



Bloodletting

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She is on a train, head on the cold glass, eye-to-eye with her own reflection. She isn't supposed to be on this train. The heavy snow has caused many things to be cancelled, including her training weekend. She's going to see her brother in Newcastle instead, on one of the only trains still running. And sitting here, conjoined to her window-twin, she thinks she is pregnant.

She and Benjamin are trying to get pregnant but she feels totally unprepared for its reality. Like they are calling upon a dark magic that they don't fully understand. She imagines turning her eyes inwards to watch cells divide, a nervous system form, a spine, a brain, and then a heart. A second heart beating inside her.

She meets her brother at the Metro station near his house. The bright light of the station gives way to winter's darkness beyond. The cold chases her hands into her coat pockets. When they get to his one-bed flat they make big mugs of warm tea. He offers to make her pizza toast, their childhood favourite. And has she seen *Game of Thrones*, o you must, we'll watch it tonight. And while they talk, mugs still in hand, the muscles in the wall of her womb start to tighten and squeeze. Her uterus contracts. And when she goes to the toilet she sees it. Her blood has come. It's thick and heavy. She hasn't brought any supplies with her. Shit. She pulls on the toilet roll, wraps it round her hand then shoves it in her knickers. The pain is intense. She texts her husband, when you come up tomorrow, she writes, bring sanitary towels, big ones.

Of course this blood means she isn't pregnant. It's not this month. The dark magic, so vivid a companion on the train, has forsaken her. She grieves a little. But they are young. They are young. They are

young. There is time.

The snow stays and promises a white Christmas. Benjamin is excited like a little child. Late one night, when their faces are only inches apart in bed, in the dark, he asks if they can get a tree early this year, and she acquiesces, enjoying his delight. They haul the tree home, give it a name, and sit making star decorations out of coloured paper on their hideous blue sofa. He wants home-made mince pies too. This year he wants it all.

Benjamin dies before the snow melts. He sits down in a restaurant toilet after a Christmas meal and doesn't get up. Various misunderstandings mean it takes a whole day of panic before he is found. There are police. There is an investigation. Benjamin is dead. Benjamin is dead. How the fuck can Benjamin be dead?

It's the liminal time between Christmas and New Year. Benjamin has been dead three weeks and she is staying at his uncle's house, in the South. Benjamin's parents, his cousins, and his sisters are here too. They are trying to do normal Christmas things. Eating too much food, drinking, telly, shopping. She buys a jumper dress in the sale.

One evening she is sitting on a bar stool in the kitchen. The telly can be heard in the other room. She stares quietly into her empty mug as the conversations go on around her, her finger tips tracing the curve of the handle. For the second time in a month she is wondering if she might be pregnant, because the last time she and Benjamin saw each other, they had sex.

They had sex and told each other about their day. It was hasty, before they each went their separate ways for the evening. Afterwards, while Benjamin dressed for his Christmas party, favourite green polo shirt

and blue jeans, she lay on the floor, wiggling her bare legs above her head. She'd heard this helped with conception. Benjamin was delighted with how silly she looked. They both knew if it didn't just happen, you know, if legs in the air wasn't enough, they could take it more seriously. They could track days and measure temperatures. They could have sex in her fertile window. She could take supplements. They could draw up a spreadsheet. Benjamin would love that. Because, they thought, they had time. They had time. They had time. But now Benjamin is dead. And that casual sex, that everyday after-work sex, those ridiculous legs in the air, that was it. That was their last chance.

And that sex means this dying he has so recently dared to do might not yet be done. She might be gestating a living part of him within her. His sperm burrowing into one of her eggs and that egg burrowing into the wall of her uterus. The dark magic of life-bringing now promises a resurrection.

It will be a boy she decides. Brown hair and a Mallen streak like Benjamin. She sees him as a toddler on a beach, knee deep in sand, a collapsed sandcastle empire around him, skin glowing in the sunlight. She sees him turning to look at her with Benjamin's clear blue eyes, and uttering something she can't quite make out. Then she is at the school gate, he is running out to meet her, arms outstretched thrusting a *Charlie and Lola* lunch box into her hands. On the way home he asks her if he has a daddy like his friends and what does 'dead' mean.

She moves her head slowly from side to side to dispel the images and raises a hand to stroke her neck. Her throat is sore. It tickles and forces her into a cough. Benjamin's aunt turns to her, does she want some cough syrup? Yes she says, imagining already how soothing that might be, yes. Then she feels a warm hand on her forearm. Benjamin's mum. But what if you're pregnant, she says, can you have it if you're pregnant?

