

The Bell Jar
By Sylvia Plath

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It was *completely dark*.

I felt the darkness, but nothing else, and my head rose, feeling it, like the head of a worm. Someone was moaning. Then a great, hard weight smashed against my cheek like a stone wall and the moaning stopped.

The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smooths to its old surface calm over a dropped stone.

A cool wind rushed by, I was being transported at enormous speed down a tunnel into the earth. Then the wind stopped. There was a rumbling, as of many voices, protesting and disagreeing in the distance. Then the voices stopped.

A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened, like a mouth or a wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again. I tried to roll away from the direction of the light, but hands wrapped round my limbs like mummy hands, and I couldn't move.

I began to think I must be in an underground chamber, lit by blinding lights, and that the chamber was full of people who for some reason were holding me down.

Then the chisel struck again, and the light leapt into my head, and through the thick, warm, furry dark, a voice cried.

"Mother!"

Air breathed and played over my face.

I felt the shape of a room **around** me, a big room with open windows. A pillow molded itself under my head, and my body floated, without pressure, between **thin** sheets.

Then I felt warmth, like a hand on my face. I must be lying in the sun. If I opened my eyes, I would see colors and shapes bending in upon me like **nurses**.

I opened my eyes.

It was completely dark.

Somebody was breathing beside me.

"I can't see," I said.

A cheery voice spoke out of the dark. "There are lots of blind people in the world. You'll marry a nice blind man someday."

The man with the chisel had come back.

"Why do you bother?" I said. "**It's** no use."

"You mustn't talk like that." His fingers probed at the great, aching **boss** over my left eye. Then **he** loosened **something**, and a ragged gap of light appeared, **like** the hole in a wall. A man's head peered round the edge of it.

"Can you see me?"

"Yes."

"Can you see anything else?"

Then I remembered. "I can't see anything." The gap narrowed and went dark. "I'm blind."

"(Nonsense! Who told you that?)"

"The nurse."

The man snorted. He finished taping the bandage back over my eye. "You are a very lucky girl. Your sight is perfectly intact."

"Somebody to see you."

The nurse beamed and disappeared.

My mother came **smiling** round the foot of the bed. She was wearing a dress with purple cartwheels on it and she looked awful.

A big tall boy followed her. At first I couldn't make out who it was, because my eye only opened a short way, but then I saw it was my brother.

"They said you wanted to see me."

My mother perched on the edge of the bed and laid a hand on my leg. She looked loving and reproachful, and I wanted her to go away.

"I didn't think I said anything."

"They said you called for me." She seemed ready to cry. Her face puckered up and quivered like a pale jelly.

"How are you?" my brother said.

I looked my mother in the eye.

"The same," I said.

"You have a visitor."

"I don't want a visitor."

The nurse bustled out and whispered to somebody in the hall. Then she came back. "He'd very much like to see you."

I looked down at the yellow legs sticking out of the unfamiliar white silk pajamas they had dressed me in. The skin shook flabbily when I moved, as if there wasn't a muscle in it, and it was covered with a short, thick stubble of black hair.

"Who is it?"

"Somebody you know."

"What's his name?"

"George Bakewell."

"I don't know any George Bakewell."

"He says he knows you."

Then the nurse went out, and a very familiar boy came in and said, "Mind if I sit on the edge of your bed?"

He was wearing a white coat, and I could see a stethoscope poking out of his pocket. I thought it must be somebody I knew dressed up as a doctor.

I had meant to cover my legs if anybody came in, but now I saw it was too late, so I let them stick out, just as they were, disgusting and ugly.

"That's me," I thought. "That's what I am."

"You remember me, don't you, Esther?"

I squinted at the boy's face through the crack of my good eye. The other eye hadn't opened yet, but the eye doctor said it would be all right in a few days.

The boy looked at me as if I were some exciting new zoo animal and he was about to burst out laughing.

"You remember me, don't you, Esther?" He spoke slowly, the way one speaks to a dull child. "I'm George Bakewell. I go to your church. You dated my roommate once at Amherst."

