Blood Ties

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Extract

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ONE

My milk started leaking about thirty seconds after I realised my baby was stolen. Stupidly, I remember worrying that my blouse would be stained with crisp white circles for the afternoon's duty visit to the in-laws. I'd only stopped at the supermarket to pick up a cake, the kind that looks home-made, in the hope I might con Sheila into thinking it had recently slid steaming from my oven. I'd even got a plate and a doily to put it on. But when I got back to the car – I'd left it for two minutes, *two minutes*, because the drive had finally put my screaming Natasha to sleep – the car seat in the back was empty. Just a warm indentation where she'd been and an oval of clotted baby sick on the padded cover.

I dropped the cake on the frosted ground and searched the car. Stupid things occurred to me. Had I taken her into the supermarket and left her behind in a trolley? Or perhaps a kind old lady had taken a shine to her rosy cheeks and pouting top lip. Was my baby so precocious that when I found her everyone would marvel at how an eight-week-old infant had got up and walked? Was it possible that Andy had come looking for me, seen my car parked and woken her up for a cuddle? He was allowed. He was her father.

I'm sure I locked the car.

I bumped my head on the roof as I got out, finally

acknowledging that Natasha wasn't in there. Precious seconds. Then my milk started leaking; that burning breast-orgasm when you just have to feed your baby. Except I'd lost mine.

The winter dazzle of a low sun bothered my view as I searched for Natasha's face bobbing over Andy's shoulder. I wanted that waterfall of relief as I realised my baby was safe. I wanted to know that what I thought had happened to her hadn't, that my skewed reality wasn't real at all. Surprisingly, there weren't many people around, only an old couple fumbling groceries into their car.

'Andy,' I shouted, but it came out as if I had bronchitis. My throat was all stuck together with thick spit and it burned as I panted in the freezing air. I forced myself to focus on every corner of the car park but my eyesight flared and my ears whooshed every time I turned my head. That's when I turned into an animal.

'*Tasha!*' This time my scream came out. A wilderness growl. My feet were apart, fists clenched, shoulders hunched. My neck stiffened and my head lurched forward as I began to run between the cars, screaming my baby's name. I hurtled up to the old couple, who raised their hands in defence, terrified, I now realise, that I was going to mug them.

'Have you seen my baby?' I don't think they understood my puffing animal-English; didn't answer if they did. I moved on, instinctively aware that every second counted. I screamed Natasha's name until my voice caved in. I pinballed off cars until I slipped on the ice and fell down onto the ground.

Then a hand rested on my shoulder, and just as I looked up, just as I focused on the luminous plastic jacket above me, I heard a baby wail.

I leapt to my feet and stood on tiptoe, straining my ears. There was a dog yapping, perhaps left too long in a car, the hum and whine of a forklift as it scooped up palettes of groceries from the back of a delivery truck, the rattle of shopping trolleys as a teenage boy collected them in an out-of-control train from around the frozen car park. My senses were on fire.

Then the baby cry again.

Beneath the layers of clatter, I heard a baby wailing, screaming, shrieking for its mother. A baby just like Natasha. It was a circle of pure sound that ripped the inside of my already sore head to shreds. The cry, the wailing, the incessant howling of my baby. I didn't know which way to turn.

I stepped on a bumper and up onto the bonnet of a blue Ford estate, quite a new model, and I was worried that it would dent. It's all so clear. I even remember the gloves on the dashboard, the Christmas tree air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror. Then I climbed onto the roof and saw the whole car park and beyond from the top of that car. The slippery metal gave a little under my weight.

'Miss,' said the man in the yellow jacket. 'Calm down, miss.' His eyes were black and wide and I knew he thought I was a madwoman.

'Be quiet,' I begged, desperate to hear the cry again. It had come from the high street end of the car park. I squinted against the shield of sun and after what seemed like ages but was only really a second or two, I saw a figure running.

I saw someone running through the supermarket car park carrying a baby.

'Natasha!' I yelled again, stupidly, as if she would be able to answer. I jumped directly off the car roof, my left ankle crumbling beneath me, and ran towards the high street. I'm

quite tall, but not as tall as being on the top of a car, so following the running person over the heads of all the Saturday shoppers proved nearly impossible. But I was a monster-mother with distilled panic in my eyes and I battled towards the road to get a clear view up and down the street.

I stood, breathless, my leaky breasts heaving up and down beneath my winter coat, sweat prickling the skin on my back. I scanned up and down the high street, and the shops that I'd visited nearly every week of my life suddenly dissolved into discoloured, alien places. The whole town, from that moment on, became completely foreign. I was a lost tourist who didn't speak the language.

