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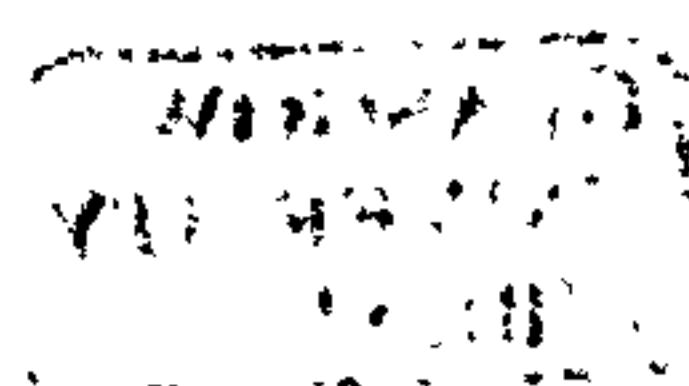
The Creative Dark: Writing about the Holocaust, Trauma and Autism.

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Volume I: Yesterday's Shadow – a novel

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Abstract

The creative dark is a term generated by Doris Lessing to describe the process of writing. It is used here also to describe writing about subjects that are commonly held to be unknowable: namely, writing fiction about the Holocaust, trauma and autism.

Yesterday's Shadow is a novel, which explores a link between autism and the Holocaust. Bruno Bettelheim, a psychologist, was interred in Dachau and Buchenwald in 1938 – 1939. His observations on human behaviour in the camp led him to hypothesise that autistic children were like the *Musselmänner* in the camps, they had withdrawn from the world through lack of hope. Bettelheim furthermore claimed that autistic children had no hope because the parents did not love them. This came to be known as the 'refrigerator mother' hypothesis. The novel considers the differences between the developmental disorder of autism and autistic-like withdrawal, which may happen as a result of trauma.

In addition, a commentary on the writing of the novel is provided. This discusses the process of writing: where the ideas originated as well as the research carried out. Several issues arose during the writing of the novel and these are addressed in the commentary. The first of these is memory, in particular how trauma is remembered. Following a brief outline of psychological research in this area, there is a discussion of how memory and trauma are treated in *Yesterday's Shadow* and in the discredited memoir by Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*. The second factor concerns women's experience of the Holocaust and whether there is a case for stating that women's experiences were different from those of men. This is discussed in relation to *Yesterday's Shadow* and *Lovely Green Eyes*, a novel by Arnošt Lustig. Finally, there is an exploration of

how the Holocaust is represented and the ethical issues surrounding this. One significant theme is a need for historical accuracy when writing about the Holocaust. A recent children's novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, by John Boyne is discussed in this light. It is concluded that historical accuracy is of especial importance in the light of revisionist historians who seek to deny the existence of the death camps.

VOLUME I

YESTERDAY’ S SHADOW: A NOVEL

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Prologue

July 1939, Krakow

Ewa traced the rim of the wine glass with her finger. She had finished her wine half an hour ago. On the other side of the table, Marek was lost in his work, his hand curved round the stub of a pencil while he made notes in a pamphlet, his writing small and precise. How he managed to work here, she didn't know; the café was dimly lit: stuttering candles and a few table lamps did little to chase away the shadows. He was frowning, his eyes narrowed and bleary.

Ewa yawned. The warmth of the café together with the wine had made her sleepy, maybe even a little tipsy. Marek stopped writing for a moment and played with the pencil, letting it slip through his fingers. Ewa watched him caress it and wished they were at home, in bed. Outside in the square, the bugle call from St. Mary's church sounded, ending as it always did, in the middle of the five-note sequence.

Marek looked up. 'What time is it?'

'Nine o'clock.'

He folded the pamphlet, stuffed it into his jacket pocket, 'You've been very patient, my love.'

Ewa smiled at him, 'Yes, I have, haven't I? It's time you paid me some attention!'

Marek grinned as he drained his glass and signalled to the waiter for more drinks. 'Well, if I must. What have you been thinking about while I've been working.' He squeezed her hand.

Ewa shrugged, 'Nothing much. Daydreaming, I suppose.'

‘What about?’

‘This and that. You know ...’

Marek raised an eyebrow. He did know. Damn, she was blushing. She changed the subject, ‘The bugle call, why does it always stop in the middle like that?’

‘It’s a silly story, part of our bourgeois past. We should be looking to the future, comrade.’ Marek liked to make fun of the more serious members of the party.

She persisted, ‘I’d like to know.’

‘Really? Isn’t there something else you’d rather do?’ His finger stroked the palm of her hand, insistent.

Ewa’s blush deepened, ‘Tell me anyway.’

‘If you insist.’ He let go of her hand. The waiter came with their drinks, beer for Marek, a small glass of wine for her. Ewa listened as Marek joked with him. He was good with people, always had time for everyone. When the waiter left, he sat back in his seat and said, ‘Once upon a time, a very long time ago ...’

Ewa punched him. ‘Ouch,’ he rubbed his shoulder. ‘That hurt!’

‘I should hope so too. Get on with it.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Way back in the thirteenth century, Krakow was under constant threat of invasion from the Tatars. One soldier was given the task of guarding the city. If he spotted invaders, he had to blow a warning on his bugle. The same five notes were used each time so the whole city knew to listen for them. But one day, the signal was cut short when a Tatar arrow got him in the

throat. Like this!' Marek gestured pulling an arrow out of his throat. He sprawled across the table knocking over Ewa's wine.

Ewa brought out her handkerchief from her handbag and mopped up the wine, muttering, 'Marek, get up. Everyone's staring.'

He groaned, 'If I am to live, I need the kiss of an honest woman.'

'Don't know where you'll find one of those.' Ewa folded her arms, tried to look stern, but her lips twitched.

Marek's hand found her leg, started to travel upwards. Ewa glared at him, defiant.

He whispered, 'A kiss is all I ask. Otherwise, who knows where the hand of a dying man may go.' His hand was on her thigh, near the top of her stocking. Ewa's breath quickened. Out of the corner of her eye she could see an old woman, shaking her head. She leaned across the table and kissed him; she didn't care about the disapproving looks.

'Let's go home,' she whispered, her hand feeling for her coat. They gathered their things together, never taking their eyes off each other. At the door, Marek stopped, said, 'Wait!' and rushed back inside where he grabbed a red rose from a vase. He snapped the stem leaving two inches or so and placed the flower in Ewa's hair, behind her right ear.

'I hope you checked to see there's no earwigs in there,' said Ewa, her lips curving into a smile.

'Course there's not. That would've cost extra.' Marek pushed the door open and they left the café. It had rained earlier but now the sky was clear. The

Rynek was bathed in pink and orange from the setting sun, cobblestones glistening grey in the fading light.

Their flat wasn't far from the town centre, a ten-minute walk through the square, past the Cloth Market and St. Mary's Church. As they drew near to the Jewish Quarter they could hear prayers being chanted. They stopped to listen for a moment, taking in the unfamiliar sounds. Marek took her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers.

'I can't wait to get you home,' he said.

'I know.'

They ran the rest of the way, racing each other up the stairs. Marek fumbled with his key and dropped it. Ewa giggled as he scrabbled round the communal hallway looking for it; she'd covered it with her foot. After a few seconds she relented and pushed it towards him with her toe. 'You witch,' he said.

There was a faint aroma of bread in the hall, underlain with spice; a warm smell, welcoming. Ewa smiled as they went into the flat. It was tiny, but it was home. There were only two rooms: the larger one was a kitchen and living area combined. On one wall was the range, which they always kept burning. Only once had they let it go out; it had taken the best part of a day to light it again. To the right of this was a scullery with a sink, barely bigger than a cupboard but it kept the rest of the room clear for eating and living in. Marek had put up shelves for all his books; she'd sewn cushions and curtains from jewel coloured silks and damasks she'd bought cheaply in the Cloth Market, beating down the traders to their very best price with her smiles and jokes. Her parents had given them an old sofa, which she'd covered in dark green velvet. Their dining table came from the

street; one foggy autumn night on her way home she'd spotted someone dumping it and she'd run to tell Marek. They'd carried it home, edging it up the narrow stairway; Marek spent hours sanding, then waxing it so it was smooth once more. Nothing in the flat had cost much but to Ewa's eyes it was beautiful. She put her hand on the kitchen door to push it open, but Marek pulled her back and guided her into the other room, their bedroom. 'You're going the wrong way,' he said and she laughed.

Later, in bed, Marek lay on his side, leaning on one elbow and studied her body. Ewa knew she ought to be ashamed; memories of the nuns at her school came to mind – a modest girl never looks at her body; when you undress always do so under a blanket, so you will not be tempted by sin. She hadn't known what they meant but now she did, she wanted to laugh. Stupid women. They didn't know what they were missing.

Marek kissed her once more, then got up to pee in the chamber pot. When he finished, he wandered round the room, picking up the clothes they'd shed. His movements were unhurried, graceful; he was so beautiful she would never tire of looking at him. His dark hair had a blue gleam like a swallow's feathers; his eyes were the colour of bluebells, violet almost. But it was his mouth she loved most: the lips soft, the upper one bow shaped, the lower one a plump cushion, his teeth white and even save for the two middle ones which overlapped slightly. And his body. He reminded her of a picture in her anatomy book: each muscle group was so clearly defined. Quadriceps, biceps, gluteus maximus, she ticked them off in her mind. All perfect, her very own work of art. As he put their clothes into a neat pile he looked over at her. 'What are you thinking?'

She shook her head and the rose fell on to the pillow, ‘You’re always asking me that. It’s a secret.’

‘Tell me.’ He climbed back into bed, picked up the rose and handed it to her. She inhaled its perfume, thinking she’d never been so happy in her life. With a smile she said, ‘You’ll find out soon enough.’

Chapter One

Glasgow: present day

Last night I dreamed of Marek. It was spring, the buds on the trees unfolding to reveal fresh veined leaves softer than velvet. I was running through the streets of Krakow to meet him. The hejnal, the bugle call of the legendary city watchman, sounded in St. Mary's church as I passed through the Florian Gate. A few seconds later the clock struck seven; I was late.

