

**IN THE
BLOOD**

On waking, Agata's cheek feels cold. She peels herself away from Richard's back, and before he draws her into his large warm body, she quickly flips the pillow over so that he won't notice the damp evidence of her tear ducts working overtime. From what uncharted part of her have those tears sprung? Do they actually belong to her or to someone else? Someone from far back, before her memory can reach, someone she doesn't know. When she scrunches her eyes, Agata can make out the contour of a cheek, the shadow of a smile.

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The morning traffic crawls along, slower than usual, and Agata hopes that breakfast with Lily will compensate Mama for being left behind. This after Mama kicked her legs in the air can-can fashion to demonstrate that she has already changed from her home-knitted slippers into her outdoor shoes. Because Mama knows no greater pleasure than driving around London on errands with her daughter.

'But Mama!' Agata moaned. 'I'm only going to the dentist, and I'm already late.'

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Looking for a space in the hospital car park adds another ten minutes. They are already waiting for her. Agata steps out of her jeans, the nurse stretches a fresh length of paper over the bed, straps Agata's feet in clamps and turns the ceiling light off. In the glare of the computer screen the radiologist adjusts a condom over a plastic instrument, then tips it with a generous dollop of lubricant jelly. 'Easy does it.'

The instant the icy gadget slips inside her the room fills with an amplified hum. While the radiologist moves his hand this way and that, they are both quiet: he is concentrating on her internal bumps and cavities and Agata, hardly daring to breathe, on mortifying any response her flesh may be conned into by his expert probing.

'Now this might just look like a blur, but I assure you, anything nasty would look very different.' The radiologist flicks a smile to the nurse who, whenever Agata shifts, veils her discreetly with a blanket. And every time she performs this little dance, Agata sniffs her sweet coconut scent. 'Here, see that area I'm highlighting green?' The radiologist invites the nurse to peep at the screen and Agata, craning her neck, catches what looks like a hazy weather map.

‘That’s the right ovary... ehum! Looks clear. Left ovary... left ovary...?’ The radiologist’s hand shuffles back and forth and Agata grips the side of the bed. What has he seen there? Is it possible that his probe detected Richard’s recent presence inside her?

‘Have you had anything to eat this morning?’

‘A cup of tea, I only drank half.’

‘Left ovary hidden.’

She knew it! Why hadn’t she refused that toast Mama popped in her hand? Now she’ll have to worry if anything ‘nasty’ has invaded her left ovary. Thank God they removed Mama’s in time, her right breast too. Now Agata reaps the benefits of her mother’s misfortunes. Being in a high risk category guarantees her a yearly ovarian scan: every August, to be precise. Richard books the car in the garage every July; so first the car, then the ovaries. Easy to remember, and no need to trouble Mama with either.

While she is pulling her jeans on the radiologist opens a form. ‘Today is...?’ He checks the tag on the nurse’s breast. ‘Baduwa?’

‘Twenty-first August.’

Exactly to this day, twenty years ago, Russian tanks rolled under our Prague balcony, Mama reminded Agata only this morning. Imagine! Military invasion in central Europe! ‘Now we’ll never see our daughter again, she’ll stay in England,’ your father said – no, he sobbed. Soft. That’s what Pavel was, but here – here they are not interested in what happened to us in 1968, here the radio is interested in some actress from some Corporation Street and her stupid breasts!

‘So Mrs Upton, besides your mother, any other relative with breast cancer in the family?’ Agata shrugs. Every time she comes, there is a new radiologist and a new form to fill. ‘No one else on your mother’s side then?’ No idea, she says. ‘On your father’s side?’ The radiologist’s freshly scrubbed hand hovers above the page. To get the whole thing over she informs him that her father is dead. And so, besides her mother, her daughter and husband, she has no other relatives. ‘None?’ None. The radiologist hesitates, then crosses out several boxes.

‘Any death from cancer on your mother’s side... father’s... siblings? Cousins... aunts?’ Agata keeps shrugging and he ploughs on scribbling UNKNOWN. Frowning as if she lost her forbears by her own negligence. This side, that side... How many times will she have to go through this? And how many relatives is one supposed to have? In any case, what business is it of this young man with bitten nails and pimples around his ears, to know how her relatives died?

‘Are you sexually active?’ Now that he is familiar with her innermost parts the radiologist wants to know. She nods and he ticks off the relevant box with

almost a sigh of relief, a flourish. Their first definite *Yes*. He then instructs Baduwa to tighten a rubber band around Agata's arm.

The blood test signals the end of the procedure.

Straight into the freezer, soon we will be able to tell what's coming your way, it's only a question of time, last year's radiologist said.

Watching her blood slowly climb the glass, thick and dark with bubbles of orange froth, Agata promises herself a cake and a hot chocolate in the cafeteria downstairs. Baduwa corks the vial with a rubber plug, gives it a playful shake and as she passes it to the radiologist she giggles, they must be new to each other. Next: the radiologist's fingers are grabbing the empty air, the vial hitting the floor and Agata's blood spilling over the gleaming lino. She watches some dribble down Baduwa's naked legs, as if it were hers.