And she realises, by telling Benjamin's family she's invited them on this journey too. Maybe it was unfair of her to draw them in, she thinks, and ask them to open themselves to the possibility of new life, and maybe new grief, so soon after Benjamin's death. She imagines their newly broken hearts, and she feels guilty.

Benjamin's aunt hands her the bottle of brown syrup. She reads the ingredients on the side. Would any of these harm a foetus? She has no idea. She doesn't know what she's reading.

Fuck it, she thinks, and drinks.

Her blood, a faithful friend, comes within days, and with it washes away the last traces of Benjamin inside her. Gone. All gone.

When the New Year comes she rearranges the furniture in her and Benjamin's house and drags all their possessions out of the attic so her friend Freya can move in. She hauls bags and bags of DVDs to the charity shop to make space on shelves and packs Benjamin's clothes into zippered storage that she puts under her bed. She and Freya are both grieving for Benjamin. They console each other with late night sessions of raspberry jam on toast and watch hours of *The Sopranos* from her hideous blue sofa.

She plays soul music and drinks white wine. She sleeps long, deep sleep in her big marital bed, taking with her one of Benjamin's jackets, wrapping its arms around her waist and burrowing her head in its hood. She goes back to work in the office and returns to her training weekends. She cycles to friends' houses and gratefully eats the hot food they make for her. When she is especially angry, when it bubbles up inside her like burning lava, Freya encourages her to write swear words in a notebook. One day she spends a whole afternoon furiously scribbling the word fuck in black ink. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Then she writes more than swear words. She strings together her feelings into images and then into poems. When the rage and the grief are held in the black and white of the letters and between the firm covers of the hard backed notebooks, she feels relief. She feels contained.

A year turns its circle and then another. It is the spring time and she is sitting on her doorstep, Camel Blue in hand gazing at the blue purple sky of the early evening. The trees have buds all up the arms of their branches and there is a new sweetness in the air. She is remembering her travels after university - the monastic community in France, the hostel in Nice, the train ride in Italy. She went alone. It terrified her but it was exhilarating. The edges of her body felt sharp and her thoughts came together in pictures. She filled her notebook with drawings and writing.

She inhales from her cigarette and watches as the smoke unfurls upwards. She has often wondered if she hadn't fallen in love with Benjamin, what her life might have been like and what other path she could have taken. The image she always comes back to is of an eccentric, strong, older woman, her hair wrapped in a scarf, living on her own, travelling, and writing.

The street lamp at the end of the road flickers into life. If Benjamin must be dead, and it seems no matter how long she waits for his return, he must, then maybe this life here in this city is dead too. She stubs out her cigarette on the edge of the step and stretches her legs out in front of her. She feels a desire building in her belly. A plan is forming.

By the time the leaves fall she's gone. The house she shared with Benjamin has been stripped and scrubbed and all their belongings hauled and stacked and stored. Her friends carry on with their lives - there are children to be had and jobs to progress in. But she's gone and she has no plans to come back.

In Paris she sits in the church called Sacre-Coeur in Montmartre. Nobody knows exactly where she is and the way this physical aloneness meets the loneliness she feels inside is a homoeopathic salve of sorts. She looks at the huge mosaic Jesus on the dome above the altar. His arms are outstretched. His heart is golden on the outside of his robes and surrounded by thorns.

In Toulouse her desire burns in her. She has a heat in her belly that will not leave. So even though she is on her period, she climbs into the empty bathtub and masturbates, letting her blood cover her fingers and her thighs. Later she writes in her notebook, for fuck's sake, there must be books on sex and grief.

In Berlin she dreams fevered dreams. In one, Benjamin bounds towards her in a green camouflage jumper and wraps his arms around her. She is confused, isn't he dead, aren't you dead she says. And then he is in a large kitchen, standing behind the counter cutting into the pink purple flesh of a pomegranate, the juice seeping over the counter top edge. Ring your mum, she tells him, you need to ring your mum.

In Amsterdam she sinks into despair. Being so much on the move has left her feeling unmoored and adrift, a small boat on a vast ocean, but the ocean is inside her pressing hard up against her chest making it hard to breathe. The sharp edges that travelling gave her are dissolving. She is losing substance and she is terrified she will be forgotten. She fears her space in the lives of her friends and family is slowly closing and one day it will heal into a smooth taut skin. They will be on one side and she will be trapped, alone, on the other. She texts a friend desperately seeking to connect and her friend says, maybe you're homesick. Home. She doesn't know where home is anymore.