There are two ways of running in dreams. Either you run easily, your feet skimming over the ground or you run as if your legs are wading through mud, heavy and tired. I am an old woman; it is years since I have moved with ease. Imagine then my joy as I sprinted down Florianska into the Rynek, past the Cloth Hall, knowing I was about to see Marek once more. He was waiting for me in the café where we always met, on the southern side of the old town square. I stood outside, smoothing my hair, catching my breath; I did not want to appear too eager. The anticipation of seeing someone you love is exhilarating; I allowed myself time to savour it before I pushed open the heavy, oak door to go inside.

A smoky bar, ill lit. It was a moment or two before my eyes got used to the dark. And then ... I saw him, at a table in the corner, reading a newspaper (he was always reading). He was so handsome. There was a candle on the table and the flame highlighted his cheekbones. With his dark hair flopped down over his forehead, he looked very young. I stood in the shadows, wanting to have time to drink him in. But he must have sensed my presence; he pushed back his hair,

looked up, scanned the room. When he saw me, he smiled. What a smile! It caressed me, made love to me. On the wall behind him was a mirror, ornate, framed with gilt. In its flecked surface I saw my reflection, my skin unlined, my hair long and dark, my eyes bright with love and hope. I walked across the room, my heart beating so hard I felt its pulse in my head. But although my stride was firm and confident, I could not reach him. My arms strained towards him as he faded, still smiling, into the darkness. A moment later, I awoke, devastated. I lay for hours as night turned to day, searching for his face in the corners of my mind.

It is hard to get up in the morning when you have nothing to look forward to. Every day is the same in this place: meals, socialising, reading, naps, visits from relatives. My alarm goes off at quarter to eight; I have breakfast at half past. It is barely enough time to get ready. When you are eighty-five, your body doesn't work as well as it once did. Getting dressed is a huge effort even though everything is laid out the night before on a chair, in the order you put them on. Skirt and blouse at the bottom of the pile, underwear on top. It's like being a child, a very dependent child.

Today, the alarm rings for longer than usual. I ignore it. My dream has disheartened me. There is a knock at the door and one of the orderlies comes in, uninvited. She turns off the alarm, speaks to me as if I am two years old – and how are we today, Ewa? I say nothing as I struggle out of bed and start to dress.

I moved here six months ago. It is a pleasant enough place I suppose, a conversion of a large Victorian mansion on the south side of Glasgow. There is a modern annexe, built last year, but I am in the original house in what was the drawing room. It is an imposing space, more than thirty square metres. And light.

I insisted on a room with as much daylight as possible. A large bay window looks out onto the front of the building and there is another window on the side wall. There is nowhere for the shadows of my past to hide. The walls are a pale buttery yellow, the cornicing and ceiling lighter still, the colour of clotted cream. I love this room. It is the most peaceful place I have ever known. Even when it is dull outside, the yellow paint underlines what light there is, brightens the room.

Residents are allowed to bring their own furniture – subject to health and safety checks, the brochure proclaims - so everything I have is my own: the bed I shared with Jack, the age-softened white linen sheets trimmed with broderie anglaise, the cream brocade curtains, the two ancient armchairs, which Hannah had re-covered for me in green velvet, the brightly coloured silk cushions scattered round the room like spangles. It is enough to make me feel at home. Hannah pays all the bills, vast amounts of money. The cost makes her feel less guilty, I think. But there is no need – I prefer living here. She will be here later; most days she comes to see me, after work.

*

Hannah puts on her reading glasses and takes a deep breath. This is going to be a tough appointment. The parents have recently separated and have a sparking tenseness about them, even more than is usual in these meetings. Mary, the mother, sits on the edge of her chair, knees crossed, arms folded tight around their sleeping child. She spots a stain encrusted on her trouser leg and scrapes at it with a long red fingernail, flicking the detritus onto the floor. Her husband, Fraser, has rolled the report into a tube and strikes the palm of his hand with it. This makes Hannah nervous; it wouldn't be the first time a parent has become aggressive in a meeting.

‘Thank you for coming along today,’ she says. ‘You know Miss Wilson and Mrs McKenzie, of course.’ She indicates the speech and language therapist and the educational psychologist. ‘You’ve had a chance to read the report so we’ll each talk through our part, then you’ll have a chance to ask questions.’ Hannah clears her throat before starting to talk about her observations.

Fraser leans forward, his gaze is invasive and Hannah pulls her skirt down over her knee. She carries on, lists the signs: poor eye contact, no joint attention, limited social interaction skills, no imaginative play, language skills at a twelve-month level. When she finishes she turns to the speech and language therapist.

‘Lorna, would you like to talk us through your part of the report?’

Lorna smiles at the parents. They don’t smile back. She coughs nervously and starts to read through her notes. Hannah, now she is no longer the focus of attention, takes the opportunity to observe Mary and Fraser. They aren’t really listening. Mary is glaring at her husband, little looks of poison. Fraser ignores her, occasionally scribbling a word or two on the back of the report, which he has now unrolled. Hannah tries but can’t read what he’s written. When he’s not writing, he stares at Lorna. He rarely blinks; it is unnerving and Lorna stutters a little as she speaks. By the time she finishes, her face is scarlet and her upper lip shines with perspiration.

The educational psychologist is more confident than Lorna and talks at length about the cognitive assessment, her report spilling over with technical terms: centile scores, standardised tests, visuo-spatial skills. Hannah covers her

mouth with her hand and yawns, tries not to catch Lorna's eye. At last it's back to Hannah to sum up their findings; there's no doubt about it. Chloe is autistic.

'I'm sure you have questions,' she says.

Mary tears her eyes away from her husband's face, 'Is it my fault?'

'Of course not. It's no one's fault.'

'Fraser says ...' Mary stops. She tightens her grip on the sleeping child. She swallows, tries again. 'My husband says I have a splinter of ice in my heart. Isn't there a theory that autism happens because of the mother being cold? The refrigerator mother.'

Hannah shakes her head. 'No, there's no truth whatsoever in that theory. It's been totally discredited.'

Mary nods, 'Yes, I thought so.' She glances sideways at her husband, triumphant.

'The truth is, we don't know for sure what causes autism and it may well be that there isn't a single cause, that it's a combination of things.'

Mary smiles; it doesn't reach her eyes. She looks at her husband as she speaks. 'Well, we know it wasn't the MMR, because she didn't have the triple vaccination. Fraser insisted on the single dose. Might as well have saved our money.'

'So what is the cause then?' Fraser spits the words out, glares at each of them in turn.

Lorna butts in. 'Well, there is thought to be a genetic factor.'

'What do you mean?'

Hannah interrupts before Lorna can make matters worse; she should leave medical matters alone, stick to what she knows.

‘Nothing other than it tends to run in families.’ She taps her pen on the table, letting it dangle between her thumb and forefinger.

‘So, it is someone’s fault then?’ Belligerent.

Hannah stifles a sigh. ‘Well, no.’ She tries to explain again that the cause is unknown though most likely genetic, but Fraser is argumentative, interrupts, never gives her a chance to finish a sentence. In this way, the meeting drags on.

Although it’s only April, the sun blares in through the massive window; Hannah’s eyes sting with tiredness; it’s been a long day and she didn’t sleep well last night. She wishes someone would set off the fire alarm; get her out of this room. She hates this part of the job. Whenever she diagnoses a child with a developmental disorder, especially autism, she feels as though she is destroying parents’ hopes. As always though, she makes positive noises about the future: the importance of the right education, parent support groups, the Hanen Programme.

While the psychologist is telling them about possible options for school, Hannah pushes up the sleeve of her cardigan to steal a look at her watch; quarter to six. The meeting should have finished at five. A car horn sounds outside, an angry blast that startles them all. The child, Chloe, wakes up. She’s a frowning fury, tries to squirm out of her mother’s arms. Mary does her best to hold on to her but within seconds she’s screaming so much that Mary caves in and lets her go. For several seconds they watch as she careers across the room. Her head is down; she looks at no one as she runs. Hannah fears she’ll hurt herself, fall or bump into the furniture but she must have built-in radar; she misses everything

by an inch. The psychologist talks on but the meeting lasts only a few minutes more; it's impossible to continue with this distraction.

As soon as the parents leave, the professionals relax. Hannah leans back in her chair, runs her hands through her hair and says, 'Why do we always have the difficult ones last thing in the afternoon? We'll have to think again about how we do this.' She smothers a yawn. 'Time to go home, I think.'

Feedback meetings should take an hour at most but this one has taken well over two. Hannah picks up half a dozen files to take home and makes her way to the car. Her husband is working until seven, so there's time to visit her mother. She manoeuvres the car out with difficulty; some idiot has parked too close. On her way to the car park exit, she passes Fraser and Mary who are standing by their car, arguing. Chloe is screaming, trying to escape from her mother's tight clasp. Hannah raises a hand in greeting. She's sure they've seen her but they ignore her. More satisfied customers; she puts them out of her mind and concentrates on the drive to Pollokshields. All the way there, she yawns. While she's waiting at traffic lights, she pulls down the visor and glances in the mirror. The day hangs badly on her; bloodshot eyes, her hair a tangled mess. She snaps the visor back into place.

The woman who runs the nursing home, Matron, as she likes to be called, scuttles across as soon as she sees Hannah at the door. 'Doctor! How nice to see you. Can we get you some tea? You look as though you've had a hard day.'

Hannah hates comments like this. She knows they're euphemisms for looking old. 'I'm fine, thanks. Just popping in to see mum.'

Matron bustles alongside her, chattering away. Every sentence begins or ends with 'doctor'. Hannah lengthens her stride. Matron, tightly corseted and only five foot one, starts to puff.

'I'll be off then, Doctor. Things to do. Busy, busy.'

Hannah carries on up the stairs to her mother's room. At the door, she pauses, pulls her shoulders back and takes a deep breath.

*

After six o'clock and still she is not here. She works too hard. I am always telling her. She doesn't like me saying this. I can tell by the way her mouth tightens. At last, a knock on the door.

'Hello, mum.' Hannah comes into the room. Her eyes have dark circles under them. She is untidy; her dark skirt is creased, her blouse is a little too tight and strains across her breasts.

