself drifting alongside them, moving further away from home, carried by a wind I can neither control, nor predict. A chilling fear runs through me, and I begin to shiver despite the warm rays of sunshine that fall on my back. I inhale, exhale, give my arms and legs a little shake, and walk away.

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Now I am looking for my key. I have looked everywhere, to no avail. I climb upstairs to my room, opening the drawers of my dresser. I check the washroom cabinets. I go downstairs to the laundry room, looking inside the laundry machine. I go upstairs to my room and open the drawers of my dresser. I look around the living room. It's not anywhere! I go to my room to check the drawers of my dresser, which are already open. I must have forgotten to close them this morning. I check the drawers. I have no idea where my key is. Panting from running up and down the stairs, I open the fridge to get a drink, and low and behold: my golden house key stares at me from the produce drawer. What the fuck? I throw the key, exasperated. It clatters to the ground, scratching the floor. I pick it up, walk out of the house, and slam the door.

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I'm driving up a hill. The cyan of the sky reflected on the road makes me feel like I'm on water. And I'm drowning. I imagine Joe at the top of the hill, alone, scouring the road for me, not knowing that I'm already too deep down to be found.

Suddenly I'm flying, and as I speed down the hill, I make a left. That was not right. A police car pulls up beside me.

The officer knocks on my window.

“There is a sign that says no left turn, ma’am. I’m gonna need your name so I can issue you a warning.”

What is she saying? I don’t get what she’s asking.

“Can you say it differently to me?”

“What is your name?”

I look around frantically, as if my name might be floating around in the car and I’ll be able to catch it.

“Can I tell you tomorrow?”

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Words keep slipping away. I don’t know where they go. Or where I am going myself.

I see myself disappearing into oblivion, and I envision a shadow of myself drifting further and further away from my body – the body that sleeps beside Joe. I am there, and yet I am not. The scariest part is that I know this is the best it will be, the most I will ever be here again.

Sobs flow through me and I shudder and cry, missing him already. I mourn the retirement we won’t have together, how we won’t grow old together the way we had planned. I hate that I am bringing this weight for him to carry, leaving our team with one brain instead of the two that were married. Oh Joe, I’m sorry I’m scary I’m...I’m...I’m...I CAN’T FIND THE WORD!

Autumn

As the leaves change, people start to leave. Jenny and Joe no longer get invited to get-togethers with their friends and neighbours. This year, they will be home during their annual neighbourhood fall festival. The neighbours assume that Jenny is unable to participate, and that Joe will be busy taking care of her.

We're sitting on our porch and Joe is feeding me something so yummy. I can't tell what it is by seeing it. "This tastes like ice cream", I say, smiling.

"It is", says Joe, "chocolate fudge, you're favourite."

"Mmmmm", I agree, as Joe feeds me another bite. Some of it spills on my shirt. I wipe it up with my hands and lick it. We both laugh.

The mailman comes to the door. He looks to Jenny with pity, focusing on the stain on her shirt. He then turns to Joe and asks him how she is doing, as if she can neither understand, nor speak. They chat for a moment before he leaves.

"Let's go inside", I tell Joe.

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"Diane! Sorry for the late-night call, I kept mixing up your phone number...yes I meant to say Darla... anyways, I would love to fetch up sometime....no I'm totally fine ... sometimes my brain just gets foey and I go in small ways but don't be alarmed, I'm still Jenny ...um, there is something else I wanted to ask about ... I had Joe write it down for me but I can't seem to make it out..." I look at the paper:

FALL FESTIVAL

“...no, it isn’t unimportant, it may have been very important! I will retall it soon. And then I’ll call you back ... oh, okay, I’ll call another day then.”

Oh my. Phone calls are scary now because I always mess up. Words in my mind spin further and further away. I think of what I am going to say but when I reach for the words to say them, they are gone. I have moments of clarity and then it all becomes muddled. I’m there and then I’m gone. Wisps of people and thoughts vanish like sudden flashes of lightning. They’re there and then they’re gone. Vanished. Like my driver’s license.

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“No one wants to be with me ‘cause I’ve got nothing to say.”

“I do.” Says the man driving me. Must be the taxi driver.

