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The Burning Air

Written by Erin Kelly

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ERIN KELLY

The Burning Air



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For – but not about – my mother

Mrs Bingley: But Inspector, he's just a boy!
Inspector Goole: We are *all* boys to our mothers.

J.B. Priestley, *An Inspector Calls*

LYDIA

I

Saxby Cathedral School
15th January 2013

I mean this to be my confession, and my apology. I write it in secret, when Rowan is at work. 'The last first day of a spring term,' he said at breakfast. 'I'm halfway through my year of lasts.' He's talking about the academic year, of course. For him, the year begins not when the calendar changes but in September, when the school fills again. He is proudly institutionalised after fifty years here. I won't be here to see him retire in July. These are days of lasts for me, too. I have eaten my last Christmas goose, sung my last Auld Lang Syne, and paid my last visit to Devon.

'Enjoy your day, darling,' he said as he shrugged on his gown and straightened the only tie he has ever owned.

I waited until the door of our apartment had closed behind him and I heard his footsteps across the quad. Then I dragged myself to bed where I dozed for three hours, dreaming about my single remaining first, my unborn granddaughter. I woke up invigorated by the promise of her. I will see her. I will hold her.

At noon I rose to force down some soup and return to my writing. I struggle to grip the pen these days. My script has become that shaky old-lady writing, rickety letters that suggest an age their author will never attain.

This diary is identical to the dozens of volumes that preceded it, in which I have recorded everything from my marriage to my magistracy. I have written about everything that ever mattered to

me. Everything but the thing. It is such a beautiful book, and such a pity that I will have to destroy it after writing.

I am compelled to write, despite the risk of discovery. I can't say why, only that the compulsion has been with me since my diagnosis, and gathers strength daily (comparisons with the tumour are grimly inevitable). Until I have written, I can't know whether I will give the words time to breathe on the page or tear the paper from its binding before the ink has dried. What I do know is that it can never be read by eyes other than mine. This I will make sure of.

It's strange, but in a way I would rather the confession were made public than read by my family. Our reputations would suffer: my career on the bench would be retrospectively undermined, as would Rowan's relationship with the school. But beyond that, nothing; what I mean is, no conviction. The law I broke was relatively minor and in any case it comes down to that slippery fish, intent. Until officers of the law learn to read minds, I will remain unpunished.

Public judgement is as nothing compared to what Rowan and the children would think of me if they read my account. Reputation is one thing; family is quite another. Family matters. It would destroy each of them for different reasons. It is not vanity but love for them that calls me to preserve their image of me as decent and truthful.

Of course it was love for my children, love for my son, that caused me to act as I did. It was a lapse of judgement. If I could have foreseen the rippling aftershocks that followed I would have acted differently, but by the time I realised the extent of the consequences, it was too late.

In my years on the bench, I heard all the excuses. None of them applied to me. I wasn't young, I wasn't impoverished, I wasn't uneducated. Motherhood was my only excuse. I was trying to do right by my son and it made me momentarily blind to the interior laws I have always tried to live by. We all want the best for our children, but I crossed the line between protection and offence.

The Cathedral clock has just chimed twice. I have no more time to write today if I am to keep my appointment. I am ashamed of

the relief I feel. My confession will have to wait for another of my borrowed tomorrows. For now, I will lock my diary and call a taxi to take me to the hospital. I should be back before Rowan knows I was ever gone.

My doctor disapproves of my decision to keep my illness from my family. But why put them through months of pre-emptive grief? I don't believe that sharing my diagnosis would prepare them for life without me, and in a sense I have been doing that, for my children at least, every day of their lives. A good mother loves fiercely but ultimately brings up her children to thrive without her. They must be the most important thing in her life, but if she is the most important thing in theirs, she has failed.

SOPHIE

2

29th January 2013

They say that you forget the pain, that the survival of the species depends on it.

In the morning, Sophie was still telling herself that it was not a pain but a *sensation*. Perception was all. Reframe it as an intense sensation, a necessary part of the process, and it wouldn't hurt. She paused on the threshold of the hospital, inhaled, exhaled and allowed herself to experience the *sensation*, which was in any case only a false alarm, practice contractions until the real thing started, and completely normal. Inhale, exhale, straighten up, keep going.

Saxby Wellhouse hospital was built in the Victorian high gothic style: little natural light made it through the pointed-arch windows into the atrium, which was as vast as a cathedral, its tiled floor scuffed by shuffling feet whose owners, both patients and their relatives, moved their lips as if in silent prayer. A young nurse in scrubs laid a hand on her forearm and said, 'Are you all right, love? Do you want the maternity ward?'

Sophie looked towards the gleaming white corridor that led to the modern extension of the birthing unit.

'No, thank you.'