'You look tired,' I say. 'Always working too hard. You should retire. Why do you need to work? You have plenty money.' I stroke the cushion on my lap; pleat the crimson silk between my fingers. Hannah bends down to kiss me; she smells of perfume, Chanel No. 19. I raise my cheek to her. She takes the seat opposite, looks out of the bay window. I like the view; most days I sit at the window pretending to read, but instead I watch the passers-by. The nursing home is at the top of a hill. On a clear day you can see right across Glasgow to the Campsies and beyond.

The home is in a wide avenue, lined with elder and rowan trees. They are flowering. I follow Hannah's gaze and look at them. The Rowan blossoms look like tiny cauliflowers from here and the Elder flowers are unimpressive. I

remember that close up they are pretty, with their delicate spokes fanning out like lace umbrellas, but from a distance they are nothing but smudges of cream against the green foliage. I think we have not got off to a good start. Hannah ignores what I said, asks me about my day. I long to talk about my dream, to have an excuse to say Marek's name, but she knows nothing of my past. Instead, I revert to a favourite irritation, Matron.

‘Not good. That stupid woman, Matron. She says she wants to take away my chairs.’

This battle has been going on since I moved in. Despite what it says in the brochure, Matron doesn't like us having our own furniture. She wants everyone to have standard issue armchairs covered with vinyl, easier to clean. She thinks everyone over the age of eighty is sure to dribble out little bits of pee when they sit down. I hate her. Hannah doesn't like her either.

‘It's ok, mum. I'll speak to her.’ Hannah's mouth tightens. The fees for this place are outrageous. I know she will fight for me. Hannah changes the subject, talks about the boys. She tells me about Ben's new job and about David's baby who never sleeps. She says little about Sam. As usual. She will never admit it but she wanted a girl for her third child. It's only natural; I too wanted a girl.

At seven o'clock, Hannah rises to go. I struggle to my feet to kiss her. There are strange sounds in the air. It is me, speaking Polish but I don't know what I am saying. I feel dizzy and sit down again.

‘Thomas? Thomas who? How can I bring Thomas if I don't know who he is?’

Hannah's voice, angry and impatient, belies the smile on her face. I am stunned. What have I said? I don't reply for a moment, then mumble, 'I don't remember. No one.'

Hannah studies me; I can feel her scrutinising my face. 'Mm. I'll see you in a couple of days. I'll bring Dick and Harry too, if you like.'

'Very funny,' I say as she leaves. My mouth is dry and my heart is pounding as if it will break through my chest. I cannot believe I have said his name aloud, now, after all these years. It isn't possible. I go to the window to wave goodbye to Hannah, but she doesn't look up as she gets into her car. It is some minutes before she drives away and I wonder what she's doing. I watch the car until it leaves the street; she drives too fast. When I am sure she has gone, I go to my wardrobe. There in the drawer, underneath the spare bedlinen, is the wooden box where I keep my secrets. I take it out and put it on the table beside me. I am reluctant to open it for I know that when I do, the past will be with me once again.

But I have to do it. I must think about my life and about what to tell Hannah before it is too late. My hands tremble as I prise open the lid.

Chapter Two

Poland, 1944

My breath misting in the cold, damp air. A shawl round my shoulders. Tomasz running from one side of the cellar to the other for hours on end. Trying to see in the gloom. Lighting a candle would help but there's only two left and they are in short supply. One, two, three, four ... I count Tomasz's steps, it's a habit, my own little ritual. When he reaches the outside wall, he touches it with the forefinger of his right hand, turns and runs near to where I am sitting and hits the wall behind me. Each time I think he'll run into me but he veers to the left and misses. Once I would have tried to stop him, to break into his rhythm, but not now. He screams if thwarted and that makes Kasia nervous. Poor Kasia, always so anxious, not wanting us here but family duty wins. She must look after Marek, her baby brother.

The skin on my arms, so dry and itchy. Worse in the cold. Always scratching, trying to ease it, never succeeding. My fault that we are here. I insisted on leaving the city, sure that neighbours knew what Marek was up to. Even when he stopped working for the Resistance, after that night when he crawled home wounded, I couldn't rest. Terrified someone would come to the door, ask questions, take us away. Leave, leave, I nagged. Kasia will look after us. Never thinking it would be so cold in the country.

The farmhouse is a mile from the village. The walls are stone at the bottom where the cellar is and wooden above. It is small, maybe ten metres long and four wide. The cellar is tiny, less than half this size. Three of its walls are

outside ones; cold is built into the stone, radiates into our bones. On the south facing wall a tiny window with opaque glass, which lets in a little light. Precious light. The one inner wall is made of brick. Several bricks have been removed from it, leaving a hole big enough to squeeze through. This is for emergencies, in case the house is searched. It is tight but there is enough space behind the wall for all of us to hide. With the bricks put back in place no one will know we are there. Please God.

Marek is lying on the lumpy mattress that served as both bed and seating. He is cross, I know by his voice when he says my name.

‘What is it?’ I stop scratching, watch flakes of dry skin shower onto my skirt, brush them aside.

‘Can’t you stop him doing that? Read to him or something. He’s driving me crazy.’

I want to say - *why don’t you try playing with him for a change?* – but there’s no point. Marek’s injury changed him; he has no patience with Tomasz, with any of us now. I struggle up from the dusty old cushions that Tomasz sleeps on. I have to stoop to avoid the joists above me. My voice is low as I call to Tomasz. Sometimes I can distract him with one of the few toys we brought with us from Krakow. The wooden train father made for him, painted red with a black funnel – that’s a favourite. I search through our sparse possessions, find it under a blanket and get down on my knees to push it over the uneven floor.

‘Look Tomasz, it’s your train. Choo-choo,’ willing him to come and play but he ignores me, continues to run. Crouching in the semi darkness, watching

his sturdy little legs pump up and down, it is hard not to be drawn into the rhythm.

‘For God’s sake,’ Marek throws his book aside. ‘Can’t you get him to do that somewhere else?’

I drop the train and stand up. As usual I forget about the low joists and I bang my head. ‘Where do you suggest, Marek? Shall I take him outside to play?’ I rub the bump on my head. ‘At least when he’s running he’s not screaming.’ Tomasz stops in his tracks and points to his mouth. Marek swears and sits up. He presses his fingers to the sides of his forehead.

Day after day, the same thing. Marek silent except to complain; he lies on the mattress smoking, fills the small space with the stench of burning tobacco. Every day endless with chores: washing clothes that never dry properly, scraping together a tasteless meal, trying to keep two children quiet. No respite from the cold, which burns into our bones. We wear layers of clothes: vests, jumpers, mittens and several pairs of socks and dread taking them off. An old wood-burning stove belches smoke into the room. It gives off little heat and the smoke stings our eyes, making them stream. Our eyes are red-rimmed and sore.

Two knocks sound above our heads; a warning that someone is approaching the house. Marek’s hand shakes as he stubs out his cigarette, puts it in his pocket for later. No one knows we are here apart from Kasia and her husband, not even other relatives. It’s safer that way. We wait in silence for the next signal. Another three thumps. Friends then. No need to go into the bolt hole but we must keep quiet. Please God, don’t let Piotrek wake from his nap. Tomasz is awake, but a piece of stale bread should keep him quiet for a while. For once

he sits on my knee and I pull a blanket over us, relishing the warmth of another human body. Most visitors don't come into the house and are gone within a few minutes, especially if the weather is good. It is sunny today. I can tell from the patch of light shed on the cellar floor from the little window. Tomasz squirms in my lap, so I let him go in case he starts to scream. He runs straight to the wall and touches it, his ritual underway again.

An hour later and still the visitors have not gone. Piotrek stirred half an hour ago but I was ready for this and lifted him before he started to cry. I put him to my breast. Peace for five minutes then Tomasz sees, runs across and pulls at my dress. I give in immediately. It drains my strength feeding two children. Marek thinks Tomasz should be weaned but it is a way of stopping him screaming. In the room above, chairs scrape on the wooden floors; the visitors are going, about time too. It is dark now, early evening.

The trapdoor bangs open and Kasia climbs down the eight steps into the cellar. She has a candle with her, in a holder I recognise, white pottery painted with poppies. It is mine; it should be packed away carefully in a box upstairs; how does Kasia come to have it? The flickering flame glows through the protective hand that Kasia holds round it. She sits down on one of the mattresses.

'Can't you stop him from running?' Kasia doesn't understand Tomasz. Does anyone? She thinks all I need do is snap my fingers and Tomasz will be fine. Sometimes I think I should challenge him, let her hear the screams. We had that all the time in Krakow. Neighbours complained. There I let him scream but here... I cannot take the risk.

I am short with her. 'No.'

Kasia wrinkles her nose, 'I would have thought ...'

‘What?’

‘Nothing, it doesn’t matter.’ She brushes some dust from her skirt. ‘That was a farmer from Jankowice. I don’t know him well but I thought he was suspicious. We could hear scuffling,’ she nods towards Tomasz. ‘I told him it was rats and he offered me a cat. That’s all we need, another animal to feed.’

I smile but the scowl remains on Kasia’s face.

‘I mean, how can we go on like this. I have to feed the four of you as well as Jan and me. It isn’t possible.’

‘Three,’ I say before I can stop myself.

‘What?’ Kasia’s almond shaped eyes are slits.

‘There’s only three of us. After all, I’m still breast feeding Piotrek.’

‘Yes, but you eat more than your share. To keep up your strength.’ I can’t believe it; she is mimicking me.

Tears sting my eyes. Only once did I ask for a little more to eat, when we arrived at the farmhouse. At the time, Piotrek was two months old, constantly needed feeding. The journey took longer than we thought. A comrade drove us to the village but, frightened of being stopped on the way, insisted on using quiet country roads to avoid the towns. I thought it would take only three or four hours and didn’t pack any food. We had to walk the last mile as the track up to the farmhouse was too rough for the car. I was exhausted and starving when we arrived to Kasia’s cold welcome.

‘That’s not fair, Kasia. Ewa often gives her rations to me.’ Marek’s voice is sharp.

I twist a strand of hair round my finger, unsure what to say. Sometimes I miss out on a meal and give it to Marek, hoping it will make him better tempered. I didn't think he had noticed.

Kasia sniffs. Her nose is narrow, always pink and damp at the tip. If it wasn't for that she would be a beauty. 'Well, well,' she says, 'so my little brother has teeth after all.'