I thought I placed the boy's face then. It hovered dimly at the rim of memory—the sort of face to which I would never bother to attach a name.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm houseman at this hospital."

How could this George Bakewell have become a doctor so suddenly? I wondered. He didn't really know me, either. He just wanted to see what a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself looked like.

I turned my face to the wall.

"Get out," I said. "Get the hell out and don't come back."

"I want to see a mirror."

The nurse hummed busily as she opened one drawer after another, stuffing the new underclothes and blouses and skirts and pajamas my mother had bought me into the black patent leather overnight case.

"Why can't I see a mirror?"

I had been dressed in a sheath, striped gray and white, like mattress ticking, with a wide, shiny red belt, and they had propped me up in an armchair.

"Why can't I?"

"Because you better not." The nurse shut the lid of the overnight case with a little snap.

"Why?"

"Because you don't look very pretty."

"Oh, just let me see."

The nurse sighed and opened the top bureau drawer. She took out a large mirror in a wooden frame that matched the wood of the bureau and handed it to me.

At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture.

You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-colored sore at either corner.

The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colors.

I smiled.

The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.

A minute after the crash another nurse ran in. She took one look at the broken mirror, and at me, standing over the blind, white pieces, and hustled the young nurse out of the room.

"Didn't I tell you," I could hear her say.

"But I only . . ."

"Didn't I tell you!"

I listened with mild interest. Anybody could drop a mirror. I didn't see why they should get so stirred up.

The other, older nurse came back into the room. She stood there, arms folded, staring hard at me.

"Seven years' bad luck."

"What?"

"Lid," the nurse raised her voice, as if speaking to a deaf person, "*seven years' bad luck.*"

The young nurse returned with a dustpan and brush and began to sweep up the glittery splinters.

"That's only a superstition," I said then.

"Huh!" The second nurse addressed herself to the nurse on her hands and knees as if I wasn't there. "At you-know-where they'll take care of *her!*"

From the back window of the ambulance I could see street after familiar street funneling off into a summery green distance. My mother sat on one side of me, and my brother on the other.

I had pretended I didn't know why they were moving me from the hospital in my home town to a city hospital, to see what they would say.

"They want you to be in a special ward," my mother said. "They don't have that sort of ward at our hospital."

"I liked it where I was."

My mother's mouth tightened. "You should have behaved better, then."

"What?"

"You shouldn't have broken that mirror. Then maybe they'd have let you stay."

But of course I knew the mirror had nothing to do with it.

I sat in bed with the covers up to my neck.

"Why can't I get up? I'm not sick."

"Ward rounds," the nurse said. "You can get up after ward rounds." She shoved the bed curtains back and revealed a fat young Italian woman in the next bed.

The Italian woman had a mass of tight black curls, starting at her forehead, that rose in a mountainous pompadour and cascaded down her back. Whenever she moved, the huge arrangement of hair moved with her, as if made of stiff black paper.

The woman looked at me and giggled. "Why are you here?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I'm here on account of my French-Canadian mother-in-law." She giggled again. "My husband knows I can't stand her, and still he said she could come and visit us, and when she came, my tongue stuck out of my head, I couldn't stop it. They ran me into Emergency and then they put me up here," she lowered her voice, "along with the nuts." Then she said, "What's the matter with you?"

I turned her my full face, with the bulging purple and green eye. "I tried to kill myself."

The woman stared at me. Then, hastily, she snatched up a movie magazine from her bed table and pretended to be reading.

The swinging door opposite my bed flew open, and a whole troop of young boys and girls in white coats came in, with an

older, gray-haired man. They were all smiling with bright, artificial smiles. They grouped themselves at the foot of my bed.

"And how are you feeling this morning, Miss Greenwood?"

I tried to decide which one of them had spoken. I hate saying anything to a group of people. When I talk to a group of people I always have to single out one and talk to him, and all the while I am talking I feel the others are peering at me and taking unfair advantage. I also hate people to ask cheerfully how you are when they know you're feeling like hell and expect you to say "Fine."

"I feel lousy."