The sight of the same running figure, scarved and hatted-up against January, disappearing down Holt's Alley – a gloved hand cradling the tiny head of a screaming baby – sent me darting between honking cars and down the narrow passage. Looking back, I was about fifteen or twenty seconds behind. Looking back, I didn't know what I was doing.

Holt's Alley always smelled of hot chips, beer and piss. There was usually a cluster of teenagers lurking at the far end and 4 January 1992 was no exception. Once or twice, when the gluttonous hunger pangs of pregnancy had got the better of me on a shopping excursion, I furtively ducked down the alley and slid into Al's Chippy. The resident group of teenagers always had a smart heckle or two, usually about getting fat or didn't I know that eating too many deep-fried sausages got you up the duff. I would smile politely, not wanting to rile the pack, and go into Al's to gorge myself, feeling as guilty as a pregnant mother caught smoking. It was only chips. But as I'd done everything right for that baby, *nearly* everything, I figured that hot chips and the smell of piss as I passed by wouldn't hurt.

I barged into the group of lolling adolescents, knocking a can of Pepsi from one of them.

'*Oi*—'

'Have any of you seen a baby? Someone running?' I spat as I spoke, panting, not caring. 'Just now. Someone running down here?' I leaned forward, hands on the knees of my elastic-waisted black velveteen trousers, the only half-smart thing I could fit into for my afternoon with Sheila.

'Nope.'

'*Please*. My baby's been taken.'

They were all spots and bravado. I don't blame them. One of them at least made a statement a couple of weeks later, after seeing the police posters. I ran on. Street after street.

The running figure had disappeared. Natasha, too.

On the walk back to the car park, I convinced myself Natasha would be safely strapped in her car seat. I'd obviously missed her in a new-mother panic. Baby blindness, a syndrome I'd not heard of before. Then I found a white baby bootee lying in the middle of the road. It looked hand-knitted. I picked it up.

'It could be Tash's bootee,' I said to myself, thinking of all the knitting Sheila had done for my baby. I took it as a good omen that I had found an item of baby clothing. Someone had sent me a sign, except I was too stupid to realise exactly what the sign meant.

Dear Natasha,

Happy birthday, sweetheart. My little Tash is a teenager . . .

I can't write that to her. It sounds as if she's still a baby. I screw up the letter and begin again. To me, she still is a baby.

Dear Tash (*informal, sounds better*),

It's hard to know where to begin after all these years. You're probably wondering why I haven't written to you before now. The truth is, I was too scared. Even hearing the name Natasha on TV crumples me. You see, I still love you just as much as when I had you for those few short weeks. Loving something you can't have, well, it hurts and . . .

I screw this one up too. It's rubbish. She'll laugh.

I started to run again, back from Holt's Alley, but with my stomach lurching as if I'd drunk a gallon of fresh orange juice and milk, I had to be patient with my aching post-partum body.

When I got back to the car, Natasha wasn't there. She was gone. Still gone. The man in the yellow jacket wasn't there either and neither were the old couple. I longed for someone familiar, a hand of kindness, a voice crooning that everything would be OK. My car door was still open, scraping against the paintwork of the car beside it, and the cake was lying on the ground where I'd dropped it.

Suddenly, I was thinking clearly, as if the sprint through town had given me some sense. I would go back into the supermarket to get help and telephone Andy; he might still be at work.

The plan had been to meet him at his parents' house, Sheila and Don's, but that would have to be delayed now. Sheila would be cross and mutter about ruined food. The supermarket manager would probably give me a cup of tea – just what I needed in my new, colourless, light-flared world where there was no sound or feeling or time or any possibility of a normal life ever again.

I picked up the cake, brushed it off and wondered if the shop might think I had stolen it because it wasn't in a carrier bag. I went into the supermarket, convinced I would soon wake up. I needed people. Thoroughly kind people.

Dear Natasha (*formal again. It's been a while, after all*),

I want you to know that I have thought about you every day for thirteen years. Each time I remember you I have to imagine someone a little older, a little taller, and now more womanly as the years slip by. I look at photographs of myself as a child to see what you might have become. Everyone said you were my double, those dimples, those lashes. Are your eyes still blue? Have you started your periods? Are you dead and rotting?

I screw that one up too. It's raining outside; pearly-sleeting, actually. Four o'clock and already the street lights are on, making the pavement peachy-grey, the leafless trees spring-like and more alive than they should be on a dull November afternoon.