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She skips the cake, heads straight for the car park. Mama's stomach must be rumbling, it's almost lunchtime. Less traffic now. Rachmaninov's concerto, one of the few pieces Agata can identify, is playing on the radio. Each note resonates in her strangely empty interior. She follows a diversion sign and takes a right turn. Now the black arrows on a yellow ground order her to bear left. Now to the right, then left again. Just as well she didn't tell Mama about the scan; the less she knows the better. Mama probably employs the same tactic with her; they are two spiders knitting a web of, not so much lies as omissions. Holes. As though there was something to tiptoe around. Left, and then right, the arrows guide her. Only there are no secrets, just a habit. A habit of protecting one another. Take that cough Agata heard last night. What if Mama caught a chill at the barbecue, what if...? Must get her a thicker blanket tonight and switch on the heating, Agata reminds herself.

'Right! It said right!' Agata yells. 'The arrow pointed to the right!' She hears herself protest as a towering wall of red swings in from the left and something slams into the side of the car. Then, as abruptly as it burst into view, the red is gone again and the car is careering forward, Agata hanging onto the wheel, jamming the brakes to slow down the metal gate hurtling towards her, her entrails, as if loosened by the radiologist's probe, threatening to burst through her back.

When she opens her eyes, the one thing she notices is the radio dangling from the dashboard, still crackling Rachmaninov. Lucky she refused to give the radiologist more blood, she might need every drop of it now.

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Richard is the first person she runs into at home. He is en route to the studio, in his tatty corduroy waistcoat – the sign he trained them to read as not to be disturbed. She fell in love with Richard because of his colours. Or more

accurately – their intriguing absence. When she first saw him in a packed underground train, he was wielding a tube of rolled up papers, a strand of flaxen hair falling over his forehead. Beneath his pale eyelashes his eyes, drops of water at the point of freezing, took her in. They both got off at Charing Cross and, without much being said, headed for St. James’s Park where, in the tangle of the bushes, Richard let go of his designs. At the time, Agata’s erotic experience was limited to a few groping raids in the school cloakroom, and the totality of her English to just a few words, but at the grand age of eighteen she couldn’t wait to get rid of what had become an encumbrance; and that it should be with a stranger whom she was never likely to meet again seemed a bonus. What she didn’t expect in that prickly patch of metropolitan nature was to feel rapturously, breathlessly happy. Richard’s hair smelled of windswept northern steppes, of low skies, of a tribe reassuringly disparate to hers. Yet it was her genes that got the upper hand when a few years down the line a tiny creature with enormous black eyes and a brush of dark hair popped out of her: Lily, their daughter. Lilian, Lily, Lilinka.

‘Sorry I’m late. Please don’t get alarmed,’ she warns him before he notices her rumpled state. ‘I was driving, and they played Rachmaninov.’ She takes care to impart her information in manageable doses. ‘Concerto No. 2, I think.’

‘Rachmaninov is kitsch,’ Richard says, tenderly fingering a microchip he is on his way to install in his computer motherboard. ‘Ask Dora.’

‘Rachmaninov was on the car radio,’ she clarifies. ‘But the car was involved in a little accident.’ Richard freezes in mid-step. ‘Don’t worry, I’m ok,’ she quickly assures him, but he has already leapt to the front door, thrown it open and cast his gaze up and down the street.

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In the tube earlier, she rehearsed a limited version of the event. Why mention that the windscreen looks as if someone shattered it with a hammer into a thousand splinters and then painstakingly glued them back together? Or that she distinctly remembers seeing something like this before: mannequins flung across a car seat, straw poking out of their wounds, dead stare in their glass eyes, bent metal on the wooden plinth, but where...? In a gallery? Faces peered at her. Hands pulled her out. *Public not allowed to touch the exhibit*, she wanted to warn them. Then the police arrived and notified her that as she had driven into the main road without slowing down and collided with a double decker bus, she might face prosecution for careless driving.

‘Gatushka? Thank God you’re back,’ Mama calls from the landing; to exercise her English, the minute her mother lands at Heathrow she stops speaking Czech, even to Agata. ‘Come, come, we need your help.’ In a quick whisper Agata asks Richard to keep quiet about her misadventure, then

follows Mama to the kitchen where she finds a grim-faced Lily struggling to smudge Nutella over one of the circular wafers Mama brought from Prague.

‘Mum!’ Lily greets her with a whine. ‘I need to make a cake for tomorrow’s school fair, but Babi doesn’t know how to bake.’ Lily calls her grandmother Babi – a shortening for *Babička* – granny in Czech. ‘Babi, what is this called again?’

‘Waffel chocolate torte, darling. You glue Carlsbad wafers together with chocolate, no need to bake.’

