

THE MEMORY OF BLOOD

PONY LOUDER

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‘The way we view our past affects how we see our present and shapes our future’

Dr Janina Ramirez, University of Oxford

For Chel
With love, and a boat

GREY

It's always different, and it always feels the same.

From the darkness comes the light.

Dawn is a sharp blade, cutting right to the heart of my aloneness.

From the rich inkiness comes a tender smudge of blue. So sure of itself.

Like it had never seen a war. Like all the blood had never flowed.

Like everything that comes together doesn't fall apart.

And, like any drab-winged insect, I'm irresistibly drawn back to the shining.

Where a story starts isn't easy to pinpoint. Beginnings tangle, wrapping like vines, and everything is connected. Nothing exists in isolation.

What I do remember watching was a young girl...

MINA

Late September 1811, England,
Home

Shoes are an odd thing. There's a lot to be said for having the world under your feet rather than a piece of old leather. It was a long time before I could decide whether shoes were help or hindrance. Maybe I came to them too late. I'd had eleven winters before I could wear the pair they'd taken from Mama after she passed. Even then I needed to fill the toes with twisted hay and wrap rags around my heels to keep them from sliding loose. They flapped about my feet like a pair of chained crows. Noisy and blister-making whenever I walked with any sense of purpose, but I persisted, out of respect for our dear mother, and in the hope that one day I might fill them.

I was in Mama's shoes when they came for me. The milking shed door flung open, hands on me, tearing my dress. Like a bad wind roaring in, it happened so fast. There was no time for goodbye, no chance to comfort Billy.

In one cold rush, the whole world I knew, all that I loved, all that I understood, was gone.

Only it wasn't a wind, and it wasn't the farm being dragged away. It was me.

We had woken that morning to frosty half-circles on the window panes. Winter's bony fingers inching across the skies a good month earlier than usual. I'd dressed Billy quickly, hurrying to keep the bed warmth on his body before seeing to the fire.

Next there was the cow to see. She didn't take long to milk so I'd not bothered with my own coat. Stepping outside, the sweet peatiness of fallen leaves wound out from the woods. Dew shone across the grass, making gems of a spider's web strung across the porch. Billy swished his feet across the silvery lawn, giggling and puffing tiny clouds as we made our way to the cowshed.

I knew to listen for the sounds of change, and I'd noticed the hushed birdsong. But instead of early warning, I'd taken the stillness around us as more sign the year was turning: the last of summer's swallows on the wing.

There had been talk of missing children. Some months before, word had trickled through. No child we knew. No families from the village. It was a shadowy thing: the taking of children, something spoken of in hushed tones. Fireside tales told long after dark. It was not something that happened to us. Not something that happened in daylight.

But whether the danger felt real, Papa's instructions were.

'Listen out, keep Billy close,' he'd told me clear enough. 'Be ready to run. Into the forest, you'll have a chance there. If they come and I'm not here, run for the trees and hide.'

In the cowshed Billy had been talking about blackberries.

Before they came, he'd been standing neatly beside the cow, and always in her view, like I'd taught him. His small hand absently patting her neck, as he explained why we needed to go and pick berries. His thinking was that he liked eating them and if we didn't go soon, right after breakfast, the birds would finish them off – and we'd be left with none. He'd mimed this last point with solemn empty hands and I'd been trying not to laugh, hiding my face behind the cow as I milked her.

I remember thinking it would be good to take a pot to the blackberries too. Mama used to send me to pick them so she could keepsake summer's sweetness in a tidy row of jars. Billy and I had been wolfing them straight from the bushes – our hands, and Billy's face, still stained a tell-tale, greedy red hours later. I wasn't sure how to make jam, but getting the berries home would be a decent start. Billy would be as pleased with a spoon of jam in his winter oats as I used to be with mine, and it was only fair my brother had the same treats.

It had rained in the night, so going out to the brambles could also be the chance to pick mushrooms. I was teaching Billy which ones were safe to eat, and now was the time to start hanging them from the rafters above the fire, so we'd have smoky dried mushrooms in our winter stews.

These were my thoughts that morning.

Before they came, this was the weight of my head.

The crack of cart wheels on the hardened earth road, the horses' hooves. I should have heard them coming some way off. Not been startled by the sight of two heavy-footed men already inside with their hands out. Landowner Ruthers and his great bulk of a man, Locke, blotting out the light. I should've heard him coming weeks before he was taking up the doorway.

'Don't let them close enough to lay a hand on you. Kick and bite if it comes to it,' Papa told me. 'Whatever it takes. Throw what you can reach, even if it's animal shit. They won't want you if they think you're touched.'

'Yes, Papa,' I'd promised him.

But I'd let them drag me from the shed, hoisting me up into the cart as easily as they would a cowering animal. Billy left alone, wide-eyed and crying. The pail of warm milk knocked over and steaming into the dirt floor. The cow only half milked.

Instead of holding my little brother, close and tight in the safety of the woods, I could only watch him from the back of Landowner Ruthers' cart. Billy's face becoming smaller with each turn of the wheels, until he was a lonely blur against the wall of the shed.

If I knew an inch of what lay ahead, I would not have gone so easy.

Timid as a field mouse, I wasn't used to strangers then. We lived in a three-room cottage on the edge of a forest, the door of our nearest neighbour half an hour's walk. Months could come before we'd greet another person, and grown men were to be obeyed. I was a simple girl. It was a simple life. Papa worked the fields until sundown, Billy and I saw to the chores. Our horizons stretched little further than what we could see, or what our hands could hold.