I've switched on the electric fire, put the telly on – a slushy, feel-good show where happy families win fridges and cars. I've made a cup of tea, which later will be chased by a bottle of gin or vodka, whatever's on special at Spar, and sit curled up under a fleece blanket, with a writing pad and fountain pen. I am also holding Natasha's bootee, the one that was dropped on the high street, the one that was handed back to me in a Ziploc bag when the police gave up looking for her.

I do this every Saturday in January, the month she went, and every 6 November, Natasha's birthday. Otherwise, apart from this, I try to be normal. You'd never know that I once had a baby.

Dear Natasha Jane Varney (*full name now because honestly, would she know it otherwise?*),

It is with pleasure that I write to you with news of your mother, Mrs Cheryl Susan Varney. She is alive and well and wishes you were too. She prays that both your souls will be saved. She is filled with sadness and regrets that she never got to push you on a swing or give you a birthday party or cook you sausages and beans . . .

This won't do either. I make a ball of it and lob it into the waste bin. It's the ad break on TV. I don't like commercials. They don't advertise products but rather the life we should be living. Who says we should have a shower in a glass-fronted bathroom overlooking a milk-sand beach, the sun shining always and if we'd only use new improved Spiffo Shampoo, then our hair would be long and glossy like the naked waif of a model on telly?

Maybe I should buy some Spiffo, just in case my dank, mildewy bathroom might spin like a top and reappear on a Bermudan beach when I squirt the stuff on my head. Maybe it will wash away my life and I can have Natasha back. Another chance.

The thing is, I know the car door was locked.

While the adverts are on, I rummage through the kitchen cupboards in search of alcohol because my inability to write a nice letter to my daughter has upset me. Other mothers get to write to their daughters.

All I can find is cooking sherry. I sneak back to the living room on tiptoes, concealing the sticky bottle under my pilled cardigan, and swig furtively, making sure I face the window so that someone sees me.

I have this thing with myself that I'm being watched all the

time. There are several reasons why this is so. Possibly it's God, because he feels sorry for me, tucking me under his wing with the other forgotten, worthless creatures of the world. Or it might be my guardian angel and if this is the case, then I reckon it's Natasha because this person seems to know me pretty well. Or, and this is most likely the truth, it could be because I'm a bit strained at present and not really on top of things. Some would call it guilt. I call it my life.

So I face the window when I swig the sherry in the hope that someone will see me. It makes me feel a little less mad about being watched.

There. A woman walking her dog through the murky dusk. She stared right into my cosy little house and clocked me slugging. I rarely close my curtains, so passers-by can get a glimpse of my life and give me a guess at theirs. I have regulars, each with their own time slot and reason for walking past my squashed-in terrace. Some have names, characters and lives that I have invented for them. My own library of unknown friends.

Marjory comes by early in the morning to get the paper. She once tried to jog and wore a pink velour tracksuit but walked on the way home, sweating and red-cheeked. There are the school kids at eight twenty-five and three fifty each day during term time. Now that Natasha would be at secondary school, I'm not so keen to watch the teenagers skulk by my gate. They leave their mark though; Coke cans and crisp packets and cigarette butts sown in my pillowcase-sized front garden. I usually tap on the window and smile and nod at Frederick when he passes on the way to buy his tongue. He has tongue sandwiches for lunch every day. He's a client but hasn't been for a few months. His wife died four years ago and he hears knocking inside his house.

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When I got back inside the supermarket, I wasn't sure whether to queue up at one of the busy checkouts or go straight to the customer services desk, which also had a long line of Saturday shoppers. I chose the express till as everyone had ten items or less, except the woman in front of me who had a small trolley clearly containing more than ten things.

The whole world had gone through a high-temperature coloureds wash and come out dingy grey. And everything was flat, like a child's cardboard puppet theatre. If I blew hard, I reckon the shop would have toppled over.

My state of severe, sun-flared panic had gone now and all I wanted was for someone to look after me. I didn't care who and I knew that by reaching the head of the queue and telling the checkout girl that my baby was missing, I would get the sympathy and kindness I needed. I shuffled forward, clutching the chocolate cake, my thumbs sinking through the cellophane. I put it down on the conveyor belt so it wouldn't get even more mangled. I still wanted to impress Sheila with my home baking.

The woman in front of me finally paid for her groceries and took forever to pack her bags and slot the remains of her pension into her faux crocodile purse. The details, the obscure but exact minutiae overloaded my senses, perhaps to knock out reality. I didn't realise it then but had I been revved up to red alert, I might have been able to fire up enough people to begin an immediate search. Looking back, Natasha couldn't have been far away. Looking back, I didn't handle it very well.