“And what’s your name, sir? That’s very kind of you to say.”

“It’s Joe, your husband.”

“I have a husband! How wonderful!”

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All of a sudden I get a spurt and I turn to my husband, my light, and everything feels alright. I place my hands on his cheeks and rub our noses together, giggling.

“Oh Joe, you are my sunshine, my only sunshine.”

Joe smiles and finishes the song for me. “You make me happy when skies are grey. You never know dear, how much I love you ...” He trails off, tears brimming in our eyes as we both mentally sing the last line, knowing this moment of presence is fleeting.

Please don't take my sunshine away.

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It's sundown and I feel my heart beating faster, and suddenly I am terrified because mom and dad aren't here.

"They've passed away, honey, over twenty years ago now", says Joe. He tries to give me a hug, but I jerk away, shocked.

"When? How come nobody told me?!", I wail. I spend the night sobbing in anguish, my heart breaking as I realize I'll never see mom and dad again. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

And in the morning in her mourning she leaves, seeking home. Joe finds her at a park nearby.

When Joe grabs my hand, I turn to meet his eyes. For a moment I am back home, where my heart is. But I see in his eyes the pain I've caused, and a weary exhaustion that happens when you live under a cloud of sadness, but must always be ready to go out in the rain.

Jenny curls up on a bed of leaves, comforted by their mutual falling away from their roots. She begins to cry.

Joe lays down beside me. "What's wrong?", he asks.

"Everything.", I blubber, "You don't want me anymore".

"Jenny, all I want is you. I miss you."

He picks up a leaf and throws it, but he is powerless against the wind. It floats right to left and left to right, and lands back beside him, unchanged.

“Some thing has knucked me down, Joe”

Joe looks up at the sky, which seems to darken earlier and earlier.

“And I can’t do anything about it”, says Joe with a resigned sigh.

Joe and Jenny lie there, tears trickling down their faces, lamenting over their helplessness, unable to find solace when each day seems bleaker.

Someone's hands are on my bare skin, and I can't do anything about it.

It's wet and it prickles. Jenny screams in terror, horrified. These have never been parts of her that have never been okay for strangers to see.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmalfagh!!!!!"

She thrashes and pushes, but is eventually unable to stop the woman from bathing and dressing her in the clothes Joe has picked.

"I wanted to wear the other dress."

“You told me you wanted to wear that dress for special occasions. Today’s just an ordinary day!”

"I can pick." She demonstrates how she can point.

“You’re right. I’m sorry”, Joe relents.

I look at my reflection in the glass. I look like a child. How ugly and unkempt. And then I realize I've wet my pants.

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A never-ending pitter patter of feet resounds as she walks around and around in circles.

"Have you seen my husband? He's six two, very handsome."

Joe thinks of his wife's gait, its constant rhythm that matches his heartbeat.

"He gave me a ring just like this one." *She licks the ring pop on her finger.* "His name is Joe. J-O."

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"Hey, Joe!" Jenny calls out to a young nurse in the hall. "Joe, you're here!" She wraps her arms around him as if he is a lover, and sways back and forth. In an unrecognizable tune, she loudly sings, "Youuuuuuu aaaa-aaare myyyyy sunnnnnnnnnnnshinneeeee" repeatedly. The nurse gently sways with Jenny until she loses interest.

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"There are bugs on my bed giant cocoroacheches!! Bugs on my bed get me out!!!"

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Joe looks beside him, flooded with guilt and emptiness. He thinks about how half of him doesn't work like it used to. His eyes become rivers of saltwater, soaking his pillow. He changes his pillowcase three times that night, but never finds sleep.

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The bugs are gone. I lie here and think about what I could do before. With the hierarty in this place I am nothing and nothing is scarier as when Joe says bye and it's time for me

to sleep. Sometimes I am so lats and I miss me and I miss him and I don't know how to make it better and I don't know how to put an end ...

Winter

It's a flurry of activity with Christmas activities and family visits. But Jenny's every day remains unchanged. The nurses lift her into her wheelchair, make sure she is upright, put on her bib, and try to feed her. Today, she bites and kicks, resisting their touch.