If I knew what was to come, I'd have fought like a cornered rat that morning, but we don't get to do things over. None of us can look back and pick the bad pieces out.

There were other children in the cart with me. Another girl and three boys. Landowner Ruthers and Locke rode up front and we were in the back, pressed up together against bundles of hay and close enough to whisper without the men hearing. None of the other children knew where they were taking us or when we might be coming back. No one had been allowed to bring belongings.

Harry was the youngest. Just turned six.

‘What if no one lets her out?’ he whispered.

He was talking about a cow. It was his job to take her out in the mornings. No food in his own belly, the little boy fretted Brownie would be left hungry in the dark of her shed. I looked at his hands as he steadied himself against the cart, still pudgy and soft like Billy’s hands. He was so little. Whatever the men intended for us, surely Harry was too young?

He sat between Ty and Calumn, the two older boys. Cal’s coat had been ripped, threads swung down from a wide tear at his shoulder. Ty must have put up even more of a fight. He had a cut lip that was bruising to purple and he flinched each time the cart jarred his shoulder. I knew Cal and Ty were friends. I’d often seen them laughing together at the harvest gatherings. Of the two Ty spoke the least, although it didn’t seem from shyness. With his long legs folded up in front of him, he must have been the most uncomfortable of the five of us in the small space.

Next to me was Helen. Sweet, pretty Helen, who I’d never known to be unkind to anyone. I saw one of her long braids, usually so neatly plaited, had been yanked loose.

The men drove the horses hard and we rattled along at an uneasy pace, our fears a metal tang clattering along with us. We were heading south, but that was a meaningless detail to me then. Reaching up around us, the trees were turning gold and red, as though their leaves had caught a slow, deep fire. But there was no warmth here. The day was grey and damp, and we shivered as the wind rushed through the slats in the cart.

I knew we had to keep track of our journey. I’d begun counting the groves of trees and stretches of open fields, keeping measure of how long it would take to walk back. But as we travelled on, my grasp of the land’s patterns loosened. The tighter I gripped, the more it unravelled.

I started counting the forks in the road we passed instead. Soon, even those became too many, over-stacking and jumbling in my head.

It was a desperate twisty thing. If we couldn’t remember the path away from our home, how could we find our way back?

I looked down at my hands. A splinter from the cart was caught in the skin of my palm. Pulling it free brought a bead of bright red. Frantic as I was, terror sloshing inside me, I couldn’t think of another way to mark the journey.

Up ahead, another crossroad was fast approaching.

I pulled up a larger splinter from the cart beneath me and dug it sharply into my finger.

As we swung left, I drew a small mark with the blood on the inside skirt of my dress.

I would do a dash for every left turn the cart made, and a cross for every right.

Pressing my finger into the splinter each time we came to a split in the road, I made sure the marks were soaked deep enough into the cloth that they’d stay fast. Moving to another fingertip when the cut on the first became too ragged to press a clear mark, I kept them in a neat line. Circling the inside of my hem, just high enough to be clear of any mud.

The crosses and dashes lined up. Inching around my skirt as the day wore on.

My fingers ached, but having something to focus on kept fear from taking hold. I told myself the blood I was drawing would keep us tethered to our home. The blood that ran under my skin was made of this place: it would bring us back.

By afternoon we had travelled further than I'd ever been. Farther than Mama or Pa had gone. The familiar was running to wide, unfarmed lands. Strange rocks jutted from the ground.

We came across an iron cage. Swinging from a post and cross beam. We didn't know what it was at first. Until the crows lifted, shrieking and calling, their black wings beating angrily, and the smell reached us. The unmistakable animal sweetness of death. It was a person, a body that had once been someone. Bound in chains, locked in a cage barely bigger than itself. As we passed, the crows closed back around the wretched thing.

The men stopped regularly to rest the horses and let the animals relieve themselves. I badly needed to go too but we weren't allowed to get out of the cart. Ty asked to stretch his legs. In answer he got the side of the crop and a stinging red line across his face to match his bruised lip.

We kept quiet after that, even when it started to rain. Stony drops that fell heavy to our bones. Landowner Ruthers pulled the cart to a halt, Locke jumped down to check that the bundles of hay were still covered in their tarred sheet, and the men urged the horses onwards.

Shivering, we huddled together in the back.

I knew my brother would be cold and hungry too. The kitchen fire would have died after an hour, two at the most. Billy would know not to go into the woods alone, but would he think to pull the blankets from our beds to keep himself warm until Papa got home?

I looked down at Mama's shoes on my feet, shamed all the more for letting myself be taken. Mama had trusted me with Billy's care. Keeping him warm was the smallest that I could do. It had been barely a year since she died and here I was, already failing her.

He had grown so much. Mama would smile to see how much of himself he had become, a proper little person. How he talked now. His chatter keeping up with his little feet as he followed me about, trying to help with the chores. But still only three years old. We'd never left Billy alone before, not even for a few minutes.

Night came and with it a deeper chill. But the storm of dangers I'd imagined Billy facing alone calmed.

I knew Papa would be home and the fire would be lit. There would be a different storm now: Papa raging against what had happened. Slamming the chairs; yelling, throwing his tin mug across the kitchen. But what could he do? Even if Papa were able to come this far after me, what could he be against the reach of Landowner Ruthers? The man who owned our farms, and held our lives to his whims.

