

SO much blood. Not dripping or flowing or even gushing. But splashing. Onto the floor as if a bucket had been tipped, a red tidal wave lapping against my trainers. It couldn't have happened; I'll wake up any second. A cold wind slaps my face. I look down and see the tidemark tarnishing the leather's pure whiteness, already crusted like wet sand drying out. Your blood that stains me is all too real.

Cigarette trembling between my lips, I fumble a lighter, my thumb spasming against the spark wheel, unable to ignite a flame. I try again and again, as if my life somehow depends on it, and then it catches, a yellow glow flickering, the cigarette lighting. I take a long drag and feel thick, warm smoke curl inside my lungs. Haven't smoked for months.

'They'll be the death of you, Jonny,' you'd said, after finding a packet tucked inside my coat pocket.

'They're the last I'll ever smoke, Jen.' I'd kissed you on the forehead. 'I'm definitely giving up now. Everything's changed.'

I'd meant to throw that packet in the bin, but it was still there, hidden away, with the lighter stuffed inside. Kept for reassurance I suppose. I'd felt some solace moments ago when I'd plunged a hand deep into the pocket and my fingers had reached the firm cardboard edges. Guilt needles me as I take another drag but needs must. I suck on the filter as greedily as a baby should on a teat, an old familiar comfort enveloping me.

Collapsing onto a weathered bench, legs shaky as string, I stare at a scene that could be from a Constable painting: an undisturbed olde England, the textured greens of fields and leaves sweeping the landscape with a shimmering lake its blue heart. Dark clouds above threaten an azure sky.

They sent me out here. To calm, I guess, away from the screaming and the alarms. I daren't look behind me, at the hospital where you lie, where my trail of bloody footprints lead. Instead, I gaze at the lake, where a lone swan floats, its elegantly curved neck forming the shape of half a heart missing its mirror image. Its head is bowed, its orange beak pointing towards the depths, a black patch of skin between eyes and bill intense against pure white feathers. Swans mate for life, don't they?

I shiver as the wind's cold fingers enclose mine. Inhaling more smoke, I close my eyes, withdrawing into darkness. But I can't escape the sight of your blood. It's like when you look at a light for so long that its image is burnt into your vision. Nausea erupts in my stomach, the cigarette's bitter taste not helping. The bench's wooden slat is rough in my grip as I find myself staring at the ground, a green blanket just like the one the midwife gently wrapped around him before handing me the most precious thing I've ever held.

My leg jerks involuntarily as I jolt alert. Taking in the surroundings again, I realise I've retreated to somewhere we'd frequently visit, as if I've crawled towards familiarity. We'd sit here to relax and breathe in fresh air after your check-ups, chatting about the life we'd created. The

last time we were here was just weeks ago when this field was covered in a snow that suffocated any life beneath. It's vanished now; thawed then melted clean away. Buds have surfaced, flowers peaking from under emerald hoods just like his face from within that blanket. One catches my eye, a heart-shape in deep crimson that droops from its stalk. I remember you pointing out that flower once, you were fascinated by its name.

'Bleeding heart bacchanal,' you said it was called. The colour of your favourite roses that I buy for you every Valentine's Day. A colour that I can't escape from.

I look away, searching for another memory, anything but that. I find the first time we sat here, side-by-side, looking out across that still lake.

'I've something to tell you,' you'd said quietly, chewing on your bottom lip. My heart had hesitated. The words came fast. 'We're going to become a family.'

Fear and elation. Panic and pride. Emotions had swirled as my world turned upside down, then righted itself. We'd hugged while weeping happy tears.

I can't hold you in my arms now. All I can do is stare at the pale pink flowering on a cherry blossom tree in the distance. The wind gives the branches a last rummage as it weakens to a whisper, just strong enough to shake the blossom free, so feather-like fragile as it falls.

It's the colour of your pregnancy as you flourished, of your flushed cheeks as you glowed, bump swelling, skin stretched. His strong kicks made everything tangible. You nurtured him from the moment you felt him. Two hearts beating inside you. My doubts about how we'd cope faded as protecting you both became my reason for being. It was too simple.

I was by your side as you entered the delivery room and as you pushed and pleaded, sweated and swore, hair plastering the pleats of your forehead, white knuckles cracking my fingers, our teeth digging into our lips. You gripped and groaned, struggled and strained. A last almighty effort. A heart-stopping moment of silence. A cry, melodious in the relief. You laid back as he was gently placed on your chest, radiant in exhaustion, even after everything. It was too perfect.

The change in the atmosphere was as imperceptible as the moment when one season becomes another. The midwife passed him to me and I didn't consider that it might be too soon. I was too captivated by the glimpse of his flawless blue eyes before they screwed as his little face scrunched into a scream. Too amazed at the power of tiny lungs. Too busy jiggling in an amateur's attempt to settle him.

