

Dusk

by K. Armstrong

Eveline stared at the clock on the mantelpiece, and swore. Her eyes were gone to hell — she knew that — but that damned thing, like most of the inhabitants of the Nazareth Home, wasn't ticking.

She'd planned this operation to perfection, down to the moment when Rose, her partner in the lounge, would give in to her tablets, and collapse into head-nodding, dribbling, blissful unconsciousness.

After that, she had just minutes before dinner, when they'd be shunted into the dining room to feast on some atrocity the latest cook had dreamt up.

Ah well, she thought, rising slowly, and listening to the creaking of her bones, she'd better make the most of it. She picked up her walking stick and slowly made her way out of the room. With a furtive glance into the hall, she edged quietly along, towards the door.

She pushed her way out, and suddenly her senses were bombarded by the late afternoon seascape that appeared before her. She blinked, inhaling the fresh, cool sea air; a striking contrast to disinfectant and stale potpourri, mothballs and old flesh. It was beautiful. The cool, salty air brought tears to her faded eyes as she stared at the scene. She listened to gulls cawing dreamily above her, then shook herself out of the enchantment, and moved gingerly down the steps of the Nazareth towards the promenade.

Every summer there was a cabaret singer on the front to entertain the families who couldn't afford holidays elsewhere. The old folk were brought out to sit and listen to the noise, although anyone who could leave generally did. She always pitied those in wheelchairs, deposited with no means of escape. It was sadly comic to see them stuck there for long hours, nodding to the singer's strained tones.

What a way to end. People forgot. They forgot that you knew disappointment, fury, ecstasy and pain. They couldn't see you had been a giggling, fearful child; a sullen, awkward youth; a confident, capable woman. They couldn't see it in your withered, leathery flesh; in your chilblains, varicose veins, knobbly elbows and knees; in your wispy, thinning hair and slowly dimming eyes. And who could blame them?

She moved her neck painfully back to look at the sky, sensing rain. Then hesitantly, gaining momentum and pace, she began to hobble along the promenade.

Her memory was a faded pastiche of the past, and indeed the present sat uneasily in the middle of the dreams that governed her mind; so it was that often she would forget the day, the time, the year. She had no notion of the time it had taken her to open the door, to close it behind her, and step into the daylight. Nor, as she walked deliberately along, could she recall the reason for this departure.

For countless nights, she had lain awake, planning her venture; wondering if she would see the day on which she dared to assert such independence. She tried to stem a rising sense of panic as she realised she could not remember her mission. Here she was, casually bent on adventure, with no idea of its purpose. She swore softly, hoping the caustic words would slow her speeding heart.

A small child, with big blue eyes and cherry lips, who had been circling the promenade, glanced up at her as it heard the words, and began to cry. She watched it, genderless in its woollen hat and red boots, running towards the safety and sanctity of its parents, presumably — figures, shady on the periphery of her sight.

She clucked sadly to herself, mustered her resolve, and marched slowly onwards. Better start with what she did know. Her name. Eveline. She mumbled it to herself, feasting on the syllables, the connotations. Eveline. Musical, soft notes, spun from the sinews of time. Eveline. Such a pretty name. She didn't own it any more.

Eveline was a child with dimples, who laughed and sang, could play the piano and recite rhymes. She was the apple of her mother's eye. She wore her hair in two thick braids with red ribbons, which she flicked disdainfully at boys who wanted to hold her hand.

Back on the promenade, her knees were feeling the effect of her walk. They trembled beneath her, and she feared they might turn to dust: that she would crash down in a cloud of bone. Her head began to spin, when she spotted a bench a few yards ahead.

The sight of it had a calming effect. It took just a few moments of exertion to reach it and sit slowly down, to consider. Already the Nazareth was a closed chapter in her life; an ethereal dream, from which she had long since awoken.

The dusk, the cry of a lone bird, the breeze from the sea, the taste of salt upon her lips: this was reality. She could not imagine that the scene before her — so complete in its separation from the warmth, the bright, harsh colours, the regular meals, the kindly, bored staff, the old people who smelt of cabbage and talcum powder — could be reconciled with the Nazareth.

She had left; she had stepped out of the door, she had closed it behind her and now she could never return. Her name was Eveline. She was never called that now. What did they call her? Dear... sweetheart... something non-committal; something that didn't distinguish her from the phlegmatic, cobwebby, creeping crowd. Her name was Eveline, wasn't it? Eveline, she mumbled to herself,

listening to the cracked voice she knew to be her own make a daring, reckless reclamation.

Not the voice that sang sweetly in St Michael's choir — no. It was like a door hinge in desperate need of oiling; a ghastly, ghostly sound that frightened her a little. She shuddered and sighed.

As the light continued to dim, her sense of urgency increased. She had to get on. She pushed herself up with effort from her lonely bench and manoeuvred herself and her stick back onto the main promenade.