Hollowness twined and twisted my stomach as I pictured my brother and father together, rosy in the warmth of being indoors, my chair empty across the table. I didn't know what they would do tomorrow. Pa was needed in the fields and Billy would have to go with him, but what of the chores? Winter's survival was as dependent on the wood being chopped and cow being milked as anything else. No days could be missed. I looked at the children with me in the cart. They would be needed at home too. Especially Helen – she and her mother lived alone.

The rain had eased but it was too cold for our clothes to dry. All of us were shivering. None of us had eaten today. No one had spoken for some miles: not wanting to risk Mr Ruther's crop, nor was there much to say to each other. Why had we been taken? What would happen to us? There were no good answers.

Where we come from, the world is small. Some people might laugh at how small our lives were, but even now, with all I've seen, I wouldn't trade my beginning. Large isn't everything, and I've yet to see the sheer weight of numbers make anything right.

On the farm, the world felt possible to understand. Everything had its rhythm and its way, and if you leaned in close and watched carefully, you could learn the world and how to be in it. The forest roots that were good eating, which grains to feed hens for eggs with yolks the colour of golden sunrise. How to raise a fire from wet wood; which leaves to pick for the fastest-healing poultices. The sounds an untethered horse will listen to.

The world didn't feel small then; it felt big as a clear horizon and full as the day. I was just a farm girl but I didn't feel simple then, I felt part of the world and in tune with its melody. Everything had a reason and a sense to it, and I was a piece of that. I didn't think to question whether it was a fair world or if I had my rightful share of it. There were simply rhythms that I could rely on, and a place for me among them.

But that was before I'd seen a machine.

The night whistled on past our ears, and through our wet clothes. My bones ached from the cold; all the water inside me turning to ice. The others had fallen into a juddery sleep but I was afraid to let my eyes close. If I missed even one turn in the road, all the marks inside my skirt would mean nothing. Curled up and shivering against the cart's side, the warmth of morning seemed unreachable as we rattled deeper into the night.

Then, out of the darkness came a strange noise.

At first, I took it to come from the cart. But as the sound grew louder, it was clear it ran separate to the drum of the horses' hooves, and was coming from some distance away.

Soon the noise was loud enough to wake the other children; startling them from sleep and swallowing the sounds of the horses and the cart altogether. A fearsome, repeating hammer, it was unlike anything we'd ever heard.

'Is it thunder?' whispered Harry. 'Maybe hitting the same spot?'

'Thunder won't do that,' Ty answered softly. 'And look, the sky's cleared.'

'What is it then?' asked Cal.

Ty just shook his head, not knowing.

We knew no good could come from such a noise. No human hand could create such a hammering. Surely no right mind would want any part of it? And yet it seemed the sound pulled us forward, drawing us ever closer. Each crash now timing with the circles of the cart's wheels.

In horror, we realised the horses were quickening their pace towards the hammering.

The woods we rode through were thinning. The road beneath us becoming smoother and faster. Everything rushing to bring us to it.

As the last of the trees cleared, a monstrous building rose ahead. A vast, shadowy bulk that dwarfed the landscape around it. Larger than twenty of our cottages piled together, it was a house built for giants. From ground to gable, five storeys of windows punctured its walls. A towering chimney, tall enough for twenty fireplaces, stretched up into the night skies.

Helen pressed closer into my side. I reached for her hand and looked over for Harry, Ty had put his arm protectively across the little boy.

This was surely the source of the noise, and as we got closer, the monster did nothing to dispel our fear. The thunder coming from it was evenly spaced; a pulse almost, as though the building lived. I didn't understand how Landowner Ruthers was able to drive the horses so close, but as the cart came to a halt outside it, I saw the horses were familiar with the crashing. They had the witless indifference of animals who had never faced down the cause of a thing. As Locke fastened their bridles to a post right out front, the beasts practically nickered. For them it must mean rest and a feed. It was unlikely to mean the same for us. Landowner Ruthers would not have put himself through the trouble of bringing us this far for anything so pleasant.

We watched him walk to the doorway of the monstrous building. For a moment, before the door swung shut behind him, yellow light spilled out, cutting a sharp triangle that raced across the grass towards us.

I thought about running. My legs were cramped and shaking, would they get me to the cover of trees before Locke caught up? Could I leave the other children alone here to face Ruther's wrath? Were they thinking the same thoughts?

Ty must have been. Of the five of us, he had by far the strongest chance. But Ty stood fast, his hand resting on Harry's shoulder. Maybe I wasn't brave enough, or just too tired and cold, for I stood with him.

Ruthers came back with a bony, odd-looking man. Half the width of Ruthers, taller by a good few inches. The man's hair was dark, but the long lines of his face were sliced crossways by a fat hedge of moustache red enough to glow like embers in the lamplight. His trousers and jacket had been cut from the same dark blue cloth. I now know to call this a suit, but it looked particular to me then, gleaming silkily from his neck to his heels.

The two men spoke heartily, clapping each other's shoulders, leaning in to hear each other over the roaring house. At one point the thin man stepped closer, his lamp casting deep hollows across his face. His eyes had the same look Mama used to have when she was buying supplies at the market. There was a distinct sensation we were being measured for quality and freshness as he swung the light at each of us. After a second look at Ty's bruises, he said something to Ruthers who laughed. The matter completed, the men bid each other well.

Locke prodded us. We were to follow the thin man down a path into the darkness. It was a great relief to be walking away from the hideous building. I looked over my shoulder to see Ruthers climb up to his seat. He didn't trouble himself with so much as a glance back at the children he'd had in his cart.