I'd turned to give you a shrug, acknowledging my inadequate efforts to calm him. You were pallid, eyes distant, arms slack. Seemingly far from us and falling further away. As I looked at the ghost of my wife I felt a warm liquid around my feet.

I take a gasp of smoke as I try to focus on the field and away from the horror running through my mind. The cigarette's almost burnt out. I flick crumbling ash to the ground, which was white and hardened by frost on that last visit. Rain has now softened it and sunlight nurtured it, allowing grass to push through. It seems so serene out here; the alarms must only be ringing inside my head.

They'd screeched at frantic midwives. At the doctor and nurses who appeared. You motionless; activity all around. I was frozen too, a useless statue with unnamed child, the love of my life bleeding to death in front of me. They took him from my arms, cajoled him into silence, carried him to a calmer place. Then ushered me out, my last sight of you curtailed by swinging doors. In the glimpses, I could see the medics pummelling your chest and pumping blood into you as fast as you were losing it. It switched from a maternity suite to a theatre of war in an instant.

They say that when someone's drowning they see their life flash before their eyes. It was our future that flashed before me: raising our son, forming a family, growing old together. A lifetime yet lived suddenly never meant to be.

I'm on my knees in the dirt, choking blades of grass between fingers as tears soak the soil like rainfall, one hand still clinging to the cigarette. How could I live without you? I can't even remember how I managed before we met. The half of my life that came before us seems

irrelevant now, as if another country's history. The day I found you is Year Zero.

I stay hunched, as alone out here as I was in that corridor, as helpless and speechless as our newborn. Had everything. Then nothing. A blurred memory emerges of a nurse approaching me.

'Is she...'

Incapable of even forming a sentence.

'Your wife's suffered a ruptured artery.' Everything's so clinical here: the white walls, the wires, the words. 'She's lost a lot of blood. They need to stem the bleeding. Then she needs a transfusion.'

'Will she...'

A sound similar to my voice, but shaky and faint, trailed off into silence.

'We're doing everything we can.' Danger lurked beneath her calm tone, like the unknown in the lake's depths. 'She's in the best possible place.'

Hovering between life and death. Fate uncertain. I'd thought impending fatherhood was scary until I faced loss.

Sympathetic eyes examined me.

'Have a seat.' She'd positioned me into a chair as a window dresser would a mannequin. 'I'll let you know how she is as soon as I can.'

I don't know for how long I studied the blood smeared floor. My world had stopped turning anyway. That feeling's increased by the field's stillness. Then movement by the lakeside unsettles the painting. Another swan emerges from the cover of thick reeds. My heartbeat quickens, just as it did when I saw the nurse striding down the corridor towards me, a longed for and dreaded return. I'd caught her expression. Knew immediately.

I stand up, throw the cigarette butt to the ground and extinguish it with a stamp and twist of my foot. It's definitely the last one I'll ever smoke. I pull the packet from my pocket and throw it into a nearby bin.

The swan glides across the water until alongside its partner.

I close my eyes again and see the nurse in front of me once more.

'The bleeding's stopped.' She was breathless. 'Your wife's stable.'

That was when my hands refused to stop shaking.

'She'll be alright.' The words came from some far off place. I remained mute. Her eyes searched mine. 'You OK?'

I could only nod.

'Look, why don't you get some fresh air. Go for a walk. By the time you're back you might be able to see her.'

I'd stumbled along the corridor, through doors, past people, so many people, young and old, down stairs and outside. Kept walking as if I didn't know how to stop. Arrived here. So peaceful. It's not as cold now

the wind's gone. Winter's bitterness has evaporated into spring's prospering warmth. I glance at my watch. Weeks ago it would have been turning dark at this time but it's still light now. I look again across lush grass and blossoming flowers: plush purple crocuses and daffodils' yellow crowns. I breathe in their sweet scent, hold it inside me, then slowly release it. Chirping birds break the silence as they swoop into trees. Life is thriving in this field; little miracles happening all around.

I suddenly feel foolish. Who am I to indulge myself in taking this time to recover? To needing this space to recuperate? It's you that's really suffered, that's battled and endured. You're the one who's been through hell and fought your way back.

My hands are still. My legs firm. *You're* going to be alright. *He's* going to be alright. *We're* going to be alright. I'm ready to return to the hospital to be by your side and present you with the son you've given us, who we'll name together.

A last look at the lake. A cygnet has emerged from the bank too. The grey and white bundle of fluff zigzags across the water then skids into its parent's slipstream. The swan's drift elegantly along, proud necks raised high, a family united.

*1,950 words*