'I didn't mean to offend you, Kasia,' says Marek.

'No?'

Marek reddens, the flush firing up his face. It might be embarrassment but is most probably rage. I've seen it too often in the past few months. Please God he doesn't lose his temper. He and Kasia are not close and a row could tip the balance, make Kasia decide that after all blood is not thicker than water. I watch him force a smile, but his eyes are still and cold. I stutter, 'Kasia, please ... we're so grateful. You know we are. What we would have done without you, I don't know.'

Mollified, Kayja sniffs. She unfolds her thin body and goes back upstairs. Once she has closed the trapdoor, Marek spits on the floor. 'I hate this,' he says. His jaw is rigid; the tendons on his neck tense. I say nothing, not wanting to upset him. After a few minutes, I get up to fetch supper, some rye bread and a small piece of cheese. When I put the plate in front of him he pushes it aside.

'I'm going upstairs.'

I nod. We often go up into the house at night, sometimes walking out into the surrounding woods, safe in the dark.

'Aren't you going to complain?'

‘Why should I?’ It is hard not to sound defensive. I try again, ‘Maybe we should all go out, get some fresh air.’

Marek lights another cigarette. It makes me cough. I try to stop but it only makes it worse. Marek moves towards me. I can’t help myself, I wince.

‘For fuck’s sake.’ His voice is so loud that Piotrek wakes with a startled cry and even Tomasz looks to see what is happening. ‘I hit you once and now every time I come near you, you act as if I’m going to kill you. I said I was sorry, didn’t I? What else do you want from me? My balls?’

Tomasz runs towards me, clings to my leg. He often does this when Marek shouts; at these times I think there’s nothing wrong with him. I ruffle his hair and he glances at me, eyes flicking past mine as he sinks his teeth into my thigh. Thank God the thick material of my skirt is a protection. I keep my face still, not wanting to alert Marek to what Tomasz has done. Tomasz lets go of my leg and returns to his running.

‘Well?’ He demands.

‘Nothing, I’m fine. You go ahead, we’ll be up later.’

Marek nods, goes over to the wooden steps that lead up to the trapdoor.

‘You know what? Sometimes I think it would be better to be captured. At least we’d know where we were. It’s all this waiting I can’t stand.’ His voice sounds normal. I give him a thin smile but inside, my guts churn. Marek knocks on the trapdoor and calls to Kasia to open it.

I watch him climb the steps. When the trapdoor falls shut with a dull thud, I throw myself onto the bed and stuff the blanket in my mouth. I want to howl but I mustn’t. A moan escapes and I bite harder on the woollen cloth.

We have not made love for months. I don't know why. Anger yes, but there is more to it than that. Making love is something for the past, when we were different people. Sometimes I remember it with a shiver; how he'd lie on top of me looking at me before kissing me all over, even in that most secret of places. The first time he did that, I thought I would die of bliss. Then he showed me how to give him similar pleasure.

Now night after night we lie in bed not touching. It makes things worse between us until one night I wake as Marek rolls onto the mattress beside me. He smells of drink, spirits not beer. I stare into the dark, try to make my breathing regular so he won't suspect I am awake. For a few minutes all is quiet. I think he is asleep until he puts an arm round me and murmurs drunkenly in my ear. It stirs me in a way I'd almost forgotten.

His hand drops to my waist and I stiffen.

'Are you awake?' he whispers.

I don't reply, hoping he'll think I'm asleep but he continues to caress me, his hand moving downwards until he finds the edge of my nightshirt and lifts it. His hand strokes the inside of my thigh. It feels good. Maybe it is time to try for reconciliation. I turn round to face him. There is a glimmer of light from the moon. Even so, it is much too dark to make out his face. I reach out, touch his mouth, trace the shape of his lips with my thumb. His lips are dry and cracked with cold. He draws me to him and we kiss. His breath is smoky, tinged with vodka, intoxicating. I breathe in deeply, until his taste becomes part of me. It feels good to be held so tight, better than I remember. Marek is clumsy; his fingers, which used to be so caring, are rough, the result of too much drink and months of abstinence. But I don't care; he barely has to touch me and I come,

hard and fast, trying not to cry out in case I wake the children. He is only seconds behind me. Afterwards we lie in silence. Remembering how he used to tell me how much he loved me, I wait in hope. Nothing. I whisper his name but there is no response, he is asleep.

Chapter Three

I wake to the sound of a cock crowing. For a fleeting moment I wonder how it has come to be in the city. Then I remember. I turn to face Marek; he is still sleeping. It is barely light but I can see wrinkles round his eyes that weren't there a year ago. He is only thirty-one but the past few years have aged him. With the tip of my finger I trace one of the lines. He stirs, opens a bloodshot eye.

His voice is husky. 'My head's killing me. Get me something to drink, make yourself useful.'

I reach for my shawl on the floor beside the mattress and wrap it round me before getting out from underneath the bedclothes. I don't know what I expected - a declaration of love, perhaps, or a smile, some acknowledgement of what happened last night. Perhaps – my heart grows cold at the thought – he was so drunk he doesn't remember. I go to the container of water. There is less than half a litre left.

I pause. If I give it all to Marek there will be none left for Tomasz and he is always thirsty when he wakens. If I keep some back, Marek might lose his temper. I wonder what time it is, whether the others are awake upstairs. Not that it matters. Kasia won't come down in a hurry. I close my eyes and massage my temples; there has to be a better way to live than this. Resigned, I fill a glass with the remaining water and take it to Marek who drains it without a word, handing it back before lying down and turning his back on me. How could I be so foolish to think that our fumbled lovemaking last night would make up for months of friction? I take the glass to the basin where we do all our washing, and put it in with the rest of the dirty dishes. In the corner of the room is the bucket we use as

a toilet. Holding my nose I go over and lift the lid. Half full. It should have been emptied last night - Marek's job, but he often ignores it, leaving it to me. I lift up my skirt, feeling the cold air pinch my thighs, and piss. A few drops dribble down. I am not drinking enough for a woman feeding a baby but when every drop of water has to be accounted for and there are so many uses for it, what can I do?

Piotrek is crying and I lift him from his crib. His nappy is hanging off him, soaked through. We have hardly any nappies and they are difficult to dry. Once I asked Kasia if she would hang them out on the line but she refused, saying it was too dangerous. I tried again.

'You could say they were towels, or rags, you know ... for your monthlies.'

Kasia shot me a spiteful look. 'You might use filthy rags but I look after myself much better than that. No, it's not possible.'

The nappy is soiled as well as wet. I scrape off as much as I can into an old newspaper, the stench of ammonia stinging my eyes, and put the nappy in a bucket. It is impossible to keep clean in the cellar. I have no sooner finished washing than Piotr dribbles milk down his front or Tomasz rubs earth onto his shirt and I have to start all over again.

Tomasz is awake and out of bed, in at our puny stockpile, scavenging for food. He's found the last bag of oats. I grab them before he spills them. His screams tear through the air, wake Marek and frighten Piotrek who howls in reproach. Marek leaps up from the mattress but has forgotten where he is; he almost knocks himself out on one of the joists. He reels back on to the bed, clutching his forehead. I pick up Tomasz for he needs most comforting. He

writhes in my arms, biting me in his efforts to get free. I let him go and immediately he stops screaming. Within a few seconds he is moaning, a low keening worse than the screeches. Piotrek is easier to soothe, calming down within a few seconds, though he continues with a hiccupping sob that tears me apart. It's so rare to hear him cry. It takes so much energy to keep Tomasz quiet that often I forget about Piotrek, leaving him on the mattress kicking his legs, exploring his fingers and toes. He amuses himself for hours while I struggle with Tomasz.

Furious banging from above. Now there will be another argument. I go over to the mattress and sit down beside Marek waiting for the sound of the trapdoor going up that heralds Kasia's descent.

Marek is sitting with his head lowered, his hand over his forehead. 'Are you all right?' I ask.

He raises his head and takes away his hand so I can see the lump, large as an egg. He flinches from my touch.

'Leave it,' he snaps.

'It'll need a compress, something to reduce the swelling.'

'I know that. I'm not stupid. Leave me alone.'

The trapdoor creaks open, but it is Jan, not Kasia. This is a surprise; he generally stays out of things. He clambers down the steps, stumbling at the bottom. 'I don't know how you can bear this place,' he says as he sits on the heap of cushions.

'We don't have much alternative,' I say, smiling to soften the words.

'No?'

'You know we don't.' Marek sounds like a spoiled child, sulky.

‘What did you do to your head?’

‘What do you think? Bumped it on the fucking joists. Again. I’ll be lucky if I get out of here alive.’

Silence. Jan is staring at Tomasz, a deep frown on his forehead. He fiddles with his shirt collar and mutters, ‘Kasia wants a meeting this evening. To discuss the situation ... you know.’

My stomach twists. They’re going to ask us to leave. I try to catch Marek’s eye, will him to speak, but he has his head in his hands, oblivious to everything but his hangover.

‘Are you going to tell us to go?’

Jan won’t meet my eye as he gets up. ‘I’ll see you later.’

I slump on to the mattress. There is so much to do, clothes to wash, children to see to but what is the point? Inertia sets in, my body heavy and cumbersome, eyes drooping with tiredness. I could sleep forever. My eyes close. Five minutes’ peace, if I could have that. Five minutes.

Tomasz lands on my chest, knocking the breath out of me. He tugs at my nightdress and I glance at Marek. His eyes are closed so I let Tomasz suckle. It is painful, for his teeth are sharp and I have to bite my tongue to stop crying out. He sucks for a moment or two then leaves me alone.

Six o’clock. Dark enough to go out. I want the meeting with Kasia over so I can walk in the nearby woods. When we went there after we arrived I was terrified. Gnarled tree trunks took on the shapes of witches or demons waiting to pounce on us. Leaves rustled, twigs cracked, making me spin round in fear. But I have grown used to the nocturnal rambles and the trees no longer frighten me. Tomasz

is asleep in the middle of the mattress, his arms flung wide above his head. He'll have to be moved later. Marek won't tolerate either of the children in bed with us.

'Should we go upstairs?'

Marek nods, 'I'm not ready yet. You go ahead.'