The path curved past a throng of trees and down to another building. Smaller than the one at our backs, it was still far larger than any house I'd ever seen before. Instead of going to its doorway, the thin man left the path, the circle of his lamp swinging across the grass, and walked to a small shed built against the back of the building.

He unlocked it. We were herded inside and the bolt slid back into place behind us.

The lamplight shone briefly under the door. I saw a stack of split wood before the light swung away with the men's steps, leaving us in pitch black. Reaching my hands out, I felt for the stacks of wood. The shed smelt musty and cobwebby. Chopped wood that had sat undisturbed for some time.

Outside, past the second building and up along the path, the hammering suddenly stopped.

For a moment the air hung empty, then I heard the other children's breathing. The scraping of wood being leaned against. Our feet shuffling on the dirt floor. Simple, normal sounds that were a comfort to hear in the darkness of this place.

Little Harry was the first to speak, 'What are they keeping in there? In that massive house?' His voice was quivery with fear. 'What creature could make that noise?'

‘It’s got to be a city noise Harry. We’re probably not far from the city.’

Calumn was trying to comfort Harry, but this idea only increased the child’s fear. His voice rising higher. ‘The *city*! Why would they want us in the city? What are they going to do with us?’

I heard the rustling of a body moving, Ty stepping closer to reassure him. ‘Just think Harry, how good this story will be to tell everyone when we get home.’

‘Whoever nailed this wall together wasn’t too fussed about it staying up,’ Cal’s voice was now coming from somewhere near the ground. ‘Won’t take long to get these planks loose.’

We could hear him pushing against the wall, feeling for weakness in the wood.

Ty sighed. ‘They know where we live Cal.’

‘What are you saying?’ asked Cal. ‘Ruthers will come, get us again?’

‘Or take one of your brothers instead. Would you want Eddie or Jon here?’

As Ty’s words sunk in, the creaking stopped. I thought of Billy. There was no way I wanted him here in my place.

‘I can’t hold it much longer.’ Harry voiced a concern I had too.

‘Hang on. There’s a bucket or something here,’ said Cal.

We took turns, Helen and I squatting over the bucket with our skirts covering everything but the sounds. It was too dark to see anything, even after our eyes had adjusted, but it still took me ages to be able to go, knowing everyone couldn’t help but listen. Ty went last and when he was done, he carried the bucket to the door. We heard him feeling for the gap between the ground and the door, then slowly emptying the bucket. The shed was on a slight incline, but to be sure he laid a few pieces of wood down by the wall so no one would have to sit on wet ground.

‘We should try and get some sleep,’ he said.

‘I’m too thirsty,’ Harry’s voice was now beside me.

‘Here Harry, let’s get a button to fix that.’

‘A button? What can that do?’

‘It’s magic,’ I smiled at him in the dark.

I pulled a button free from the bottom of his shirt and slid it into his mouth. I could hear him clicking it around his teeth, then a surprised intake of breath. ‘It works!’

Mama taught me this. I did it with Billy sometimes when we were out in the forest. It couldn’t properly cure a thirst, but something hard like a small pebble or a button could wet your mouth and keep you going until home. After that, the sound of buttons clicking against teeth filled the shed.

The ground was cold but dry. There was space for two to sleep comfortably. We slept folded up and curved around each other, the heat from our bodies drying off our clothes and keeping the shed warm enough.

As I drifted off, I could feel the juddery rhythm of the cart still. I knew it was just my body reliving the day’s dealings, muscles remembering the cart’s unfamiliar motion, but I pulled my skirt around me tighter all the same. My fingers sore and bloodied from the splinters.

Slipping in and out of fitful sleep, I dreamt of Billy. Dreams that he was calling me, that I was trying to find him, protect him from a fierce storm coming. Then he was with me and the feeling of him in my arms drew me from sleep. But when I woke, it was Harry's head heavy and warm on my lap.

I lay awake and stared into the blackness. At some point the walls began to take shape. The sleeping bodies of the other children slowly emerging from the gloom as dawn trickled through the cracks in the wallboards and up from the gap under the door. The only one of us small enough to stretch out, Harry had spread out sweetly across everyone, his arms and legs flung trustingly wide.

I saw Ty in the opposite corner, propped up against the wood stack, and realised he was awake too, and had been watching me.

He smiled, a sideways crescent moon in the murkiness. 'I liked your trick with the buttons.'

With Helen asleep on his shoulder, his legs tangled with Cal's, and Harry's feet across his lap, Ty reminded me of the raggedy king of the harvest scarecrows. We had not spoken much before. I'd seen him plenty of times at village gatherings but something about Ty always made me feel shy. He seemed so easy in his measure of things.

'Did you mean what you said?' I asked him. 'About having a good story when we get home?'

It was light enough now to see the doubt in his eyes, 'Harry needed to get some sleep. We all did.'

A little later, the hammering started again. Rumbling through the dirt and taking over the air so thoroughly it was a wonder there was still space for the sky itself.

Whatever was making the noise, it was as angry this morning as it had been last night.

The thin man with the moustache came to unbolt the door not long after that. He told us to get up and hurry after him. Blinking in the light, we untangled ourselves and, as instructed, followed him back up the path we'd come down the night before. Back towards the terrible noise.

EVERY

Present day, London, Friday,
4.55am

I'm running and everything is white. Everything is shuddering and coming apart. Powdery feathers float through the air. The only way out is through a tunnel of collapsing buildings. The air is chalky with debris and hard to breathe.

