

Under the Apple Tree

by Juliet Robinson

Let me tell you about my mother. This morning when making coffee, the percolator boiled over and the smell of burnt coffee, the toasting bread, and the jam was like a conjuring. I wasn't in my own home, in a rush, half-dressed and wondering why I hadn't gone to bed earlier, and worrying about the school run, or work, or how I was to walk the dog and still have time to make lunch. I was young again, maybe five, though I could have been any other age between five and leaving home and I was in another kitchen.

My mother's kitchen, with its low oak ceiling, stained from years of cooking, with the small window which was always covered in pots of parsley, chives, basil, rosemary and coriander all wilted and straining for the light. With the too much stuff piled around the counters, books, opened letters, chopping boards, half drunk cups of coffee, the toaster that had never worked - sometimes burning the bread sometimes returning it with a mild tan but it was such a pretty colour that it needed to stay, the postcards peeling away from cupboard doors and the notes, little nippets of a thought, or a message from someone as they left saying we needed milk.

There is a great devil in the universe and we call it time. Because time does tricky things, just like the devil supposedly did, or does, depending on your beliefs.

Anyway my mother fell on the wrong side of time, or the devil if you would believe her mother who knew much of such matters and had solely given herself to the one god and his son, but it was my mother that the smells brought through time, or perhaps it was me who was cast back in time, not her mother who we never met.

My mother was late to be born, nearly a month, not the September baby she was meant to be but an October one. October the tenth month of the year, though it is out of place or time, since originally it was the eighth month of the year, hence its name – *ôctō*. October, an autumn month full of fat trees, branches hanging with fruit, like the cooking apple tree which half swallowed the house and dropped swollen apples upon the roof when the wind was up, which it normally was and we half thought the ceiling would come down upon us, but the slate was strong and backed with oak so it never did.

My mother was too early for her own wedding and had time to think it over and leave, because it was the right thing to do, but for her mother this was the end of the familial bond, for she left my mother that day, even as my mother took me with her, because I was there, just a small seed of a person growing in the cup of her womb.

My mother knew there would be other men, kinder, gentler, meaner, richer, uglier, wiser and all the things that any person can be, and there were, for my sister came along and then my brother but he wasn't meant for the world yet, so he left and perhaps might come back another time and we will know him if he does. But no man ever stayed in the house with the too full kitchen and I think maybe my brother knew this was not a space for men, or maybe it might be in another time, but it wasn't then.

So it was just me, my sister and our mother. Our mother whose heart tried to break, not from the ache of love, but from disease and when we were only little she nearly left us, but she didn't, they did things in hospital and she came back. But I remember her not being there and other women coming and looking after us and they were like my mother in that they were kind, gentle and soft and they spoke in low voices until my mother came back and rested in bed. While she took rest we watched all the tv in the house under the apple tree, and the other women took us to school, brushed our hair, washed our clothes and cooked food that wasn't ever quite right.

And then one morning my mother was back in the kitchen with the hazy green light from all the plants throttling the window, burning the coffee, shouting at the toaster, spreading the jam, stuffing the lunch boxes, feeding the dog and hustling me and my sister out the door to school.

But she was on borrowed time, for it kept on trying to take her, and it became like a game, she would go to hospital, the women would come and then my mother would return and for a while things would be as they were meant to be, but then back to the hospital she would go, before home again, and we came to depend on her return. So when time finally took her and didn't send her back a promise was broken.