I pick up the waste bucket making sure it isn't too full. Once I had a nasty accident because I hadn't realised how heavy it was. It spilled out, the foetid mixture splashing onto my feet and legs. The stench hung around for days.

The trapdoor is open. Slowly I climb the steps. At the top I place the bucket on the floor before clambering out. With a nod to Kasia and Jan I go to the door and open it. I walk past the outside lavatory across the yard to the cesspit, hoping I won't fall in the dark; there is only the light from the gas lamps in the farmhouse to show the way. I count as I walk; the cesspit is exactly forty-one steps from the house. Holding the bucket at arms length I bend my body away so the piss and shit doesn't splash on to me as I empty it. I can never hold my breath long enough. The smell is overpowering and I run back to the house to get away from it.

For a few moments I linger outside the farmhouse, breathing in the fresher air. When the wind blows from the wrong direction we can smell the cesspit in the house. Tonight though, there is a cold breeze from the north and the only smell is the tang of snow. I shiver and draw my shawl tight round me. It is March, the worst of the winter is over but it is too cold to stay outside any longer.

There is an old rug just outside the door and I wipe my feet on it before going inside. The farmhouse is divided into three areas: the main room, where we gather most evenings and where Jan and Kasia sleep as well as eat, the

kitchen, and beside the kitchen, a space which had once been used to shelter the animals during winter but now is used to store the old tin bath and a wooden flourmill. We rarely use the flourmill; there is never enough grain.

When we arrived I thought the farmhouse old-fashioned. But now, after living for several months like animals, it is like a palace. Kasia keeps a spotless house; the floor in the living area is oak, blackened by time but it gleams with all the polishing she does. There are three windows in the room, so it is bright during the day though the shutters are pulled over for the evening. Above one of the windows is a decorative row of plates. They remind me of home but my plates were prettier than Kasia's. One set in particular was especially beautiful: white porcelain with different birds hand painted on them. My favourite was the swallow; its dark feathers gleaming blue-black against the white glaze. I had to leave them behind.

I cross the room taking care not to scuff the floor with my heavy boots, and join Kasia and Jan at the table.

'Sit down,' says Kasia. Her voice is kind and I feel a twist of fear. I wish Marek were here.

I take a seat. The farmhouse has no electricity and is lit by oil lamps. The light is soft, casts delicate shadows round the room, disguises many faults. Even Kasia's nose looks less sharp.

'Will you drink with us?' asks Jan.

'Some wine would be good.'

He pours me a glass of rough red wine. I take a sip and try not to grimace at its bitter taste. Kasia smiles which makes me even uneasy. My fingernails tap the surface of the table. What's going on? Kasia is never this nice. She's going to

ask us to leave. I feel sick. Where will we go? What will become of us? Marek's footsteps are behind me. He sits down, accepts the bottle of beer that Jan pushes across to him.

'Cheers,' Kasia raises her glass.

I can't stand it any longer. I drain my glass, place it on the table with care. 'Please, say what you have to say. You want us to leave, is that it?'

Jan and Kasia exchange a look. Kasia coughs before starting to speak.

'No,' she says, 'we don't want you to leave. We know you have nowhere to go and Marek is my brother so we will look after you no matter what.' She stifles a sigh, not very convincingly. A reminder how hard it is.

Kasia continues, 'But things cannot remain the same. Your boy, Tomasz ... his screams concern me. Someone might hear and then what would happen? Some of the villagers are too friendly with the Germans. People will do anything for a little extra food. And if they find out that a member of the Communist Party was hiding here, someone who fought in the resistance ...' She rubs at a mark on the table, 'It's bad enough them knowing I'm your sister.'

'So you do want us to go,' says Marek. He fumbles for his cigarettes and brings one out. His hand shakes as he strikes a match to light it.

Jan shakes his head. 'You aren't listening to what Kasia is saying. It isn't you who is the problem. Well, not the biggest problem anyway.' He opens another bottle of beer and gulps it down. 'It's Tomasz,' he mumbles.

My chest tightens, heart pounding enough to burst through my ribcage. 'What do you mean?' I ask.

Eyes downcast, Jan shrugs and glances at Kasia. She glares at him before turning to me, 'He can't stay here any longer. It's too risky. No, hear me out,' as I rise from my seat. 'I'm not saying you have to go. Just Tomasz.'

'Where would he go?' asks Marek.

Kasia stares into her glass. 'I think he should go into an institution.' Her voice is very quiet, so quiet I wonder if I am hearing properly. 'It's time you faced facts. He's not quite right, never will be. All that screaming ... he's a liability.' She drains her glass and puts it down sharply on the table. 'I thought the baby would be difficult,' her voice softens momentarily, 'but he's adorable. It's Tomasz who's the problem.'

I can't breathe. My head is swimming; I need oxygen. A voice is telling me to breathe slowly. I grip the edge of the table to try to get control.

'You want Tomasz to go into an institution,' my voice is low, barely audible. 'You know what happens to children there.'

Kasia doesn't reply.

'You know what happens. They kill children. The damn Nazis kill anyone who doesn't fit with their idea of racial purity and that includes anyone who's 'not quite right', as you put it.'

Kasia mumbles into her glass. 'They don't kill them any more. The Church saw to that. They'll look after him. Maybe even find a cure for him.'

I feel faint. I heard stories in the hospital where I used to work: parents were persuaded to put their children into hospitals with promises of 'a better life'. A few months later they received a death certificate. Before long everyone knew it was no coincidence they died. The Church was outraged and the killings stopped, or so they said. Even without the killings these places were dire:

children left to fend for themselves, given only the most basic care, fed and watered like animals, tied up in cots, unable to move. If the Nazis didn't kill Tomasz then this treatment certainly would. I thumped the table.

'Over my dead body,' I shout.

Kasia grips her glass, 'Ewa, be reasonable ...'

'There is nothing to discuss. He is not leaving us.'

I look at Marek, trying to catch his eye. His head is in his hands again. For a moment I feel sorry for him. He looks as if someone has punched him in the stomach. He raises his head and stares at me.

'What?'

He shakes his head, a slow movement. His eyes are in shadow so I can't make out their expression.

'No, you can't agree with her. You can't. I won't let you.'

Marek opens another bottle of beer. He pours it slowly into his glass. 'What else can we do? I mean, if the house is ever searched, he won't keep quiet.' He picks up the glass and drains it in one gulp.

I take a deep breath, 'And in a month or two, will you be saying the same about Piotrek? I mean, he cries too. He won't keep quiet if we're searched.'

Another look passes between Kasia and Jan. Kasia says, 'We've been thinking about that. Piotrek could come upstairs and live with us. No need to lie to anyone. We'll say you're both away or that you're dead or something - '

'Dead? So now you're going to kill us off? I don't believe this. Marek, say something. How can you let your sister treat us this way?'

Marek shrugs, his hands open. He opens his mouth to speak but I hold up my hand. 'Don't say anything. You'll fight for socialism,' I spit out the word, 'but you won't fight for your family. You're pathetic.'

His head is bowed. 'You're right,' he says, 'I got us into this mess and I'm sorry. But if you think about it, what Kasia proposes is best for us all. We can't go on like this, with Tomasz running up and down, lining up bricks, screaming fit to deafen us all at the least thing.' His voice rises. 'I don't think he knows who we are.'

'Of course he does.'

Marek presses his fingers into his eye sockets. When he takes them away, I can see tears glistening. 'Ewa,' he whispers, 'I don't know what's wrong with the boy, I mean, God knows he looks normal enough, but he isn't, is he?'

I clench my fist; if I had a knife I would kill him.

Marek continues, 'If Piotrek stays up here with Kasia, it'll be better for him. He'll get out in the sunshine. It can't be good for him being in the dark like that all day. And we can see him in the evenings.'

'Yes, when he's asleep.' I can barely speak; tears soak my face. My nose is running and I wipe it with the back of my hand, not caring. 'He'll grow up not knowing we're his parents -'

'Ssh,' says Jan. 'Did you hear that? It sounded like a cough.'

We fall silent and strain to hear. There are rarely any passers-by because the farmhouse is at the end of a track. Although it is clearly visible from the village during the daytime, it is far enough away to ensure privacy at night and we have always felt safe enough coming out in the evening.

'Yes,' whispers Kasia, her face pale, 'there's someone outside.'

‘What shall we do?’ says Marek.

Kasia jumps up, grabs a cloth and throws it at me. ‘Wipe your eyes.’ She kicks the trapdoor shut, shoving one of the rugs over it so it is no longer visible. ‘Say as little as possible, leave the talking to me,’ she murmurs as the door opens and an elderly man peeps round.

‘Mr Bronek! How are you? Do come in. What brings you to our house at this late hour?’

He pushes the door further open and stands by it, his eyes twinkling in the lamplight. Kasia crosses the room to greet him. ‘Kasia, my dear,’ he kisses her on both cheeks, ‘but you have visitors. What a pleasant surprise.’ He smiled at us, blue eyes in a friendly crinkle. I smile back, hoping it isn’t too obvious I’ve been crying. He waits for Kasia to introduce us but she says nothing. His smile grows broader.

‘Kasia, Jan,’ he begins, ‘I have a favour to ask of you.’ He stops as if embarrassed.

‘Please, go on.’

‘Your cellar, could I perhaps rent a little space to store some things.’

Silence. Tense, waiting. My mouth dry as a sand dune.

For several seconds no one speaks, then Jan says, ‘What things?’

‘I’d rather not say.’

‘Well, of course we’d love to oblige but we store things there ourselves, furniture, provisions, all sorts. There isn’t room, sorry.’

‘These won’t take up much space.’ His voice is determined. He doesn’t look as friendly as before. He turns to Marek and says, ‘Are you Kasia’s brother?’

I can see the resemblance. You're a communist, aren't you? These must be dangerous times for you.'

Marek stares at him. 'For us all,' he replies.

The man taps the end of his nose, 'Some more so than others. Anyway I won't keep you. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about.' He opens the door, 'You know where I am if you change your mind. God be with you.' His right hand sketches a blessing as he leaves.

I wait until I no longer hear his footsteps. 'He was threatening us, wasn't he? He knows we're hiding here.' My voice is shrill.

Jan shakes his head, 'No, he's all right. He's always asking us to store things and we always say no. Don't let it worry you.'