I must keep running. Chest heaving, feet pounding.

Towering high-rise blocks tumble and fall around me.

A shard of metal slices through the air, barely missing my head.

The shaking comes again.

I look down. Under my feet, the concrete cracks open and gives way. I reach out, trying to keep my balance, but there is nothing to hold on to. The road beneath me falls away.

I fall with it, instead of down, I'm being pulled upwards.

Up through feathery layers of quilt and sleep, to where my phone is ringing.

It takes a moment to understand the cool blue familiarity of my bedroom, that I am safe, that the phone has been ringing for some time. Vibrating and rattling against a glass of water, sending tiny earthquakes across the bedside table. Book by book, my pile of reading has been sliding to the floor.

I stare at the phone dumb. Catching my breath as another book tumbles to the floor.

The number calling is a long string of digits my mobile phone doesn't recognise. I know the voice instantly. We haven't spoken for the best part of a decade, but the precisely clipped vowels are as familiar as family. I realise she's crying, and all sleep flaps away as I listen to my father's assistant describe the situation unfolding ten-and-a-half-thousand miles away.

Details arrive in a breathless rush. Dad collapsed a few hours ago. He's in hospital. His doctors have ruled out the possibility of recovery.

'We don't know how much time he has,' Janelle says. 'You need to come now Evie.'

The numbers on the digital clock beside my bed flicker from 4.55am to 4.56am. Janelle pauses, waiting for my reaction. It's late afternoon where they are. Summertime in Sydney. I picture the wide, blue-rinsed skies and imagine him on his balcony, majestically gazing out to sea. Respectful breezes gently ruffling his hair. A tumbler of scotch and soda leaving a wet ring on a pile of scripts. I blink that away. He couldn't be on his balcony now.

Down the line Janelle exhales. It's my turn to say something.

'Thanks for letting me know,' the words bubble up in my mouth. Janelle and I listen to them together. They're not the right words; there are far better words.

'Shall I book your flight Every?'

'I can do it from here.'

'I'll tell him you're on your way?'

'Yes.'

Outside I hear the deep purr of a black cab pulling up in the street. I listen to the click of its passenger light going on, a girl laughing and two car doors clunk shut. She's wearing heels. Her footsteps teeter and echo away. There's a throaty acceleration as the cab makes its way back up the narrow street past the tightly packed houses.

Inside my head is an empty vacuum, the expanding hollow before an explosion.

I can't remember ever hearing Janelle cry before. I put the phone back on the bedside table next to my clock. Seeing the time, I register that there's still two hours before my alarm goes off and I'll need to get up.

Then the screen on my phone flicks off. The room goes dark and the explosion hits.

My father is in hospital. Right now, on the other side of the world.

Even if I left within this moment. Even if I could walk directly out of my bedroom, onto the tarmac and up the steps of a waiting plane, Dad is still a 22-hour flight away.

There *is* no time.

I jump out of bed and switch on my laptop.

Pulling my suitcase from the back of the wardrobe as the computer whirs into life. It's hard to focus on what I should be packing. What things I'll need. It will be hot in Sydney but holiday clothes feel wrong. I start throwing things into the open lids of my case. T-shirts, jeans, underwear. When I get to a black dress, I stop. What am I packing for?

Twenty minutes later I'm in the backseat of a cab, asking the driver to get us to the airport as quickly as he can. As we power up the hill away from my flat, I remember I've forgotten to water the plants. The airline ticket I bought was an open return. I don't know how long I'll be gone. I don't know if I should hope it's for a long time. I haven't emptied the fridge or locked the windows either.

I text Janelle the flight details, tell Dad I'll be there as soon as I can.

It's night still. The sky inky and low. It must have snowed earlier: the sleeping streets we skim through are lace-edged in white. Rather than around, the driver's sat nav takes us through the city. With few other cars on the road, we thread smoothly through the labyrinthine turns forged by two thousand years of human life. Roman walls up against curved glass towers. Open-all-night, deep-fried-chicken shops operating out of Victorian terraces. London is a maze I can still lose myself in. Usually I love this. Right now I'm watching the sat nav closely.

Forty-two minutes until destination.

The driver flicks on the windscreen wipers and I see it's snowing again. A ballet of flakes twirling and falling through the headlights.

The streets widen, we speed up and onto the motorway, reflections wrapping faster across the windscreen. A pale face whips past on the glass, for a second I see my mother's eyes but it's just me. Tired and dark-eyed.

Twelve minutes to destination.

Beyond the rhythmic swish of wipers, signs for the airport become more frequent. The driver asks if I want Arrivals or Departures. It seems obvious until I remember the two half-shells of suitcase left stretched across my bed. The black dress swaying on its hanger in the wardrobe.

Even at 6.45am Heathrow is crowded and aggressively bright. The check-in line is a long shuffling snake twice-doubling back on itself.

On the flight information board my flight is listed as Go to gate.

The queues drag through to security. People fussing with their shoes, belts, loose coins.

My flight is now boarding at a gate on the far side of the airport.

I start running. Down the long, rubber-stretched walkways. Chest heaving, feet pounding again. This time I'm awake but it feels more dream-like. Where I am, where I'm going. What is happening. None of this feels real. I run past hyper-bright duty-free stands. Through unhurried clumps of people, laughing, waving cups of coffee and melted-cheese paninis at each other. There's a sensation of moving through a film shot in slow-motion. I want to keep running, harder and faster, until all of this sharpens back to normal.

