

THE HEART

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(p. 17 – 24)

There was high atmospheric pressure. Between -25°C and -22°C for 16 days at the beginning of the year and I was sleeping on a mattress next to a steel crib at the end of a white corridor in the most advanced country in the world. I'd had a baby a few days earlier, my third, a boy, 4002 grams. In the evenings, before I lowered the blinds, the sky was orange and pink. I fed the baby, he slept. I lay down on the mattress and squinted at the wall clock, but with no concept of the time represented by the moving hands. It didn't mean anything. Sometimes there were appointments at specific times, for a medical exam or sample collection, but then a nurse would always come to fetch us and make sure we were ready and had remembered everything. Sometimes I was asleep by 8 o'clock. Sometimes the TV was on, broadcasting some quiz show at a low volume. I flicked through the book I had brought from home, a Christmas present. I read one page at a time, if that. I couldn't read properly. The letters jumped about and changed places, the words took on new meanings, and I totally misread things at times. Usually I just looked at the pictures: tea cups, dresses, suitcases, trains, cigarettes, fancy-dress garden parties (with children and adults). Gardens at dusk. Brighter dusk than the one outside, practically daylight. But unmistakably dusk. Or maybe it was something about the photographs themselves.

The photography technique? Virginia and Vanessa, sisters in swishing skirts, lying on opulent but tattered chaises longues. I stretched a little. Didn't do any exercise. Not so much as a push up. It would have been too much. Out of the question. There was no one in the ward trying to ask me questions or tell me things. No one trying to take my baby's blood pressure or yet another blood sample from his heel. There was only me. The babies in the other rooms and the night nurse glued to the screen of her desktop computer in the office were so silent they may as well not have been there. Elsewhere in the hospital building, operations were taking place. Somewhere someone was bleeding, somewhere someone had insomnia, somewhere someone was being injected with one last dose of medicine, a potted plant was being watered.

The other parents were spending the night at home or in the Ronald McDonald House nearby. Many of their children had been in the ward for months. Some lived far away, and had left everything to come here, for a short time or a long time, to be close to their child. But they went on walks, they talked, they drank coffee. They made friends. They ate crisps in front of the TV in the hospital lounge. Made lifelong friends? Joked on the phone.

I had my things lined up on the two shelves that now belonged to me. The essentials didn't amount to much. Underwear, T-shirts, jogging bottoms, wool sweaters (one thin, one thick).

Phone, wallet, toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss, towel, water bottle, ointment, tweezers, chocolate, tissues, book.

The day started at 7 o'clock every morning. The fluorescent lamps came on in all the corridors and the staff started making their way over to the coffee machines. Someone remembered to knock on our door, opened it a crack and said good morning, which meant I had to get up, put away my mattress and get on with the morning routine as quickly as possible. The morning round began at 8:00 and lasted well into the afternoon. It was only later, towards the evening, that I could contemplate walking any sort of distance and by then my legs were jelly. I pulled on sweaters, winter trousers, winter boots, my woolly hat, jacket and gloves, and slipped my wallet and phone into my

pockets. The baby could sleep, supervised by the device, the one that constantly measured his pulse, respiratory rate and blood oxygen level, and emitted a loud alarm if any value fell too low or rose too high. Or sometimes for some other reason like if one of the electrodes that connected the device to his body happened to come loose, for example. I informed a nurse I was going out for a minute. The nurse looked at me in surprise, perhaps wondering who I was or why I was being so informative. Was I entirely sane? It gave her a chance to rest for 20 seconds or so, too. To stare into space, to pause. But then she soon came to and blurted: *It's good you're going out, moving around, getting your mind off things*. She said it with such emphasis that I got the feeling there was some sort of subtext I was too tired to understand. I walked quickly towards the door, out the ward, into the larger hall outside, let go of the door, which suctioned shut behind me, I jogged down the stairs beneath a painting of a party in an enchanted forest, past the room where women were sitting in a row with breast pumps, I continued down long corridors, through the exit, and out.