"Lousy. Hmm," somebody said, and a boy ducked his head with a little smile. Somebody else scribbled something on a clipboard. Then somebody pulled a straight, solemn face and said, "And why do you feel lousy?"

I thought some of the boys and girls in that bright group might well be friends of Buddy Willard. They would know I knew him, and they would be curious to see me, and afterward they would gossip about me among themselves. I wanted to be where nobody I knew could ever come.

"I can't sleep . . ."

They interrupted me. "But the nurse says you slept last night." I looked around the crescent of fresh, strange faces.

"I can't read." I raised my voice. "I can't eat." It occurred to me I'd been eating ravenously ever since I came to.

The people in the group had turned from me and were murmuring in low voices to each other. Finally, the gray-haired man stepped out.

"Thank you, Miss Greenwood. You will be seen by one of the staff doctors presently."

Then the group moved on to the bed of the Italian woman.

“And how are you feeling today, *Mrs.* . . .” somebody said, and the name sounded long and full of **Ps**, like *Mrs.* Tomolillo.

Mrs. Tomolillo giggled. “Oh, I’m fine, doctor. I’m just fine.” Then she lowered her voice and whispered something I couldn’t hear. One or two people in the group glanced in my direction. Then somebody said, “All right, *Mrs.* Tomolillo,” and somebody stepped out and pulled the bed **curtain** between us like a white wall.

I sat on one end of a wooden bench in the grassy square between the four brick walls of the hospital. My mother, in her purple cartwheel dress, sat at the other end. She had her head propped in her hand, index finger on her cheek and thumb under her chin.

Mrs. Tomolillo was **sitting** with some dark-haired laughing Italian on the **next** bench down. Every time my mother moved, *Mrs.* Tomolillo imitated her. Now *Mrs.* Tomolillo was sitting with her index finger on her cheek and her thumb under her chin, and her head tilted wistfully to one side.

“Don’t move,” I told my mother in a low voice. “That woman’s imitating you.”

My mother turned to glance round, but quick **as** a wink, *Mrs.* Tomolillo dropped her fat white hands in her lap and started talking vigorously to her friends.

“Why no, she’s not,” my mother said. “She’s not even paying any attention to **us.**”

But the minute my mother turned round to me again, *Mrs.* Tomolillo matched the tips of her fingers together the way my mother had just done and cast a black, mocking look at me.

The lawn was white with doctors.

All the **time** my mother and I had **been** sitting there, in the narrow cone of sun that shone down between the tall brick

walls, doctors had been coming up to me and introducing themselves. “I’m Doctor Soandso, I’m Doctor Soandso.”

Some of them looked so young I knew they couldn’t be proper doctors, and one of them had a queer name that sounded just like Doctor **Syphilis**, so I began to look out for suspicious, fake **names**, and sure enough, a dark-haired fellow who looked very like Doctor Gordon, except that he had black skin where Doctor Gordon’s skin was white, came up and said, “I’m Doctor Pancreas,” and shook my hand.

After introducing themselves, the doctors **all** stood within listening distance, only I couldn’t tell my mother that they were taking down every word we said without their hearing me, so I leaned over and whispered into her ear.

My mother drew back sharply.

“Oh, Esther, I wish you would cooperate. They say you don’t cooperate. They say you won’t talk to any of the doctors or make anything in Occupational Therapy. . . .”

“I’ve got to get out of here,” I told her meaningly. “Then I’d be all right. You got me in here,” I said. “You get me out.”

I thought if only I could persuade my mother to get me out of the hospital I could work on her sympathies, like that boy with brain disease in the play, and convince her what was the best thing to do.

To my surprise, my mother **said**, “All right, I’ll try to get you out—even if only to a better place. If I try to get you out,” she laid a hand on my knee, “promise you’ll be good?”

I spun round and glared straight at Doctor **Syphilis**, who stood **at** my elbow taking notes on a tiny, almost invisible pad. “I promise,” I said in a loud, conspicuous voice.

The Negro wheeled the food cart into the patients’ dining room. The Psychiatric Ward at the hospital was very small—just two