Back at my flat, my alarm will be beeping for me to get out of bed.

When I get to the gate, sweaty and shaking, it's not boarding at all. Just people sardined together in a glass room, waiting. I lean against the wall until we're called to board.

On the plane I sit, seatbelt buckled, watching the other passengers find their seats. Each person dawdling down the aisle. Chatting, fumbling, dropping their boarding passes; stuffing the overhead lockers.

My hands are two white starfishes gripping the armrests.

Outside support vehicles make circling tracks in the snow. A swab of grey morning skulks up the runway. I wonder if Dad is awake. It will be 6pm in Sydney now. Two hours before sunset.

We don't know how much time he has. That's what Janelle said. But what does that mean? That Dad's future no longer stretches to years and months? That his time can now only be measured in days or hours? My wanting to live on the opposite side of the world from him suddenly feels petty. A leaf fighting with the wind.

The stewards thump shut the lockers, the plane accelerates towards take-off and we are finally airborne. There are safety announcements, the yellow life-vest that must not be inflated on board. A drinks trolley clatters up the aisle. I surprise myself by ordering scotch. The flight attendants were offering tea and coffee but don't seem inconvenienced by a passenger wanting liquor at 8.40am. I fiddle with the foil-wrapped peanuts, ignoring the man next to me winking conspiratorially.

Taking a sip, I look out the window and down on the wintery greys of Europe crosshatched neatly below. I'm still not keen on the taste of scotch. Turns out, it was the smoky wood smell that I was craving.

Twenty-one hours before we land in Sydney. A full day and night.

We don't know how much time he has. I picture a large hourglass, each grain of sand slipping through its narrow funnel for the last time. I ask for another scotch and keep looking out the window.

Marshy aromas swamp the cabin. Food trays are handed out and collected again. Window blinds are pulled down. Lights go out. Six different movies flicker across the backs of seats around me. The films finish, then skip seats, playing out in staggered formation across the rows for different people. I try to watch them too, but can't seem to hold the threads of a plot together. Even the films I've already seen need too much concentration. I find myself staring at back-to-back episodes of *Friends* without my headphones plugged in. The old sets familiar and soothing. I wonder what made the designer think of putting a gold frame around the peephole of a purple door. I read a feature in the inflight magazine about the drawbacks of vintage motorcycle ownership.

Eighteen hours to Sydney. We rumble on.

We don't know how much time he has. I try to picture Dad in a hospital bed. The references I have of what this might look like are from TV and films. Wired to monitors, an oxygen mask on his face, sterile tubes running across the sheets and into his veins. But I know life is never as clean, and it doesn't feel real to imagine him like that.

It's been almost 10 years since Dad and I were in the same room. Obviously I've *seen* him since. I see him most days. My father is hard to miss. Magazine covers, chat shows, red carpets – photoshopped, charismatic, beloved, a beautiful actress usually sparkling off his arm. Once I caught a number 38 bus with his face wrapped large as the moon across its side. I sat upstairs, just between his left eyebrow and a Mont Blanc pen, all the way up Rosebery Avenue into Islington.

I do not know the shape of life without him in it. The thought of life without him is unreachable.

It's 3pm, but not here. I slide up the window shade and peer out into the darkness. Nothing below and nothing above. Whatever time we are flying over, the density of night outside is so complete, so solid, that if I were able to open the window, my fingers might sink into the sky like soft velvet.

Gravity always seemed to have a lighter grip on Dad's shoulders. Even as a little kid, it was clear to me that he was the golden centre of every room he walked into. Everyone – even other stars – leaned forward to bathe in the warmth of his presence. The comfort he had in his own skin made him seem somehow otherworldly. He was not like other daddies. But nor were we like other families.

My mother once bought him a silver flask. A beautifully slim bottle to slide gently inside his jacket pocket. He complained the metal made his scotch taste tinny and overheated, but he still carried it with him whenever he left the house for any significant time. Mum just laughed at his grumbles. On the side of the flask, in old-fashioned swirling script she'd had a message engraved, *'A lion is not concerned by the opinions of sheep'*.

I knew it was intended as encouragement against the critics and unappreciative studio execs and I liked the sound of the words, but it felt unnecessary advice for Dad. He never seemed the least bit concerned by anyone's opinions, sheep or otherwise. He did what he wanted, when he wanted. Not in a cruel way, Dad was simply unweighted by other people's expectations. It was the same with his fame. For him, the attention wasn't something to pander to, or be troubled by. Like the weather, it simply rolled past his windows, inevitable but unrelated to what was going on inside.

Even after it happened, after the world was ripped open and carved apart. When life was reset red and ruined. When the adoration turned to hostility – people screaming horrible things from the crowd: murderer, wife-killer. Even then, other people's assessments weren't relevant to him. The Hollywood specials, the around-the-clock news reports: they did not describe his situation. It all seemed to slide off my father as though water from a fish. His gleam uncut.

And it didn't take long for the swing of public opinion to soften, circling back around. There was no arrest, no official suggestion of criminal involvement. The general consensus became that the poor man had suffered enough. It had been an accident. A terrible, tragic accident.

It was different for me. I was just a kid. I've never had my father's immunity to judgement. Not now, certainly not then. What these strangers, these people who had never even been in the same room as my parents, said about Mum and Dad, pierced me.

The press camped outside our home, my school. Swooping, squabbling pigeons, stopping my classmates for quotes. Springing from bushes like demented jack-in-the-boxes. Chasing us down the street. Scary and devious. Their flashes designed to blind. The sickening questions they yelled out.

