

Sympathetic Magic: Orringer's Use of Talisman and Ritual in "Pilgrims"

When we first meet Ella, the young protagonist of Julie Orringer's "Pilgrims," her family is visiting a stranger's home for Thanksgiving. Everything about the gathering is foreign to them, but they have come here rather than to their usual gathering because Ella's mother, Ann, is dying of cancer and the people at this house have experienced similar tragedies. Ella's family—her mother, dad, and younger brother Ben—are much like Pilgrims in a new land, a chaotic and strange land where the adults are absent and the children, wild and cruel. By the end of the story, Ella has witnessed the death of her Doppelganger in the host family, Clarie. In a heartbreaking scene between Ella and Clarie, Ella places her most precious possession—a lost tooth—in the dead girl's hand. Through Ella's child-mind, we understand that Clarie needed something important to hold onto in life, and it's no different in death. Ella has begun to understand the power of ritual in coping with loss. Magic and ritual, Orringer suggests, may be the only weapons we have against the all-consuming horror of cancer.

Orringer first uses magic and ritual to heighten her characters' sense of powerlessness in the face of tragedy. Ella and her little brother Ben tap out messages on the wall between their bedrooms, signals sent like warning drumbeats in the dark against the crying they hear from their parents' room (4). The parents are no different: they have turned to a kind of magic as a last hope in their battle with cancer: "There were changes in the house, healing rituals that required Ella's mother to go outside and embrace trees or lie face-down on the grass" (4). The Thanksgiving dinner host, Ed Kaplan, has a house and yard full of magical objects: God's-eyes hanging from a chandelier (5), "blue Indian goddesses sitting on beds of cloud" (6), shelves of

Greek myths and fairy tales, human figurines with animal heads (13), and tiny bird skulls that decorate the kids' treehouse (8). Even the pet collie assumes magical proportions; the dog barks warnings at the children as they play in the treehouse (8, 10), and later barks out the news that Clarie is dead, a Cassandra unheeded again and again.

The magical elements grow as the story progresses. There are some visionary moments: Ella's father, Gary, makes shadow animals on the wall to distract her mother from pain, a family ritual that will soon alter as the family shrinks from four to three. Ella's mother looks "cold and far away, pressed under the weight of tons of water" (13), an image of the future, but also a stark vision of her absence in the present. The adults burn incense, meditate, and chant the mantra of the near-dead: "Matter into energy, Identity into oneness" (16). Even Ella tries to will a change in her reality: "She closed her eyes and held her breath, filling her chest with a tightness that felt like magic power. If she tried hard enough could she transport them all, her mother and father, Benjamin and herself, to that other time?" (16) It doesn't work. Instead, Ella fixes on another vision that turns out to be prophetic: Clarie's hand on [the dog's] collar, "her knuckles bloodless as stones" (16). The most powerful element of magic, and the one on which the story's plot turns, is a glass of red liquid atop a lacquer box that holds Clarie's mother's ashes. For Clarie, this is not a symbol; this is her mother.

The children are separated from the adults, and they form their own tribe with Peter as leader. But Peter has grown feral. He steals the red liquid and climbs out onto a tree limb high above the ground, "agile as the spider monkeys Ella had seen at the zoo (18). He taunts his little sister, then empties the glass in a red arc through the air. If I can't have mother, Peter seems to say, neither can you; it's the emotional truth of a little boy furious at the loss of his mother. Clarie reaches out to catch the liquid, the railing of the treehouse splinters, and she falls. Peter orders all

the children to cover Clarie's dead body with sticks and leaves in a desperate piece of childish magic: if you can't see it, it didn't happen. "If anyone cries or says anything, I'll kill them," Peter threatens. But Ella spies her lost tooth, cleans it, and as all the children watch, drops it into Clarie's palm and closes the dead girl's fingers around it (21). With this moment, Orringer gives Ella agency. Her action somehow rights the wrong of Clarie's death in her child-mind. This gift of a tooth is a kind, selfless act, the first of the night. Ella has given Clarie a precious talisman to hold onto as she leaves this world and enters the unknown. The tooth is a substitute for the red liquid, for her mother. With the sacrifice of Ella's tooth, balance and humanity are restored for the moment.

At the end of "Pilgrims" we sense that Clarie's family is lost to chaos – will her father recover from what's happened? He's lost his wife and daughter both. Will Peter? Ella's family though, has hope. As the family drives off, Ben weeps in the back seat, confused and afraid. Ella, though, is beginning to understand what is ahead, and to know deeply what will be asked of her.

Works Cited

Orringer, Julie. "Pilgrims," *How to Breathe Underwater*. First Vintage Contemporaries Edition, 2005.