**Jeanne D'Arc, Jeanne D'Arc**

I'm sweeping up the ashes, preparing them to be thrown into the Seine. It will be a forty minute walk to the river and the sun is going down. I'm aware of people standing around the perimeter of the square. Most of them are making a point of not staring, as if they are just taking their normal evening stroll. Except for two, who watch intently.

 An old man is nearer than any of the others and is walking without obvious purpose from one part of the square to another, murmuring to himself. I recognise him as her father and realise that he can't be that old, maybe in his early or mid-forties. And yet he looks old. It’s not his hair, which has hardly begun to go grey, nor his face. Perhaps it's the way he walks, looking down at the ground, aware of some ashes blowing around his feet. He gets nearer. I don't know what I can say.

 “Jeanne, Jeanne, Jeanne D'Arc.” He says the last phrase as if it's an experiment, to hear how those words might sound. He can't have ever called her that. She was just Jeanne. The last time she was at home, she would have been Jeanne, nothing grander.

 “Jeanne D'Arc.” He's a lot closer now and I don’t if he's speaking to me. I keep sweeping. Who's to know which are the ashes of the martyr and which are those of the crucifixes they held in front of her. They have told me to sweep up everything, then we will go down to The Seine. They are English thugs, the group who have been left behind to oversee the operation. There is evidently to be no ritual, the English have no time for that. Just an efficient removal of the ashes. They have proven that the body is destroyed, no-one has been left in any doubt. It has in fact been burned more than once, reduced to a convenient minimum. No mercy, no memorial. Sweep up and throw them into the river and just forget.

 “Jeanne D'Arc.” I wish he would go. I feel for him of course, but I have nothing to say and he can't be feeling sympathetic towards me. This is a job. It's normally no worse than jobs I've had before: maintaining gardens, caretaking, painting coaches. I'm paid to keep the streets clean, to wash and sweep. Usually the worst is to clean up after the horses. This of course is much worse than anything I've known before, but I have the brush and the sacks and so I am the obvious man for the job

 “Why couldn't she wait?” He is talking to me now, though he expects no answer. “Why couldn't she wait? Or have stayed at home? Or not argued with them? She could have done plenty of good at home. I would have begged her, but I wasn't allowed to see her.”
 I nod. I stop sweeping for a moment and the ashes are blowing about again. I try to look respectful. There's nothing I can do. I need to sweep these ashes up before the wind rises and makes it impossible. And when I throw them into the Seine I’ll say some kind of prayer, silently. There will be a a ritual after all, however small, however poorly I perform it.

 “She could have been married. A normal life, so simple. Married and children.” He shrugs, runs his hands through his hair and sighs so deeply that is it louder than the breeze.

 No wonder he's so distracted. Everyone stood around and watched, horrified but unable to turn away. She was brave to the last of course, but it was awful. The scorching heat, the cries, the stench. Lust as well, that's what I sensed. The girl bound and burning and the English standing there. All kinds of dark emotions that they won't confess to. The day will stay with me all my life, more than any other memory, yet here I am now sweeping the streets.

 The man quietly asks for some ashes. He seems totally lucid all of a sudden. I look around for the English thugs but they are paying no attention, just leaning against a wall talking to each other, not drinking or laughing, just talking in their ugly accents, about something other than today I'll bet. I give the man a handful of ashes, which he puts carefully in his pocket. I don't know what theyreally came from but I don't tell him this. I suppose he realises. At least they are from today, from this place and that is enough. He can take them away and honour them somehow.

 And the second person who has made no pretence, who has been watching me all the time and not tried to hide it, I recognise. I recognise her and she recognises me. We live in the same hostel, on the noisy, poorer side of the town. We have never spoken, though she has lived there for at least half a year. Sometimes I have said hello to the three kids who live with her in one room. I've thrown a ball with them for a few minutes and looked at their pictures. She is often in the kitchen making their simple meals and she has never greeted me, though she has not seemed unfriendly. I don't know if she even speaks French or whether she has enough for a conversation. She is clearly foreign but I don't know know where she is from. I stop sweeping again. Now that the man has spoken to me it has served to encourage her and she approaches, calmly, watching me all the time. She looks down at my broom, at the ashes I have been trying to collect but which have swirled away from me again.

 “Jeanne D'Arc”, she says quietly. I don't know if it's a question. “Good woman,” she says, then she frowns and tries to find the word she wants. Her French is clearly basic, not as good as that of her children who have spoken to me before quite fluently. “Great woman.” Then she beats her chest with her fist twice. “I love Jeanne D'Arc. I love Jeanne D'Arc.”

 I nod again, to show I understand at least and she turns and walks away. She collects her children who have been playing at the edge of the square, a clever improvised game with small stones and a broken pot, then they all leave. The man who looks older than he is, the beaten down father, has disappeared as well. But the others who are still hanging around, those who have not met my eye, are braver now. They walk across the square and many of them bend down to scoop up ashes which they put in their pockets. Suddenly there are dozens of them, quickly claiming their share, then moving off down the narrow streets. I don't know what to do. Should I stop them? What will the English do if they see what's happening? But the soldiers are still in a group, having a kind of supper now. There is still no ceremony with these English, no prayer or even blessing of the bread. They just carry on talking with their mouths full, sharing a bottle of wine which they will have stolen from the mayor's cellars.

 My small sack contains hardly anything. I don't know what quantity of ashes a body and the wood should produce, but surely more than this. I worry that it will not be nearly enough to satisfy the English. As I look around, wondering what to do, another figure advances. It is Therage, the executioner, carrying a pile of clothes. He walks like a ghost and speaks without greeting.

 “Burn these,” he says. I look down at the pile. They are the clothes which he was wearing at the execution. Now he is wearing what looks like his nightwear, not suitable for the cool evening, but probably all he has spare.

 He says nothing more and seems to float away, virtually unconscious of the world around him. I check that the English aren't looking, then I set fire to the clothes in a sheltered corner of the square. This is better. A good little hill of ashes now which I can easily collect into the sack. I spend a little more time sweeping the ground, then I go to tell the soldiers that I am ready.

 We walk down to The Seine. It feels as though it should be a procession, but nobody is watching now. Everyone has gone inside and they are eating dinner, saying evening prayers, getting ready to continue with their lives even after the shocking events of the day. When we reach the river, the soldiers are impatient and there is no opportunity to pay any respect to the dead. I wish that there was a priest here to say the right words. I open the sack and despite the scolding of a soldier I hesitate for a minute and look around. There is no-one else, so it is left to me. I cast the ashes out, as gracefully as I can manage. Who was she? Why did we pay her such reverence? There is no time for me to find the right words, so I just whisper “Jeanne D'Arc, Jeanne D'Arc” and watch her ashes blow across the water as the soldiers frown and get ready to walk back into the town.