I don't recommend any of it.

The idea that anyone would actively seek out this kind of scrutiny is horrifying. All those eyes constantly watching you, that's not love. People seem confused about this – the people who think they want to be famous; for the galaxy to chorus their name. They have no idea what they're wishing for. Take it from me: standing out from the crowd, there's little advantage to this. Attention is not love. They are nothing like each other. Not even close.

I kept reading about what sad timing it was, with Mum's soon-to-be-Oscar-winning performance in *Foreign Tides* only just out in the cinemas. And her being so beautiful. As though it was her beauty or work schedule which made her death tragic. They always mentioned the blood too. So awful, so shocking. *All that blood.*

But that was seventeen years ago. I left home; grew up. I use Mum's maiden name, and stick to Evie. I'm normal now. Far from the line of fire. I am not my father's daughter.

I avoid conversations about my family. I don't tell people who I am. Why would I? I know exactly what they're going to ask. It's the same questions every time. People want to talk about that night. What I saw; what really happened. If I saw it.

The world may have felt she belonged to them, that they knew her. That paying for a movie ticket also bought a piece of the actor. They have a right to feel they lost something precious that night. But Therese Mitchell wasn't just an actor. She was a person. A person with dreams and plans; she had a husband and a daughter, and so much more life to live. She was my mum.

I understand the curiosity, of course I do. I understand why they feel they need to know. But I don't want to talk about it. It happened; it was terrible. It was a long time ago. We've all faced monsters, lost who we love. Dark beasts stalk all our nights.

We've been in the air for eleven hours. Singapore is two hours away. At Changi there will be an hour's wait for refuel, then another day of flying onwards to Sydney. How many falling grains of sand will that amount to? I look through the seat pocket again. I read the flight safety card: the cartoon families adjusting their air-masks, happily preparing for impact.

I see a lot of Mum too. In re-runs. She still catches my breath if I'm caught off guard. She *was* beautiful. I have all her movies. Once I watched Mum dying on loop for hours. I don't know why. I just sat there crying and rewinding and crying again. The one where she has cancer. I know she was pregnant with me when she filmed it, but she looks so young. Too young for babies and marriage. For me and my father.

Even though she's meant to be dying in half the film, she's glowing. No amount of make-up can dull the happiness shining in her eyes. She told me she was so in love with Dad, and excited about having me that she hardly needed to eat or sleep. That each moment felt too full and precious to waste on such things. She said that at the time all she truly needed was the air that she breathed, and to love us. Like the Hollies song they play at the end of the movie.

She used to sing the song to me when she told me this story. When I was very young and still imagined everything revolved around me, I asked to hear this story a lot. Mum had a very sweet voice; I always thought they should have got her to sing it in the film.

If I was the one handing out Oscars, this is the film I would have given Mum hers for. I think she would have enjoyed wedging her own little gold man into Dad's congregation of them at home. I think she would have laughed at that. What was the point of giving her one after she died? Just a spite of timing.

The captain announces we're descending into Singapore. He breezily adds that the scheduled hour's refuel will now be two and a half. More than twice the time it should be. Panic flutters up, coiling around my shoulders.

Landing takes longer than expected; our designated gate is not ready. We circle above Changi Airport. Taxiing into the parking bay 54 minutes later. All passengers are required to disembark.

I rush to call Sydney. Dialling the number as I bolt down the air-bridge. Janelle isn't answering her own or Dad's phone. I send texts to both numbers. Neither of them has their answerphone messages switched on. I don't know what that means, if it means anything. It's possible the number I have for Dad isn't even his anymore. They have to change it regularly.

I call the hospital. They won't let me through to Dad's room. I ask to speak with the person in charge. Minutes grind by as I listen to static, hoping I haven't been cut off. An exasperated voice eventually comes on the line. I can't prove I'm Ford Mitchell's daughter. The hospital's phones have been ringing off the hook with journalists and distraught fans claiming to be next of kin. These people knew his date and place of birth too. There's really nothing they can do for me at this stage, says the hospital supervisor. Perhaps try contacting Mr Mitchell's management team. In the morning, he adds snootily. The line's dead before I can reply.

Across the departure lounge is a newsagent kiosk. Two walls of glossy magazines. From where I'm standing, I can see three-quarters of Dad's face in replica on a neat stack of *Vanity Fairs*.

I go online and type in Dad's name. According to the headlines, the legendary actor-director has been hospitalised. There's vague insinuation it's a drug overdose. One 'showbiz' reporter demands to know if it's plastic surgery. The relief buckles me. If the pigeons are scratching up dirt and hazarding guesses, it means no official statement has been issued yet. Which means he must be okay. Death in a hospital is not something even Janelle could keep quiet.

The information boards are flashing an alert. I rush over, hoping our flight is boarding early. It's a further delay. A four-hour wait is now listed for the Sydney flight. My stomach drops. This has to be a mistake. It will make our arrival almost six hours late. I feel lightheaded, blanched with fear. I can't process how this can be happening, to *this* flight. There is not a flight I've ever taken where time mattered more.

People are crowded in front of the airline information stand. Staff behind the counter are handing out vouchers for meals and drinks. A man in a tight-fitting mauve uniform walks up to me, nudging my arm with the offer of boiled lollies from a small woven basket.

