Thanks for the Memories

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Close your eyes and stare into the dark.

My father's advice when I couldn't sleep as a little girl. He wouldn't want me to do that now but I've set my mind to the task regardless. I'm staring into that immeasurable blackness that stretches far beyond my closed eyelids. Though I lie still on the ground, I feel perched at the highest point I could possibly be; clutching at a star in the night sky with my legs dangling above cold black nothingness. I take one last look at my fingers wrapped around the light and let go. Down I go, falling, then floating, and, falling again, I wait for the land of my life.

I know now, as I knew as that little girl fighting sleep, that behind the gauzed screen of shut-eye, lies colour. It taunts me, dares me to open my eyes and lose sleep. Flashes of red and amber, yellow and white speckle my darkness. I refuse to open them. I rebel and I squeeze my eyelids together tighter to block out the grains of light, mere distractions that keep us awake but a sign that there's life beyond.

But there's no life in me. None that I can feel, from where I lie at the bottom of the staircase. My heart beats quicker now, the lone fighter left standing in the ring, a red boxing glove pumping victoriously into the air, refusing to give up. It's the only part of me that cares, the only part that ever cared. It fights to pump the blood around to heal, to replace what I'm losing. But it's all leaving my body as quickly as it's sent; forming a deep black ocean of its own around me where I've fallen.

Rushing, rushing, rushing. We are always rushing. Never have enough time here, always trying to make our way there. Need to have left here five minutes ago, need to be there now. The phone rings again and I acknowledge the irony. I could have taken my time and answered it now.

Now, not then.

I could have taken all the time in the world on each of those steps. But we're always rushing. All, but my heart. That slows now. I don't mind so much. I place my hand on my belly. If my child is gone, and I suspect this is so, I'll join it there. There . . . where? Wherever. It; a heartless word. He or she so young; who it was to become, still a question. But there, I will mother it.

There, not here.

I'll tell it: I'm sorry, sweetheart, I'm sorry I ruined your chances, my chance – our chance of a life together. But close your eyes and stare into the darkness now, like Mummy is doing, and we'll find our way together.

There's a noise in the room and I feel a presence.

'Oh God, Joyce, oh God. Can you hear me, love? Oh God. Oh God. Oh, please no, Good Lord, not my Joyce, don't take my Joyce. Hold on, love, I'm here. Dad is here.'

I don't want to hold on and I feel like telling him so. I hear myself groan, an animal-like whimper and it shocks me, scares me. I have a plan, I want to tell him. I want to go, only then can I be with my baby.

Then, not now.

He's stopped me from falling but I haven't landed yet. Instead he helps me balance on nothing, hover while I'm forced to make the decision. I want to keep falling but he's calling the ambulance and he's gripping my hand with such ferocity it's as though it is *he* who is hanging on to dear life. As though I'm all he has. He's brushing the hair from my forehead and weeping loudly. I've never heard him weep. Not even when Mum died. He clings to my hand with all of the strength I never knew his old body had and I remember that I am all he has and that he, once again just like before, is my whole world. The blood continues to rush through me. Rushing, rushing, rushing. We are always rushing. Maybe I'm rushing again. Maybe it's not my time to go.

I feel the rough skin of old hands squeezing mine, and their intensity and their familiarity force me to open my eyes. Light fills them and I glimpse his face, a look I never want to see again. He clings

to his baby. I know I've lost mine; I can't let him lose his. In making my decision I already begin to grieve. I've landed now, the land of my life. And, still, my heart pumps on.

Even when broken it still works.

One Month Earlier

ONE

'Blood transfusion,' Dr Fields announces from the podium of a lecture hall in Trinity College's Arts building, 'is the process of transferring blood or blood-based products from one person into the circulatory system of another. Blood transfusions may treat medical conditions, such as massive blood loss due to trauma, surgery, shock and where the red-cell-producing mechanism fails.

'Here are the facts. Three thousand donations are needed in Ireland every week. Only three per cent of the Irish population are donors, providing blood for a population of almost four million. One in four people will need a transfusion at some point. Take a look around the room now.'

Five hundred heads turn left, right and around. Uncomfortable sniggers break the silence.

Dr Fields elevates her voice over the disruption. 'At least one hundred and fifty people in this room will need a blood transfusion at some stage in their lives.'

That silences them. A hand is raised.

'Yes?'

'How much blood does a patient need?'

'How long is a piece of string, dumb-ass,' a voice from the back mocks, and a scrunched ball of paper flies at the head of the young male enquirer.

'It's a very good question.' She frowns into the darkness, unable to see the students through the light of the projector. 'Who asked that?'

'Mr Dover,' someone calls from the other side of the room.

'I'm sure Mr Dover can answer for himself. What's your first name?'

'Ben,' he responds, sounding dejected.

Laughter erupts. Dr Fields sighs.

'Ben, thank you for your question – and to the rest of you, there is no such thing as a stupid question. This is what Blood For Life Week is all about. It's about asking all the questions you want, learning all you need to know about blood transfusions before you possibly donate today, tomorrow, the remaining days of this week on campus, or maybe regularly in your future.'

The main door opens and light streams into the dark lecture hall. Justin Hitchcock enters, the concentration on his face illuminated by the white light of the projector. Under one arm are multiple piles of folders, each one slipping by the second. A knee shoots up to hoist them back in place. His right hand carries both an overstuffed briefcase and a dangerously balanced Styrofoam cup of

coffee. He slowly lowers his hovering foot down to the floor, as though performing a t'ai chi move, and a relieved smile creeps onto his face as calm is restored. Somebody sniggers and the balancing act is once again compromised.