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When Joe leaves after his daily visit, the nurse takes him aside to speak to him. "We have no choice", she says, "if you want her to stay."

As he signs the form she lays out for him, he mentally apologizes over and over to his love, thinking of the vow he made 47 years ago to care for her in sickness and in health, and wondering if this honours or betrays it.

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Joe arrives to find Jenny leaning against her chair, her arms attached to it with a soft posey restraint.

He loosens the belt, freeing her, and holds her hands, looking into her eyes. He holds out a bowl of food to her.

"Look what they've brought you today. Mac 'n Cheese. Our favourite."

She doesn't respond.

"Do you remember -" He catches himself. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, Jenny and Joe were at Mel's Diner. It was the first time Joe had ever taken Jenny out

for dinner. He was telling Jenny that she should leave him – she deserved a man who could take her to fancier places and give her a diamond ring. And right then and there, Jenny got up and walked away. Joe thought she was leaving, and while he wanted the best for Jenny, he felt his heart begin to break. A minute later, she returned. It turns out she had gone to the vending machine at the diner entrance. She stood by Joe’s chair, got down one knee, took out a ring pop, and asked him to marry her. It was the most special, unbelievable moment of his life. They shared a bowl of mac and cheese, and talked for hours about their plans for the future. Just as the diner was closing, Jenny asked the server if she could play one song on the jukebox. She took Joe by the hand, wrapped her arms around him, and they danced to Jimmy Davis, singing “You are My Sunshine” to one another like they were the only two people there.”

Jenny looks at him, her expression blank.

Joe begins to sing. “You are my sunshine...”

“My only leee lee” Jenny continues.

She puts his hand on her cheek, and turns to kiss it.

I’m still here, Joe. I love you.

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“Good morning, Jenny darling. I made a lemon custard after saying goodnight to you last night. Would you like to try it?” Joe brings the spoon to Jenny, filling some custard into her slightly open mouth. She holds it in her mouth.

“Swallow, dear.” He attempts to demonstrate, making an exaggerated gulp. Jenny does not swallow.

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Jenny starts to sip the milkshake, and Joe is filled with relief and hope. Until she coughs it up onto the table.

Looking down at the table, she runs her fingernails against the wooden tabletop. They briskly click against the table in a choppy rhythm of scratches, and then for a flicker she snickers, as if realizing the absurdity of the pattern. She begins again, a ceaseless refrain of scratches back and forth and back and forth.

Joe brings some tissues to wipe the table.

She takes one and folds it in her hands. Then she unfolds it. Folds it again. Unfold, fold. Unfold, fold. A new pattern, quieter yet equally unnerving.

He tries to take the tissue from her hands, but Jenny is holding on tight.

Unfold, fold.

Joe places a kiss on her forehead and remains sitting beside Jenny, sharing her space and yet feeling as if they are existing in two different worlds.

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Tonight, when Joe leaves, Jenny takes another tissue from her pocket. She holds it out to him.

“That’s okay, Jenny, I know you like them.” He tries to give it back, but she shakes her head.

“Cape it”, she says.

This time Joe unfolds the tissue.

He folds it, incredulous, then unfolds it again.

There is a ring pop in the tissue.

Spring

As Joe drives down the hill, he notices forget-me-nots beginning to bloom at the side of the road. The array of blue brings serenity to his drive in the rain. He parks and steps outside, turning to look back at the grey sky. His tears blend in with the rain as he thinks of the grey of Jenny's mind and the water in Jenny's lungs and the dark, frigid winter that he thought his heart would not survive. He walks into the diner and orders some macaroni and cheese, licking the ring pop on his finger while he waits. As he sits there, Joe begins to hear Jenny singing to him. He can feel the brush of her hands on his shoulders, and the weight of her head on his chest. He feels an inner sunshine coming from his heart that emanates warmth throughout his body, causing his tears to dry. He remembers how her love for him was never forgotten, so ingrained in her core that they both still felt it even when it seemed that nothing else remained. As Joe sings along to Jenny's voice, he realizes that Jenny is still there, in their shared part of his heart. Jenny will always be by his side.

I'm still here, Joe. I love you.