With a leaden heart she persevered into the dark architecture that housed birth's opposite. There was a queue for the lift, and anyway she did not think she could bear to be still and

enclosed, even for the short journey to the second floor. The stairs were shallow, and her midwife had encouraged her to keep active. She was glad of the excuse to pace, to fidget, to maintain the perpetual kinesis that she sometimes felt was the only thing stopping her from screaming. Sophie used her left hand to pull herself up, her right hand on her belly. The banister was old, worn smooth, although every now and then her fingers would jolt against a brass stud that some nineteenth-century killjoy had put into the wood to stop people sliding down. She paused halfway up to catch her breath, reassured to feel the baby kick sharply in protest. When you were in real labour they slowed down. In the blink between her collapse and her slide into this living death, Lydia had vowed that she would live to see the baby born, which Sophie had taken to mean that the child's arrival would give her permission to die. She would happily stay nine months pregnant forever if that was what it took to keep her mother alive.

She bypassed the polished terracotta length of the public oncology ward, heading straight for the little private room at the end of the corridor. Rowan and the others were already there. The dimensions of the family were all wrong, grotesque. Lydia had shrunk further in the night, her body a bony Z under the kind of cellular blanket you'd use to cover a baby in a cot. There was something diminished too about Rowan, his head too big for the body that was folded into an armchair. Tara seemed even more substantial than usual and looked like Felix's mother rather than his elder by one year. The prospect of motherlessness had affected them conversely. It had aged her by a decade, drawing the fault lines of middle age around her eyes and mouth, while Felix had regressed to the wide-eyed nailbiting of his teens. Sophie, round as an egg, fit to burst with life, eased herself onto the hard empty chair at her mother's side. She strained to brush her lips against Lydia's cheek. The violet splash of

bruise where the drip entered Lydia's hand seemed to have spread since yesterday.

'How is she, Dad?' asked Sophie. 'Have you been here all night?'

Rowan nodded.

'Does she know we're here?' said Sophie, panic like heartburn in her chest. What if Lydia was no longer able to communicate properly? Did that mean they had already said goodbye?

'We don't know,' said Tara. 'She's only staying awake for five minutes at a time and when she does she's not coherent. Some of the things she's come out with are hilarious.'

'It's not funny,' snapped Felix. 'She was really distressed. And she's in so much pain. I almost wish—'

'Don't say it, Fee,' said Sophie. She held her mother's hand as she had done as a child, on her wedding day, at the births of her sons, and squeezed gently, not expecting an answering grip yet disappointed when none came.

The four of them stayed there all day, taking it in turns to sprint to the cafe on the other side of the building for coffee and sandwiches that Rowan ignored, Felix picked apart, Sophie forced down and Tara finished off. The others would not allow Sophie to go, insisting that she conserve her energy, not listening when she tried to tell them that she had *excess* energy, that she couldn't seem to use it up. On her frequent toilet breaks she made forbidden calls to Will, the sound of his voice a balm. He too was poised for devastation but his connection with Lydia was not a blood one, and, unlike the rest of Sophie's immediate family, he had room in his breaking heart to support her. After ringing off she vented her grief in concise, measured sobs, each unit of anguish just enough to last her until the next.

Back at the bedside, Sophie rearranged the sunset-coloured tulips on the bedside table, hoping that the bright blobs of

colour would pull her mother's eyes into focus next time she stirred. When it was time to fetch the boys, Lydia still hadn't woken up properly, but her breathing had changed, growing faster and shallower. Sophie longed to lie on the pitifully roomy bed, to press her belly into Lydia's back, but was terrified that she would dislodge some vital tube or shunt. She settled instead for her head on the pillow and a whispered 'I love you'. There was the strength of a lifetime's feeling behind the words but still they seemed impotent.

In the corridor, she passed a nurse.

'Will it be today, do you think?' Sophie asked her. 'She's panting, like she's climbing a hill. Is that a sign?'

'You know I can't say,' said the nurse, kindly. 'It can seem touch and go and then they pull through. But something seems to have upset her today, and they often get like that just before they pass away. It's as though they know. And then, in the last hours, a kind of peace often comes. It sounds strange, but it can be very beautiful in its own way.' She tilted her head to one side. 'But how are *you*?'

'Are you talking to me or the baby?'

'Both,' she smiled. 'Do you know what you're having?'

'A little girl,' said Sophie.

'Oh, how lovely, a daughter,' said the nurse. Daughter. The word sounded like something she was, not something she had. 'Seriously, are you looking after yourself?'

'Oh, don't worry about me,' said Sophie. 'I can cope.' She was glad that none of her family was around to correct her.