I let it go. There are far more important things to think of. I wait for them to bring up Tomasz again but for whatever reason, they say nothing and after a few minutes silence, I get up and leave.

Outside, I breathe in deeply. I am unable to take in enough of the fresh pine-scented air. Above me the sky looms, cloud-laden; there will be rain later. I walk briskly towards the field at the back of the house, stumbling occasionally on a loose stone or a tuft of grass. The earth in the field is soft and yielding beneath my feet, most likely animal muck, but I don't care. What would happen if I carry on walking? Would Marek come after me? Do I care? It is hard to believe we are the same people who only a year or so ago talked for hours about our future, wondered how our children would grow up, worried about being captured and through all our worries, at every possibility made love, losing ourselves in each other's bodies, vowing always to love one another. Now I hate him. Despise him for his attitude towards Tomasz, for saying his sister could keep Piotrek. How

could he? And yet, deep down I know their plan for Piotrek is sensible. What mother would choose to let her child be brought up in the dark? Would deprive her child of the warmth of the sun, the feel of a summer breeze in his hair? A drop of rain lands on my head and I raised my face to the sky to welcome the storm, feel the rain run down my cheeks. I have no choice. Piotrek will go upstairs. It breaks my heart but at least he'll be safe and I can see him every day. Tomasz is a different matter. I will never let them put him in a hospital where he would live like an animal. I'd rather take him away from the farmhouse, return to Krakow and take my chances there. Anything would be better than losing him. I take a deep breath, then turn to make my way back to the house, ready to fight.

We fight and argue for a week. Bitter fights where we say things that should never be said. It wears me out until at last we reach a compromise; Piotr will live upstairs. We will see him every evening when I will be able to feed him. As soon as I agree to this, nothing more is said about Tomasz. At first I am relieved then I become suspicious.

‘Why does your sister have no children?’ I ask Marek.

‘I don't know. What would I know of women's matters?’ He chips away at a piece of wood he is trying to shape into a bird.

‘What age is she?’

‘Eight or nine years older than me, I'm not sure.’

So she could be forty. It isn't likely she'd have a child now. Could she mean to keep Piotr after all this was over; if indeed it ever ended. Was it a trick to threaten to take away Tomasz so I would agree to them looking after Piotr?

Tomasz pulls at my skirt. I try to pick him up but he wriggles away out of my arms, hitting out at me with open hands. Catching one of his hands I trace round his palm, hoping to try a tickling game, but he screams, showing two rows of beautiful white teeth. Almost everything about him is perfect: his shiny brown hair, his oval face with tiny versions of Marek's nose and my mouth. When you come to his eyes though, the perfection vanishes. They are blue like Marek's, but expressionless.

The days drag. I work through my chores mindlessly, never asking Marek for help. His moods are dark and he is unpredictable. Most days he's withdrawn, says little. I want to talk to him about the past, when we were first married and set up home together. Our little flat was furnished with bits and pieces given to us by friends and family. I took all the offerings gratefully and did what I could with them: searched out fabrics for curtains and cushions to make the flat as homely as possible. Rich green velvet the colour of grass in the spring, gold threaded brocade, soft silk scarves the pink of wild roses draped over oil lamps; I close my eyes and can see them, feel them, smell their luxury. Our home was comfortable, a place to welcome people. Countless evenings arguing, laughing, discussing books, films, ideas with our friends and comrades. I want also to remind him of how much we loved one another, of the day Tomasz was born, when he got drunk and went out in the middle of the night to find flowers for me. He'd come home with torn trousers, a scratched face and an armful of roses. I wish I could see once more the joy on his face as he looked at Tomasz for the first time.

I have to be optimistic. Piotr will grow big and strong in the sunshine. It was the right decision to let him go upstairs and he looks better for it, livelier, more robust. It wasn't natural the way he was so quiet in the cellar. Now he babbles constantly, more so than Tomasz had ever done. Soon he'll be speaking.

I take down a pair of Marek's trousers from the washing line. They're damp, beginning to smell mouldy, they've been wet for so long. Later I'll take them upstairs and put them in front of the fire to dry. I long to go outside and drink in the grass scented air but it's hours before dark.

Seven o'clock. I bang on the trap door, wait for the answering thumps. Nothing. Marek is hunched up on the bed reading a political tract. He senses my disquiet, grunts 'What?' without raising his eyes from the pamphlet.

'Should I go up?'

'What time is it?'

'After seven.'

He shrugs, 'You go up. I'll stay and watch the boy.'

I hesitate, 'But they haven't banged back. Do you think it's safe?'

Marek tosses the pamphlet aside. 'How should I know?'

I'll take the risk; the cellar is more unbearable than usual. I scramble up the few steps and push the trapdoor so that it falls open with its usual thud. I look into the room. There is no one there.

'Kasia?' I run through to the kitchen. No one. My heart is beating hard. Where is everyone? What has happened? I go back to the opening and call down to Marek.

Marek is calm. 'They've gone into Krakow for the afternoon.'

‘You knew about this?’

‘Yes, Jan told me last night.’

I swallow, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Because I knew you’d make a fuss,’ Marek disappears from view.

I can’t believe they’ve gone without telling me. My breasts are heavy with milk, so full it hurts. Two hours pass with no sign of them. I go back to the cellar, nag Marek - where are they - did they say when they’d be back - why have they gone? He lies on the mattress reading, ignores me. I go back upstairs before I hit him. Behind me, Tomasz starts to howl.

A few minutes before midnight, they arrive home. Kasia pale and tired. Piotr asleep in her arms. I try to grab Piotr but Kasia holds him tight against her body.

‘Give him to me. I need to feed him.’

‘He doesn’t need anything. Look, he’s asleep.’

‘But he’ll be hungry.’

Kasia lays him in the crib at the bottom of the bed. She stands up to her full height, looms over me. ‘He’s had a bottle.’

I grab her arm, shake her. ‘I know what you’re trying to do.’

Kasia ignores me, goes through to the kitchen where she cuts a slice of bread, spreading it thick with butter. I follow her, watch as she eats it, stuffing the bread into her mouth so fast that the slice disappears in a few seconds. We never have butter in the cellar; somehow our ration never appears. My stomach contracts with hunger, I’d love something to eat but I’ll die sooner than ask Kasia for more food.

‘Why did you stay away so long?’

‘Go back to your cellar. I can’t be bothered with this. We’ll talk in the morning.’

‘No, we’ll talk now.’

Jan comes up behind me and whispers in my ear, ‘Do as she says. She’s in a foul mood.’

I open my mouth but the look on his face convinces me to give up and I return to the cellar. When I get into bed, Marek asks if I’m all right. I am so angry I can’t speak.

Impossible to sleep; I stare into darkness and fret. If only we had stayed in Krakow. But it was too dangerous.

I turn over and try to make myself more comfortable. In the far corner something moves, a mouse probably. Night after night, they sneak in and nibble the rations. Tomasz stirs in his bed and I hold my breath, praying he won’t wake. He’s a good sleeper on the whole and after a minute his breathing is regular again.

I wake with my heart thumping, unable to move, convinced I’m going to die, any minute now. One, two, three ... I count the seconds, any moment now the slide into unconsciousness. What will it be like to die? But the seconds tick past with nothing happening. I’m still alive. My thumping heart proves that. Beside me, Marek continues to snore, oblivious.

These nightmares are too frequent. They started when we moved to the cellar and they always follow the same pattern. For several seconds I lie unmoving, in terror at the thought of dying. Several times I have leapt up from

the mattress trying to find a way out. Once, Marek found me scrabbling at the earthen floor.

I lie on my side until my heart calms down and try not to think about the dream. This is the second time in three days and I can't help thinking that one day I will suffocate in the cellar. It is dawn before I fall asleep again.

Marek shakes me awake. I try to ignore him but he grows rougher and at last I give in and open my eyes. He wants something to eat. I get up and go to our store of food. There is nothing but a small piece of cheese.

I give the cheese to Marek and watch as he eats it. I wonder if he realises it's all there is. Surely he knows it will be hours before Kasia comes with more rations, but he doesn't offer me any. I slide back into bed and lie with my back to him, not touching. I hope he doesn't want sex, I hate it now. If, God forbid, I got pregnant ... No, it can't happen, my periods haven't started again, one benefit of breast-feeding; free contraception. But if I can't feed Piotr? If Kasia insists on weaning him? Maybe I'll let Tomasz feed from me again, even though Marek hates it so much. Oh Christ, it's hopeless. I get out of bed; there will be no sleep for me now. Another day to get through.

Chapter Four

Glasgow

Hannah closes the door behind her. She's more than a little concerned at her mother's lapses of memory – they're becoming more frequent – but then again Ewa is in her eighties; it would be more unusual if she didn't slip-up occasionally. Hannah pushes her worries to the back of her mind and strides downstairs.

She hesitates at the reception area; Matron is nowhere to be seen. One of the care staff is passing, a pile of blankets in her arms; Hannah calls her over.

‘My mother said Matron's trying to get rid of her chairs again.’

The carer, a plump girl of about twenty, blushes, the red flush making her seem even younger. ‘I'm sorry, Doctor. I don't really know anything about it.’

‘Hm. Is she around?’

‘No, I'm sorry. Her shift finishes at seven.’

Hannah looks at her watch. Two minutes past. ‘I see. OK, I'll speak to her about it another time.’ She smiles at the girl and leaves. Matron's little diktats are not her fault.

Jim's car is in the driveway; Hannah touches the bonnet as she passes, it's still warm. He calls to her as she opens the door. ‘I'm in the kitchen. Stir fry. Ready in ten minutes.’

‘Do I have time to have a shower?’

Jim comes through to the hall where she's rummaging through her post. Nothing but junk mail; at least it's not bills. He kisses her on the cheek as she tears up two letters from credit card firms.

'It can wait. You take a shower. You look -'

'Exhausted, I know. You're the third person to say that in the past hour.' She rubs her forehead, when did those wrinkles become so pronounced? 'I'll be as quick as I can.'

She makes her way upstairs, feeling the ache in the back of her legs. In the bedroom she undresses quickly, shying away from her reflection in the wardrobe mirror; her sagging shape is depressing. For a moment she wonders about weighing herself but she bypasses the scales and gets into the shower. She puts the setting on pulse; the temperature is spot on and her neck muscles begin to loosen. There's a stabbing pain in her left temple, the beginning of a headache and she lets the water course down her face. After five minutes, the headache's gone; she'll be fine.