‘But Babi, that’s not a cake!’

‘Hey Lily, what about a Victoria sponge?’ Agata infuses her voice with good cheer, and Lily’s face lights up. ‘We have everything we need. Flour, butter, eggs,’ Agata chants, fooling them with her culinary know-how. ‘All bobs and bits, you’re in luck Lilian.’

‘Bits and bobs, you foreigner!’ Lily laughs.

It works; how little it takes to deceive those who are supposed to know you best. Agata clammers onto the stool with the ease of a grasshopper and although the kitchen cabinets spin and sway as if she were on a choppy sea, she starts hauling from an upper shelf bags of flour and sugar. What wouldn’t a mother do to make her daughter happy? Whipping the mixture she meets the bottomless holes of Mama’s eyes sending her the old, knowing look: *Yes, Lily is lucky, thank God for that*. Ignoring the pain at the root of her neck Agata pours everything into the baking tin, sticks it in the oven, sets the timer, even tidies up the counter. Then excuses herself.

She closes the bedroom door and collapses on the bed. When her jaw begins to tremble, she lets it. Must be a reaction to the shock. Perhaps she should have agreed to go to the hospital, shouldn’t have told the paramedics that she has just come out of one, but she felt no pain and there was no blood. It was only when they took her to retrieve her handbag from the car and Agata saw that the seat next to hers, the passenger’s seat where Mama would have sat, had half disappeared under the car’s squashed metal cheek, that her legs gave way under her.

‘Babi, why don’t you know how to bake?’ She hears the voices from the floor below.

‘My mother never had time to teach me. She worked in a shop,’ Mama replies. ‘We had a girl who cooked for us... Jarmila. In English I don’t think you have such name.’

‘And your sisters, Babi?’

‘Two sisters, darling. Laura and my little sister Annette... We spoke Czech and German. That’s right darling, bilingual. Yes, we had fun. Unfortunately Annette died... And Laura too, they both did, darling.’ Agata listens to her

mother tossing Lily the crumbs of her history. A history that as a child she knew not to ask too much about.

‘You’ve never shown me their pictures, Babi.’

‘Oh really? Have I not? Well, I’ll show you next time you come to Prague...’
Mama coos. ‘Me? No, I wasn’t there; I was in France. From there I went by ship to Buenos Aires... Yes, that’s in Argentina, Lilinka. Clever girl.’

A passing train rattles the window, undulates the air. Agata’s legs feel dead and the wall opposite, together with the chest of drawers, keeps charging towards her with dizzying speed. Then something blurred slides in the periphery of her vision.

‘You ok, Agu?’ Richard ruffles her hair. ‘Where’s the car then?’

She finds his hand. ‘I’m sorry Ricky, but it was a write-off, I’m afraid.’

‘Jesus! What happened? Are you alright?’ When Agata puts her finger to her mouth Richard stares at her in disbelief. ‘You crash the car, and we must keep it quiet?’

Then she loses track of time and next thing she knows, Mama is bending over her, a mug in each hand. ‘It’s only Nescafé, I can’t use your complicated machines. Why are you in bed, Gatushka?’

Agata would prefer a shot of something stronger, but how is Mama to know? She drains the tepid liquid in one go, searches for something to say. ‘Why don’t you talk to Lily properly, Mama? Just tell her the truth. Tell her why there are no photos of your sisters. Or of anyone.’

‘*Ach ya.*’ Mama slumps heavily beside her. ‘What you want me to do? Tear my hair out? Load it all on that poor child? Besides, I’m sure you already told Lily all there’s to know. A fabulous daughter you have, Gatushka. A great girl.’ She pats Agata’s cheek as she has always done, with verve. ‘See how lucky you are?’

‘Not sure.’

‘Not sure about what?’

‘About telling Lily all there is to know.’

Mama plucks off a few shrivelled leaves from the plant on the bedside table, busies herself searching for somewhere to deposit them. ‘Well, maybe we can discuss this another time.’

‘What other time?’

‘When we’re more relaxed.’

‘I feel totally relaxed,’ says Agata, the pain now radiating from under her shoulder blade – what if something vital has broken in her? She clenches her teeth and sits up. ‘Anyway, how am I supposed to tell her, if you never talk about that stuff?’ Instead of an answer, Mama silently scrutinises the vein pulsating on Agata’s neck. ‘What are you looking at me like that for?’ Agata

barks at her. Then seeing her mother pull back startled, she catches her arm. 'I'm sorry Mama. All I meant was that you could help me break the taboo.'

'Taboo?' The word alone makes Mama shudder. She stuffs the dead leaves into the empty mug and stands up. 'What nonsense you talk, Gatushka, there are no taboos. At least I don't know of any.'

And then, as if on cue, the phone rings somewhere in the house and they both listen to Lily chatting to a friend, to her shrieks of laughter. Greedily they soak in her happiness.