Hold it, Justin. Move your eyes away from the cup and assess the situation. Woman on podium, five hundred kids. All staring at you. Say something. Something intelligent.

'I'm confused,' he announces to the darkness, behind which he senses some sort of life form. There are twitters in the room and he feels all eyes on him as he moves back towards the door to check the number.

Don't spill the coffee. Don't spill the damn coffee.

He opens the door, allowing shafts of light to sneak in again and the students in its line shade their eyes.

Twitter, twitter, nothing funnier than a lost man.

Laden down with items, he manages to hold the door open with his leg. He looks back to the number on the outside of the door and then back to his sheet, the sheet that, if he doesn't grab it that very second, will float to the ground. He makes a move to grab it. Wrong hand. Styrofoam cup of coffee falls to the ground. Closely followed by sheet of paper.

Damn it! There they go again, twitter, twitter. Nothing funnier than a lost man who's spilled his coffee and dropped his schedule.

‘Can I help you?’ The lecturer steps down from the podium.

Justin brings his entire body back into the classroom and darkness resumes.

‘Well, it says here . . . well, it said there,’ he nods his head towards the sodden sheet on the ground, ‘that I have a class here now.’

‘Enrolment for international students is in the exam hall.’

He frowns. ‘No, I—’

‘I’m sorry.’ She comes closer. ‘I thought I heard an American accent.’ She picks up the Styrofoam cup and throws it into the bin, over which a sign reads ‘No Drinks Allowed’.

‘Ah . . . oh . . . sorry about that.’

‘Mature students are next door.’ She adds in a whisper, ‘Trust me, you don’t want to join this class.’

Justin clears his throat and corrects his posture, tucking the folders tighter under his arm. ‘Actually I’m lecturing the History of Art and Architecture class.’

‘You’re lecturing?’

‘Guest lecturing. Believe it or not.’ He blows his hair up from his sticky forehead. *A haircut, remember to get a haircut. There they go again, twitter, twitter. A lost lecturer, who’s spilled his coffee, dropped his schedule, is about to lose his folders and needs a haircut. Definitely nothing funnier.*

‘Professor Hitchcock?’

'That's me.' He feels the folders slipping from under his arm.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she whispers. 'I didn't know . . .' She catches a folder for him. 'I'm Dr Sarah Fields from the IBTS. The Faculty told me that I could have a half-hour with the students before your lecture, your permission pending, of course.'

'Oh, well, nobody informed me of that, but that's no problemo.' *Problemo?* He shakes his head at himself and makes for the door. *Starbucks, here I come.*

'Professor Hitchcock?'

He stops at the door. 'Yes.'

'Would you like to join us?'

I most certainly would not. There's a cappuccino and cinnamon muffin with my name on them. No. Just say no.

'Um . . . nn–es.' *Nes?* 'I mean yes.'

Twitter, twitter, twitter. Lecturer caught out. Forced into doing something he clearly didn't want to do by attractive young woman in white coat claiming to be a doctor of an unfamiliar initialised organisation.

'Great. Welcome.'

She places the folders back under his arm and returns to the podium to address the students.

'OK, attention, everybody. Back to the initial question of blood quantities. A car accident victim may require up to thirty units of blood. A bleeding ulcer could require anything between three and

thirty units of blood. A coronary artery bypass may use between one and five units of blood. It varies, but with such quantities needed, now you see why we *always* want donors.'

Justin takes a seat in the front row and listens with horror to the discussion he's joined.

'Does anybody have any questions?'

Can you change the subject?

'Do you get paid for giving blood?'

More laughs.

'Not in this country, I'm afraid.'

'Does the person who is given blood know who their donor is?'

'Donations are usually anonymous to the recipient but products in a blood bank are always individually traceable through the cycle of donation, testing, separation into components, storage and administration to the recipient.'

'Can anyone give blood?'

'Good question. I have a list here of contra-indications to being a blood donor. Please all study it carefully and take notes if you wish.' Dr Fields places her sheet under the projector and her white coat lights up with a rather graphic picture of someone in dire need of a donation. She steps away and instead it fills the screen on the wall.

People groan and the word 'gross' travels around the tiered seating like a Mexican wave. Twice by Justin. Dizziness overtakes him and he averts his eyes from the image.

'Oops, wrong sheet,' Dr Fields says cheekily, slowly replacing it with the promised list.

Justin searches with great hope for needle or blood phobia in an effort to eliminate himself as a possible blood donor. No such luck – not that it mattered, as the chances of him donating a drop of blood to anyone are as rare as ideas in the morning.

'Too bad, Dover.' Another scrunched ball of paper goes flying from the back of the hall to hit Ben's head again. 'Gay people can't donate.'

Ben coolly raises two fingers in the air.

'That's discriminatory,' one girl calls out.

'It is also a discussion for another day,' Dr Fields responds, moving on. 'Remember, your body will replace the liquid part of the donation within twenty-four hours. With a unit of blood at almost a pint and everyone having eight to twelve pints of blood in their body, the average person can easily spare giving one.'

Pockets of juvenile laughter at the innuendo.

'Everybody, please.' Dr Fields claps her hands, trying desperately to get attention. 'Blood For Life Week is all about education as much as donation. It's all well and good that we can have a laugh and a joke but at this time I think it's important to note the fact that someone's *life*, be it woman, man or child, could be depending on you right now.'

How quickly silence falls upon the class. Even Justin stops talking to himself.