'Good day?' says Jim as she sits down at the table. He hands her a glass of Chablis. A whiff of wet wool rises from it. Hannah hates this smell; it reminds her of her childhood, hand-knitted cardigans that took days to dry. She puts the glass down without tasting it.

'I've had better. Is there any red wine?' She goes to the cupboard where they keep their drink. The only bottle of red is the last of three cases they bought in France, last autumn. They'd meant to lay the cases down for special occasions but one by one the bottles disappeared. She swithers; it cost thirty euros a bottle;

the Chablis will have to do. Jim ladles stir fry on to her plate. She's not hungry, chases it round with her fork, nibbles at a mushroom.

'You should try to eat something,' says Jim. He's already halfway through his meal.

'Mmm.' She prongs a piece of chicken. The scent of ginger and lime rises, hits her taste buds; she starts to eat with more enthusiasm.

'You're very quiet. Everything OK?'

Hannah raises an eyebrow, 'Difficult assessment meeting.'

'That's not unusual though, is it? There's something else.'

Hannah doesn't reply. He knows her too well, reads every mood. Her face says too much; or so everyone tells her. At work, instead of sitting with impassive stares at staff meetings listening to managers outlining their latest cost cutting ideas, she frowns and sighs, leaving no one in doubt about her feelings; she'd never make a poker player. She continues to prod her food. Jim says nothing, waits.

She puts the fork down. 'Oh, all right. It's mum. She mentioned Thomas again. That's the third time this month – bring Thomas with you next time, she says just as I'm about to leave. I don't know any Thomas, I say and she looks at me as if *I'm* mad.' Hannah tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. 'I hate to see her like this. Losing it.'

'Hannah, she'll be ... what? Eighty-six on her next birthday. She's an old woman.'

'I know. It's just -.'

'You don't want to see her deteriorate.'

'No, I don't. But what can I do?'

‘Nothing, you have to accept it.’ Jim scoops up his last forkful and looks at Hannah’s plate. ‘Are you going to eat that?’

Hannah shakes her head, ‘I’m not all that hungry. You have it if you want.’

He looks down at his belly, which is straining over the top of his trousers. ‘Better not. I’ll put it in the fridge and you can have it later.’ He gets up from the table and fills the kettle. ‘Tea?’

‘What? Oh, yes. Please.’ Hannah clears the table, puts the plates in the dishwasher. She sits down again and pours some more wine. It tastes better than the first glass; the third will be delicious. Already the wet wool has transformed into melon and pineapple. She swirls it in her glass, tries not to drink too fast. ‘Have you ever heard her mention a Thomas before?’

Jim shakes his head. ‘I don’t know why you’re so worried.’

Hannah forces a laugh, ‘Displacement activity. Trying to forget about work.’

The files take up the rest of her evening. She’s too old to be doing this, too old to have so many responsibilities. Torn between family and work, not giving either their fair share. David’s wife has just had a baby, their fourth grandchild. He keeps hinting about childcare arrangements, tells her she could job share, spend the spare time looking after the new baby. His wife wants to return to work. Hannah loves her grandchildren but Jesus! Looking after them? She’d love to work part time, but only so she could spend more time with Jim, perhaps travel a little while they’re still relatively young. The thought of looking after a baby horrifies her. She barely coped with her own children, went back to work as soon

as she could, taking the minimum maternity leave each time. Sometimes she regrets this, feels her relationship with her sons suffered as a result. Yet Jim worked hard too and he gets on wonderfully well with them all. Perhaps her problem is that she feels guilty for not being there for them when they were little. Why is it that women always feel at fault for this when men gaily go off to work without a second thought? Maybe she's not a natural parent or grandparent. All her friends coo over their grandchildren, delight in spending hours playing with them. Hannah is always too tired. She is tired now, sandpapered eyes; she can hardly make out her own writing. At eleven o'clock she gives in and goes to bed.

Two a.m. and she is awake, worrying. She cannot sleep for thinking about her mother, her children, her work. There's a new worry too, one which won't go away. Sam, their youngest son, has a daughter, a beautiful child, Gabriella. Gabriella is twenty months old; she has large brown eyes and dark curls, the picture of her mother. Her parents adore her; never stop talking about her. For months, Hannah thought Gabriella perfect but recently she's been worried about her. Although Gabriella had several words when she was a year old, Hannah hasn't heard her say anything for several weeks. Gabriella doesn't react to her name or imitate anything that's said the way she used to. Last time Hannah saw her she tried to get Gabriella to look at a book with her or to share play with a teddy. Nothing. Gabriella continued to do what she wanted to do. Hannah's stomach twists at the possible implications; she knows exactly what it could mean. She hasn't broached the subject yet, not even with Jim who is besotted with Gabriella, but eventually she'll have to. Beside her, Jim snores and she nudges him. He wriggles away and the snores get louder. Two thirty and she gets up to piss. The light in the bathroom is harsh, unflattering. She looks every day

of her age and more. For a minute she stands in front of the mirror, undecided whether to return to bed or go downstairs and make a cup of tea. Bed wins; she returns to the crumpled sheets, smooths them, turns the pillow over and lies down in the foetal position. When the alarm goes off at seven, she can hardly open her eyes, swollen as they are with sleep. Jim is already awake and he hands her a cup of tea. As she sips it, she wonders how she will get through the day.

Her first two appointments don't turn up. She uses the time well: dictates three urgent reports, makes sure her case notes are up to date, contacts colleagues to arrange meetings. By the time her third appointment arrives her desk is cleared.

She's meeting Ben, her middle son, for lunch. A quick sandwich in the centre of town, only five minutes drive away. Ben works for a small graphics company, designing websites. He earns almost as much as Hannah. Sometimes this irritates her but mostly she's delighted for him.

As always, his physical presence astounds her. He's been on holiday, island hopping in Greece; he's tanned, his hair bleached by the sun. His clothes are casual; his firm doesn't encourage suits, too modern for that. It doesn't matter; Ben is one of those people who would look good in a black bin bag. He has a natural elegance, which he certainly didn't get from Hannah. As he bends down to kiss her cheek, she smells alcohol on his breath and all her old worries about him return. When he was a student he drank far more than was good for him. He barely scraped a degree and as a result had to work extremely hard to get to the position he is in now. Hannah thought he'd been off drink for a while. She wonders whether she should say something but decides to leave it.

She hesitates in front of the chiller cabinet. 'The roasted vegetable sannies are good,' he says.

'I don't think I'll bother. Coffee will be fine for me.' Hannah watches Ben pile two packets of sandwiches, a slice of cheesecake and a packet of crisps onto his tray. If he is drinking again, it isn't affecting his appetite. She pays and he goes off to grab a table by the window.

'This is great. Cheers old girl.' He sits back in his seat. 'You look tired. Are you working too hard again?'

'Something like that.'

'How's Nana?'

Hannah shrugs, 'So so. She's been better.'

'What's the problem?'

'Her memory's going, the damn woman that runs the home is being a pest again, just the usual.'

'If you want to talk about it ...'

'No, it's ok.' Hannah stirs her coffee. 'She's keen to see you. Want to pop in some time?'

'Funny you should mention it; I was thinking of going tonight, just for half an hour.'

'That would be great. She can't cope with much more than that.'

They chat for ten more minutes until Ben looks at his watch, curses under his breath. His firm is a stickler for timekeeping. He kisses Hannah on the cheek and rushes off. Hannah watches him run down Hope Street until she can no longer see him. She's aware she's not the only person who turned to gaze after him.

*

Ben is coming to see me. Hannah phoned the home to let them know. Matron bustles into my room without knocking, her voice with that peculiar singsong intonation kept for the elderly or very young.

‘Aren’t we the lucky girl? That handsome grandson of yours is coming to see you tonight. Your daughter’s just off the phone.’

Aren’t we the lucky girl? What age does she think I am? It’s an effort to be pleasant. ‘That’ll be nice.’

‘Won’t it just. Well, must be off. No rest for the wicked.’ And off she scurries, her blue uniform riding up over her ample bottom. I am angry about how she burst into my room and when the door is safely shut, I stick out my tongue at her. Perhaps it is true what they say about second childhoods. At least she didn’t mention the chairs. Hannah must have spoken to her.

Ben knocks at my door, waits for me to tell him to come in. He has been well brought up. Hannah’s husband, Jim, always insisted: please, thank you; wait to be told you can leave the table. I was very neglectful in teaching Hannah such things. Too busy fighting my demons. Matron is right to say Ben is handsome. All three of them are, but Ben has the edge on the others. For one thing, he is very tall. Since he was fifteen, he has liked nothing better than to stand side by side and loom over me, laughing about the difference in our heights. ‘How come you’re so small, nana?’ he would say as we looked in the mirror together. He is also blonde. Jim has fair hair but it isn’t golden like Ben’s.

Today he seems taller than ever or perhaps I am shrinking. He gives me a box of the Belgian chocolates he thinks are my favourites. I put them on the table

beside me; one of the care staff can have them. Their sickly sweetness is too rich for me but I won't tell Ben that. He starts to tell me about his new job, something in computers.

'It involves travel everywhere,' he says. 'But mainly Germany and France. Of course I'll have to learn German. My schoolboy French should get me by but German's another matter. Limited to old war films. Schnell, achtung, that sort of thing.'

The room tilts. I feel faint. Everything is blurred, darker. I don't know where I am. I can smell turnips and I think I am going to be sick.

*

Hannah hears voices as she reaches her mother's room. Ben sounds puzzled, her mother is shouting in Polish. Hannah isn't sure but she thinks Ewa is yelling, - get away from me you bastard. She doesn't stop to knock, opens the door. Ewa is up on her feet, her face red with fury. Ben is standing in the middle of the room, his hands open in a placatory gesture. He turns to Hannah.

'Thank God you're here. I don't know what she's on about.'

Hannah crosses over to her mother and makes her sit down. Ewa is sobbing now – I want him out of here. Hannah says to Ben he should go; she'll phone him later. She wants to talk to him rather than Ewa, sees his face, hurt as he leaves the room. Ewa is not likely to make sense but she cannot leave her in this state. In ten minutes her mother is calmer. Hannah speaks to her in Polish, asks what happened.