My body ached as I shuffled forward, approaching the apathetic, spotty checkout girl with her hands poised to receive my cake.

'I don't have any shopping actually. I was just wondering if anyone could—' Too late. She scanned my cake.

'Two ninety-nine, please. I'll getchanother 'cos this one's squished.' She bent forward to a microphone, closing her eyes as she spoke as if she was singing karaoke. 'Sandra to check-out three, please. Checkout three. Customer waiting.'

'But I've already . . .' I couldn't be bothered to explain. I fumbled with my purse, which didn't seem like my purse any more, and the hands messing with the buckle on my handbag plainly weren't familiar. Neither was the voice that came out of my mouth. I wasn't Cheryl any more.

Trembling, I handed the girl my debit card. I'd used up my cash paying for the cake the first time.

'Check and sign, please.'

Sandra delivered my replacement cake. The first thing I noticed was the use-by date. This cake was a day older than the original cake I'd chosen.

I remember thinking: if I'm bothered by such a triviality then surely my baby can't have been taken. If Natasha was really missing then I wouldn't be standing in a shop, paying for a cake that I'd already bought. I'd be screaming, calling the police, crying, wailing, floundering hysterically between customers, begging them to help me search.

I signed the debit card slip and started laughing. It was a laugh of relief, a massive release of emotion that of course Natasha hadn't been taken. I'd left her in the car. I was on the way to Sheila and Don's where I was meeting Andy, and we were going to spend the afternoon talking about babies, drinking tea and eating chocolate cake, which I was now purchasing.

Sheila was good at telling me about babies. She'd had three and knew all the ropes. She knitted, goodness knows she

knitted, and she provided me with a hundred useful tips each time I visited on how to keep a happy baby, as if Natasha was an exotic pet.

'When baby's finished feeding, slip your little finger in the corner of her mouth to release the suction. Sore nipples for you otherwise,' Sheila had said when I was getting to grips with breastfeeding my baby. 'At change time, let baby kick free for half an hour. No nappy rash for our little pumpkin! And winter or summer, a nap in the garden makes for healthy babies. Mind you fit a cat net, though.' The woman was a baby helpline and I never called her up.

'You were just wondering if anyone could what?' Checkout girl was grinning at me now, not so bad after all. 'You didn't finish what you were saying.'

'Oh, nothing.' I smiled, bagging my cake. I left the cardboard shop, my pace quickening as I approached the door, passing through a rush of warm overhead air before I dived into the car park cold. I ran to my Renault.

Stupid me. Mad me. Irresponsible, messed-up, nervous first-time-mother me. How could I have thought my baby was lost? Obviously my senses had been playing tricks. The health visitor warned me about not getting enough sleep. Natasha was a little madam at night. She cried right through, making sure she took snatches of beauty sleep during the day and, by playing such a game, she had bled me of my ability to reason and see straight. I just hoped I didn't look too fraught when I arrived at Sheila and Don's.

But when I got to the car, it was empty.

Natasha had been taken. No doubt.

I peed myself and screamed before dropping to the ground.

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Dear Natasha,

When you were eight weeks old, you were taken from me. I was stupid and left you in the car when I went into a shop. We were on our way to Nanna Sheila's house, to meet Daddy and to eat cake. I tried to find you but only found your bootee dropped in the road. The police came and for months they searched and checked all their known criminals and put posters up and did an appeal on the telly and then they stopped looking. They shifted your file onto a less hopeful pile, gave me back your bootee and said that they were doing all they could.

I want you to know, Natasha, that I've never stopped loving you. I never will. Some days I believe that you're alive and happy and living with a kind family who love you as their own, coping with your teenage tantrums and boyfriends with motorbikes, and fighting with you because you want your belly button pierced. Other days, the truth hits me as painfully as the moment I realised you had slipped from my life.

I wonder about your last view of the world. Did you stare into your killer's face as you were smothered? Did you gaze up with the same adoration and trust that you bestowed upon me as you lay heavy in my arms while I fed you? Were you allowed to fall into a sleep of starvation and pass away from lack of nourishment? Did you slip away peacefully or did you leave this world after only eight weeks vowing vengeance?

Wherever you are, dead or alive, I sense you. I feel you. I want you back.

You are a special girl, Natasha. I love you and I am sorry.

Mummy

I know I won't find her today, which is reason enough to drink the rest of the cooking sherry. I pass out for the evening and miss my favourite quiz show.