The night air was drifting in and it had a chill to it, which made her glad to discover she was wearing a coat. She delved her hand into a pocket and slowly drew out a purse — a clue to her errand? She looked down at the coat. It seemed shabby —worn at the edges, in keeping with her weary figure. But the purse was new. She racked her mind for a clue to it, silently cursing the addled mess of her memories.

She continued to walk, grasping the purse in one arthritic hand and the stick in her other. She squinted, trying to focus, trying to picture herself, but could see only a demure chit of a girl with long, brown hair that she brushed till it shone, waiting for life to sweep her away. What was her name? Eveline, of course.

Her father was dead by then. She couldn't picture his face any more, which was a regret. Her mother, too, was disappearing in fractured fragments. She remembered her deep blue eyes, her soft smile, and the sound of her own name spoken in her mother's voice.

She shook the purse and it jangled. The scrape of coin against coin — the noise of collection on a Sunday in St Michael's, where giggling girls flicked scornful pigtails at altar boys. Money. She

slipped the purse back into her pocket and continued her thoughtful jaunt.

She remembered a small school where she sat attentively, waiting for a turn to take the chalk — instruct a band of obedient ignorants, educate the masses, display her talents on a blackboard with a white stick. The sound of generations dutifully reciting with her, as she grew older and the chalk dust settled on the gleaming pigtails.

Someone else, another character; an embarrassed smile on his pink face — her father? A pink face that clashed with red ribbons and white dresses and red bouquets and white sheets and — that silly bugger she married. The disdainful flick of a pigtail in the choir and the rosy-cheeked altar boy. I do and I do and they did. What happened next and where he had gone were mysteries to her now, she thought sadly.

She had walked on much farther than she imagined herself capable and now stood beneath the war monument, the vision of Victory — an angel with softly beating wings. She gazed up, waiting for illumination; for inspiration, but the crick in her neck overcame will. She lowered her eyes to the ground, perturbed by the darkness; aware of ferocity in the wind and savagery in the sea that reminded her of their tempestuous natures.

Despite the heavy coat she seemed to have purloined, with its jingly, jangly purse, she was cold. The Nazareth, a picture of another universe, flickered in her memory like a dying ember; the walk from the cosy, floral front room, where little old women with candyfloss hair and names like Violet and Rose, Poppy and Iris — a bouquet of dried and talcum-scented flowers — talked about a pleasant place they called the past.

She felt a certain longing for it now, but she pressed on into the cold, remembering her lengthy and stealthy preparations, and the

breathless beating of her heart as she slipped out of the door and into a tempestuous land where gulls cawed and the sea swept along the shoreline; where the sun glowed above the water like a lost thought and where blue-eyed babies with disdainful pigtailed ran in circles to peripheral parents. She couldn't return now.

There was a mysterious new purse that jingled like the collection box in the arms of a blushing altar boy, into whose arms she fell.

She fingered the purse as she tapped along, excited by its possibilities, and singing to herself as she sang in the choir. Her cracked tones danced in the night in circles on the promenade as she made her way along.

She was tired. Her legs shook. Her bones creaked and cracked.

Ahead of her, a light shone, and she could hear music floating on the air. Trembling with fatigue and excitement, she made her way towards the brightness. She pushed open a door, and sat down, energy spent, at a table with a plastic floral tablecloth. There was a scent of talcum powder and she spotted several shades of wispy candyfloss.

A disdainful girl with a glossy ponytail asked her what she'd like.

Stealthily Eveline withdrew her purse. She wanted a cup of tea, and a cream bun, she added daringly. They soon appeared, and Eveline nibbled thoughtfully, listening to wisps of memories as she circled the promenade, searching for her peripheral parents; her beautiful mother and her father without a face.

She was jolted from her reveries by a man with blushing cheeks.

That silly bugger? He picked up her jingling purse, and she started in confusion. Then he helped her gently to her feet.

Had she enjoyed her constitutional? She had, rather. She enjoyed a cream bun, didn't she? She did, with a nice cup of tea. Quite right,

he laughed. Had she enough money? The scornful girl flicked her ponytail, bringing change, and the blushing boy blushed anew.

Best not to overdo it, though. He called to Violet, Lily and Laurel, who made their way over, smiling. They hadn't spotted Eveline.

Time to return to good old Nazareth for some Cocoa, a natter and a warm bed. He'd brought the car, and they could all squeeze in. It was good for them to retain a bit of independence, get out. They actively encouraged it.

Eveline was tired. She looked forward to the lounge; to the floral paper, the comfy chairs, and the familiar discussions of a place called the past. She wanted to be back there, warm, comfortable, and excitedly planning a secret excursion all of her own once again, against the flickering embers of a dying sunset and a lonely gull circling the promenade.