I always went in the same direction. I could never think of anything new to do on those days. Until suddenly I found myself walking along different streets from usual on my way to the café. Old, inefficient, meandering streets, unploughed, serene, named after forgotten dignitaries. Fine snow dust swirled. The hospital compound extended widely around the central building, the tentacles of a pulsing organism, mycelium burrowing underground. For sick people, doctors, cleaners, healthy visitors, food, dead bodies, medical equipment to ferry people around. The city's ultimate bloodstream. Through the arteries of the hospital, new blood flowed in and used blood flowed out, but not symmetrically like in the human body, via the heart. Here in the groves, right beside everything I recognised, were unknown hospital buildings, ancient giants with peeling facades but modern signs at the entrance, unit names so technical that I barely understood what they meant. There was no light in the windows and no one to be seen in the civilian high-rises along the side streets. The sky was a uniform grey. No movement on the landscape. My winter shoes made tracks in the untouched snow banks. When I emerged

onto the seafront there were street lights, cars, dogs, locked-up ice cream kiosks. Bikes with wide winter tyres, sometimes kickstands.

What would I have done if I reached the café? Joined the people inside? Gone among their normal bodies, in there, like it was no big deal? Queued trying to ignore the death grip of time, which just kept ticking on and on? The queue spilled far out into the snow on those evenings; everyone was squashed up against strangers. Perhaps it created islands of warmth between the bodies. What if I had just sat on one of those fleecy benches, as if our hearts were fine, and just warmed up inside for a while? Looked out across the islands in the dusky haze. The winter bathers rushing along the pier, then swimming out quietly.

Walking along the seafront, walking there everything was beautiful as though in a dream, but the veil concealing the abyss was as thin as snow. Just like now, standing here and looking in the mirror at my rosy cheeks. Brushing my hair. My hair being long and shiny.

Everything appeared in a golden light. Every branch was as sharp as a needle. The light of the street lamps, where we ambled along. The unknown and I. I couldn't move quickly. All that snow and the slipperiness underneath it, and the feeling between my legs, as if something was about to come falling out of me with every step. I have always been able to walk for an unlimited length of time, or so it seems. Like a pendulum inside me that just keeps going. Walking there, at that moment, I was carried by sheer strength of will, or what remained of it. The memory of movement. And that had changed too, I couldn't trust even that. My legs felt loose at the joints, as if they were not part of my body in the same way as usual. I had a strange cold at the time, like in spring, at the beginning. My joints ached. Infected liquid pressing from the inside.

The black characters of news headlines screamed from the street corners: *Politician shoots self. Record cold but climate crisis not over. Celebrity chef heart attack at mother's funeral.* Love songs were playing – on the bus, in the shop, in the lifts – they attacked me with no filter.

Baby, please don't leave me.

I can't live without you.

I walked into a gallery that was open late. There was a shop with bare brick walls playing

minimalist electro. I looked for the films with the loveliest titles and bought them all: *A Bout de Souffle*, *Jules et Jim*, *My Blueberry Nights*. A good chunk of child benefit had suddenly appeared in my account, but I wasn't spending anything at the hospital. The money weighed on me. The films came packed in a paper bag with a trendy design.

By the library and out on the hill everything was carrying on as usual. Children were tobogganing, grown ups were standing under trees. I didn't want to bump into anyone I knew. I couldn't bear explaining my situation, couldn't squeeze out the words. But I couldn't have not spilled it all out either. Of course I did my best to avoid being seen, in case I did happen upon someone I knew. If someone did spot me we might have stood there all night, letting the snow fall over us. I would never have shut up. They wouldn't have dared leave. I didn't run into any one. Maybe I had become invisible somehow. Maybe I had merged into the landscape, my outlines faded. Maybe, in a way, at that time, I didn't exist. I existed more than ever. In my pain, in my rectum, my aching muscles and membranes, in the peculiar difficulty I was having with walking, in the thoughts I was desperately trying to banish, there where I walked.

It was late. Suddenly I remembered that I hadn't eaten. I went into one of the cafés on the street up by the hospital, where I used to sit and work with an expensive cup of coffee in front of me, and raw porridge after boxing, with fresh raspberries and two toasted flakes of coconut on top. In the window, at the bottom, were a few half-price, day-old sandwiches. I bought one. The bread was dry and harsh on my throat. The cheese was sweaty. The cucumber was warm and slimy. It didn't hold together.

I returned, exhausted, to the smell of medicine, babies' crowns, bloody refuse, winter shoes, disinfectant, horror, coffee. It had been 45 minutes. I hung up my outside clothes as quickly as I could, on hooks, clothes hangers, a hat shelf. My gloves fell to the floor. And I

came back into the infirmary, too slow suddenly, and there were the children who were blue in the face, and the children who had been born far too early and looked like lizards, and there were the offers for a hospital chaplain, and you were sleeping more and more now.

It seemed the sky was always red or black. I noticed it on the other side of the window in the evenings before I lowered the blinds again and enclosed us in the whiteness.

I found a pen at the bottom of my bag.