In the car, another cramp fanned across her lower back and belly. Ten minutes later, an echo of the same stole her breath, but she fetched Toby and Leo from the prep school and then Charlie from the adjacent nursery as though nothing was happening. At home, the post was scattered across the hallway. With an unsteady plié she bent to pick it up. She put the bills and bank statements on the sideboard and paused to

consider the final letter. It had the thick envelope and stiffness of a greetings card. Who would have sent that? It was too early for either congratulations or condolences. The sound of three little boys hitting each other drowned out the television and her thoughts. She put the envelope to one side and rolled up her sleeves, ready to referee.

Boys, tea, bed. Husband, supper, sofa. After ten o'clock, Sophie could no longer pretend that this was a dummy run. She was in labour, and a labour that seemed to be progressing much faster than the others had. She said nothing to Will, who was slumped in front of *Newsnight*, brandy in his hand and long legs, still in pinstripes, outstretched before him. He looked tired; he had shaved that morning but a blue-black shadow already dusted his jaw. He was in for a long night, too, and she knew that he was easier to manage when the prospect of imminent fatherhood had not yet adrenalised him. While he watched television, she pottered about the house, turning off all but the smallest, softest lights, feeling protected by the half-dark. Inhale, exhale. Not a pain but a *sensation*.

Sophie tidied the already orderly desk that had been hers as a teenager and now served as a telephone table, sifting through letters about sports days, parents' evenings, school hats, crumpling those that were out of date and smoothing those that were still relevant. She ran her fingers over the letter D, a recent graffito, engraver unknown, and straightened the line of books that hemmed one edge of the desk, books she had worked on in the short life between leaving one family and creating another. For a second she wished herself back in London, childless, successful, parents immortal.

The shrill of the telephone jerked her back into the present.

'She's still the same,' Tara said. 'Still talking nonsense . . . OK. I'm going home to get a couple of hours' sleep, check on Jake and then go back in the morning. Dad's sleeping there tonight so she won't be on her own.'

'Any news?' Will called, using the established euphemism for 'Is she dead yet?'

'No change.' He held out his arms to her and patted the space beside him on the sofa. She craved his embrace but was reluctant to join him: up close, he would know the baby was coming and the door would close on denial.

Her attention returned to the unopened envelope. She fumbled in the desk drawer for her letter opener, a little dagger that had once belonged to her grandmother. The vellum was sliced to reveal not a greetings card but a few glossy black-and-white photographs. The first couple of images were fuzzy; she could make out human figures framed by a window, but not much more. She flicked the overhead light on. Each image in the series was clearer than the last, as though the photographer had taken a step towards his subject with each shot, or pulled a long lens a little closer each time. By the time Sophie got to the fifth and final image one of the figures at least was no longer blurry but in sharp, incriminating focus, his features as clear as they were familiar. No. No. No, no, *no*. She stared, hoping that the photograph would somehow transform itself into something beautiful, a seascape, a family snapshot, a blossoming tree, and only then did she take in the date, digitised figures at the bottom right-hand corner of the print. A twinge that might or might not have been another contraction made her drop to her knees, the photographs falling from her hand, dull grey slates against the blues and rusts of the Persian rug.

Will was on his feet, then kneeling beside her, his face blank with alarm.

'Soph? Has it started?' He reached for the car keys, picked up the hospital bag, put it down again, picked up his phone. 'Shall I call Ruth?'

He did not know that he had been found out and ironically this lent him a kind of innocence. This strange thought rode

the crest of a wave of the strongest *sensation* yet. With a clawed hand she reached for the worst of the pictures.

'What's . . . what *is* this?'

Will took it between thumb and forefinger. Sophie saw horror, incomprehension, horror again. He actually staggered back, until he was almost in the sitting room.

'Oh, Jesus hell,' he said. 'I can explain . . .'

Sophie eased herself onto her hands and knees. Will stepped towards her, arms outstretched. She waved him away.

'Look, we can talk about this later, but I'm taking you to the hospital,' he said.

'No!' said Sophie with a force that juddered her whole body. 'No! I don't want . . . I'm going to get Ruth to drive me. If you come, I'll say you're violent, I'll say you're drunk, I won't let them let you in. I'll get them to call the police if I have to, I mean it, Will.'

He went quiet. She could tell that had wounded him. Good. She could see too that he was deciding whether to use her past against her. Bad. He opened his mouth and in the second's hesitation before he spoke she snarled, 'Don't you *dare*.'

From his expression she knew that he would not challenge her. Ignorant she might be of his past actions, but she could still predict his responses. Kneeling, she gathered the photographs together and put them in the side pocket of her bag.

There was another wave of pain. Not sensation but *pain*, pure, insuperable pain, shaking her limbs and blurring her vision. The world was reduced to pain, attacking her from all directions. She surrendered to it. She could no more control this than she could anything else.