The airline doesn't have any other flights departing earlier to Sydney. I run back to the departures board to see if any other airlines do. A flight to Brisbane left two minutes ago. The next plane to Australia is the one I'm on. I try Janelle and Dad again. Still no answer. I don't know who else to call. What else to do. It's the middle of the night in Sydney. I scroll through my contacts. The number I have for Lenny, Dad's manager, rings out. My father is one of the most well-known people on the planet but I have no one else I can call to find out if he is alive.

I slump down next to a large display of potted orchids. Their fleshy little faces bobbing impassively at my drama. I count up the hours again. Three-and-a-half before we get back on the plane. Another eight flying. Immigration. The drive from the airport to the hospital will take at least an hour.

We don't know how much time he has. I feel sick.

In the bathroom I throw up, just making it to the toilet in time. On my knees on the white tiles retching slimy water until my stomach cramps. I wash my face at the sink without looking in the mirror.

Pacing the airport terminal, too jittery to sit, I find myself back at the newsagent, staring at the stack of magazines with Dad on the cover. Maybe a hundred Dads. He looks good. Healthy. His gaze direct to the camera. He looks like a man who has all the time in the world.

With magazine lead times, I know this photograph would be at least a few months old. I buy a copy. Dad's been busy; filming in London, judging at Cannes. A bear-watching trek through Jasper National Park with his Canadian girlfriend, Kara Lonsdale, the statuesque and accomplished thirty-two-year-old star of *Primrose Park*. There's a red-carpet snap of them together in evening dress. Sleek, blonde and six-foot tall: she looks like a beautiful praying mantis.

It's strange to think Dad and I were in the same city and didn't speak, although I realise his schedule must bring him to London often. I wonder how long he's known he was sick.

The boarding call for Sydney comes at last. I refresh the internet pages until final call. The websites don't have any updates. Standing by the gate, I keep trying Dad and Janelle's numbers, sending one last text message as I walk through the accordion folds of the air-bridge.

A different seat. Eight more hours belted in, lost to the roaring skies. Another round of drinks trolley, food smells, lights out, back-of-seat movies as the flightpath crawls sluggishly towards Sydney. A whole day and most of a night has passed since I spoke to Janelle. We're flying towards the sun, the plane's red wing-light blinking through powdery blue clouds. The man next to me turns in his sleep; his arm flops into my lap. I look across the cabin of sleeping people, messily folded into their seats and breathe down a wave of claustrophobia. Lifting the man's arm back into his own seat, I climb over him into the aisle.

The face in the toilet mirror looks tired. My eyes are sore and red. My jaw aches. Getting some sleep would be smart. I know I'm too wired. I think about asking the flight assistants for a sleeping tablet to knock me out. That's so far from safety protocol I imagine they'd just stare at me. I ask for a glass of water instead and make my way back to my seat.

Four more swollen, pointless hours.

Below, we've reached Australia. I watch the plane's tiny shadow skimming along the red Martian landscapes thirty thousand feet beneath us. Green tufts begin to sprout in the dust, and gradually it becomes bushland that we're flying over. There's the odd sign of human habitation, which multiplies and spreads until the green gives way to grey suburban sprawl.

As we sight the long, southern coastline Sydney sits on, the captain announces we're ready for landing at Kingsford Smith Airport. There are whoops and claps in the cabin, everyone craning to peer down at the shoreline. Waves wash against cliffs, then beaches, until we're low enough for the wheels to thump down.

We glide over Botany Bay, hitting the runway in a lurch of deceleration.

I'm home. It's been a long time.

In the queue for passport check, I try Janelle's number again. No answer. I try Dad's. It's 5pm local time; their time. My time. We're finally on the same time. Janelle should be answering. A security officer waves at me, pointing to the signs showing a mobile phone behind a crossed-out red circle. I pretend to look at my passport and send a text to let Janelle know I'm here.

Through immigration, I run past the baggage carousels and out towards the Arrivals hall.

I see my name, my birth name in thick, black letters held high on a card.

Then I see the wall of flashing cameras.

The scrabbling pigeons.

GREY

A kidnapped farm girl, unwilling witness to the dawn of machines. More than two centuries later, the daughter of the world's most celebrated film director. What thread could link the two?

We, all of us, are stories to tell.

Blue and green that runs to red.

I've seen a lot of stories. It's one of the perks. I get to watch. I get to notice the patterns. To see the themes emerging as the great tapestry is strung. It hasn't always felt like a reward.

Something I've noticed: History isn't always made by the loudest voices.

But let's not spoil endings. First a little scene-setting.

Did you know blood is made in the bones? Those rivers which run through you furious and deep, washing each last twist of you – even as you read these words – in sweet crimson currents. They spring from your marrow. Just like longings and dreams, you make your own blood.

Every drop is a story in itself. A single cup can hold a life. At first it did. Roughly a teacup of blood is all you were born with. You probably knew this; it's basic biology, but it's interesting to remember, isn't it? There's no other source. Blood cannot be made any other way. People have tried. The wheels of human enterprise ever-spinning. No one has come close.

Cells can be created. New skin can be sprayed from a can. Very existence can be paused and reanimated. But what once seemed the simplest thing – the mere oil greasing your machine – remains an impenetrable mystery. A code that won't be cracked. There's no recipe for blood. To make something, you have to understand it.

Another smudge of background to consider:

You were formed at the heart of a star. Oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, iron... Like almost every element on Earth, you are literally made of night sky.

Where am I going with this? Stay with me. *Rush* with me.

Let me show you a story.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE MEMORY OF BLOOD

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