Ewa is bewildered, doesn't know. She is sorry to have shouted at Ben, she sees so little of him. Hannah thinks she'll see him even less now but she says nothing. She sits with her mother as the sky darkens with leaden clouds.

Raindrops spatter the windowpanes.

‘Mum, who is Thomas?’

Ewa wary, says, ‘How do you know about Tomasz? Who told you about him?’

‘You did. Several times you’ve said to me to bring him with me next time I come to see you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I would never say such a thing.’ Ewa’s face is very pale. The lines on her forehead seem to have deepened.

‘I’m sorry, mum, but you did.’

Ewa puts her head in her hands. ‘I wouldn’t say that. It’s impossible. Tomasz has been dead for over sixty years.’

*

I want her to go, I can’t deal with this. My memories are seeping through. The barriers I have made to protect myself are wearing thin and I need all my strength to keep them there. She wants me to talk to her about Tomasz. It isn’t possible. It would kill me. But I’ve told her too much already. I should have denied what I said, put it down to the wanderings of a senile old woman. She hasn’t gone yet. Why won’t she go? I feel her stare and I look up. ‘What?’ I say.

Hannah shakes her head. ‘Sometimes I wonder if I really know you.’

Silence. I sit in my chair and examine the back of my hands. The skin is as loose as an ill-fitting glove, leather spotted with age stains. When I was a girl I was proud of my hands, the long fingers that played the piano with ease. My fingers are twisted with arthritis now. I want to speak, truly I do. But where do I start?

There is a knock at the door. Time for supper. Hannah gets up, puts on

her jacket. She tells me she'll see me tomorrow. I tell her not to bother but it comes out wrong as if I don't want to see her. All I want to do is to give her some rest but the words that come out are those of a spoiled child. I try to explain but it is too late; she has gone and I am left with my feelings of inadequacy and guilt. The room is darkening and I shiver, sensing the shadows from my past. I put on all the lights in an attempt to keep them away.

After supper there is a game of Who Wants to be a Millionaire. I don't usually join in with the social life of the nursing home but tonight I cannot bear to be alone. The game is tedious. Some of the inmates are almost senile; they cannot remember the simplest of things or they are easily confused – one man says the photographers on the lookout for celebrities are pepperoni not paparazzi. I laugh out loud at this but no one else gets the joke and my laugh falters into a cough. When it is my turn, I reach £32,000 but am beaten by a question about D-Day. What does the D stand for? It is my turn to be confused. I get my dates mixed up and say Dunkirk but it is wrong. The answer is day. What a stupid thing, D-Day is Day Day. I give up and go to bed.

Hannah does not come to see me for several days. Perhaps she is busy, perhaps she is angry with me. Either way, I cannot blame her. I have little to do but think and it is the past that pushes through. It is painful but not as bad as I feared. For hours I argue with myself about what to do. Does Hannah have the right to know about what happened to me? Can I bear to tell her? I wish I had someone to talk to, someone who would listen without judging, but there is no one. The only

people who could begin to understand are dead long ago. Ghosts and shades;
where are they now?

Chapter Five

Poland, 1944

Four months in hiding. Worn down by arguments and worry, Marek and I reach an uneasy truce. Neither of us talks much; I struggle with my endless chores and Marek spends his time reading or trying to carve toys for the boys out of branches he collects on his evening walks. Some days he is in a better humour and talks to me more kindly.

One morning he shows me the notches he's made daily on the wall, one hundred and nineteen of them.

I trace one, feeling the rough surface drag on my finger. 'Do you think we'll ever be free again?'

He shrugs. 'Jan says the allies have had many victories. But it could be propaganda; there are other tales too. They say it's not only Jews they're rounding up. Or communists.' His smile is thin. 'They've started on ordinary Poles too. Soon there will be no one left to fight.'

I pull my shawl tight around me, 'What do you think will happen?'

'The worst.'

My stomach twists. 'Do you really think that?'

No hesitation. 'Yes. According to Jan, the stories from Krakow are grim. It won't be long before they come to the villages looking for so-called undesirables.'

I can't say anything in reply; my throat has closed up with fear, choking me. Marek takes my hand.

'We couldn't have a better hiding place. We're a mile from the village.

No neighbours to speak of. They won't bother to search this place.'

I want to believe him. Summer with its longer days lies ahead of us and we will have to stay hidden for more of the day than now. It is only bearable if I can believe we will be safe. 'And we do have our hidey hole.'

'Yes, there's always that.' Marek rubs his eyes. He looks tired, grey from lack of sunlight.

'You're not convinced.'

'Oh, I am ... well, maybe not totally,' he concedes. 'I mean, how will Kasia and Marek explain away all our stuff?'

Our belongings are sparse: a few changes of clothes, our store of food, two mattresses, cushions and some blankets. I scan the cellar, peering into the dim half-light. 'I suppose they could say they're storing some old things.' I wrinkle my nose. 'It doesn't look much, does it?'

'Not when you think of what we had.'

I can hardly believe it. This is the first time since coming here that he's referred to our past. All these months he's glowered in the cellar, his mood dark, impenetrable. I swallow before saying, 'It was good, wasn't it?' Is it a trick of the light or are there tears in his eyes?

'It was the best time of my life. I'd do anything to have it back.' He holds on to my hand, massages the fingers. I never mention the pain in my joints now, not since he told me to stop moaning about it. I slip my hand out of his and look him in the eye. 'What do you want of me, Marek?' A sudden fear chills me, 'Is it Tomasz? Do you want him to go away? Has Kasia been nagging you again?'

Marek holds a finger to her lips. He shakes his head. 'Christ, what have I done to make you so suspicious? No, that's not it. I just want you to imagine for

a few moments that we're back in Krakow. Tell me, what do you see?'

In spite of my doubts, I close my eyes. 'The little chair by the fire where I used to nurse the children. I love that chair. It's my mother's ... all I have left of her. I used to sit on it and dream of one day having a daughter to give it to.' I open my eyes and look away from him, rub at a bit of dirt on my skirt, 'Well, that isn't going to happen is it? Who knows who lives there now? It could be Germans.' I feel sick thinking about it.

'I could have spent hours watching you on that chair. You always looked so happy with a baby in your arms.'

I stare at him. He looks more tender than he has done for many months. On the mattress across from us, Tomasz begins to stir. Please God, let him sleep on for a little longer.

'I didn't know how happy we were until we came here.' I say.

'I know. If it wasn't for this damned war ...'

He's never spoken about the war since he was wounded. Two comrades carried him to our flat then battered at the door until I answered it. They left without a word. I asked what had happened but all he said was that he'd been shot. Whenever I asked after that he clammed up and after a while I didn't ask any more.

'Marek, tell me what happened the night you got injured.'

'I can't.'

'Please. If you ever loved me, trusted me, tell me.'

'Ewa, I ...' Marek stops, sweeps his hand across his face. 'I can't.'

'Tell me,' I insist.

He looks at me with tortured eyes. I am shocked by the despair in them and think perhaps it is best if I don't find out after all. But it is too late; Marek puts his head in his hands and starts to speak.

'We were in the forest near where my family came from. I was chosen because I knew the area so well; it would be easy for me to find the cache of hidden arms. Jozef and Jan were with me; you remember them?

I nod. They had often visited our flat. Jozef was a bit of a bore I always thought but Jan made me laugh with his impersonations of people we knew.

'We went on foot to the forest. It was too risky to take a car even in daylight because of roadblocks. We hid in a barn until it was dark enough to go outside. The forest wasn't far, a kilometre or so away and we ran there. But something wasn't right. We could hear trucks on the road. Many trucks. Then, when we reached the forest, we saw the headlights. I wanted to go back but Jan wouldn't agree. "Go back?" he said. "Are you mad? We have to get those guns." I told him it wasn't safe but he ignored me and ran off into the forest. Josef followed him like the idiot he is. I was furious. It was too dangerous to wander about like this when there were Nazis around. But I had no choice, I had to go after them. It was a minute or so before I caught up with them.

"Bloody fools." I said, "You're going the wrong way. We should be going south. Follow me."

The moon had risen, making the way easier. I insisted on going slowly; I was terrified someone would hear us. All I wanted was to be at home with you.'

I reach out and take his hand. He squeezes it and carries on with his story.

'There was a bad feeling in the air. I can't explain it, but it was as if I knew something terrible was going to happen. My legs were shaking as we made

our way through the forest. At last we reached the spot where the guns were hidden high up in a tree. I had started to climb when we heard the voices. I was paralysed with fear. Sweat was pouring down my face; if we were caught here we'd be executed. It was well past curfew and to be found in a tree where guns were hidden ...'

'I never knew you were in such danger,' I say. 'I wish you'd told me before.'

Marek ignores me. He is lost in the past.

'Jozef was pushing at me to get high up in the tree where there was some cover from the leaves. We went as high as we dared. The voices were getting louder. It was soldiers, shouting orders. At first I thought it was maybe a night training session but as I grew used to the shouts I heard another sound mingled with them.' He stops speaking and looks into the distance as if he can see and hear what he saw that night.

'What was it?' I ask.

'Sobbing. It chilled me. Then we saw them. There were at least thirty soldiers. It was hard to tell how many civilians there were but it had to be more than a hundred. Men, women and children, some only babies. They were Jews. Some of the men had ringlets, hanging limply around their faces. I looked down at Jan and Jozef. Their faces gleamed palely in the moonlight. Jozef raised his eyebrows in a question. I knew what he was asking and shook my head. There were too many soldiers; we'd be dead within seconds if we tried anything. The group were brought to a standstill. I strained to see what was happening but even with the light of the stars and the moon it was hard to make out. I could see that the men and women were separated and the men made to stand in a line. The

cries of the women were terrible. They knew as well as I did what would happen next. I closed my eyes and prayed, as I hadn't done since I was a little boy. Shot after shot after shot. I stopped counting at fifty. Then there was a brief silence broken by a child's cry. I opened my eyes and saw the women and children being lined up where a moment ago, the men had been standing. I couldn't see the men's bodies.'

There are tears in his eyes. I want to comfort him but don't know how. He takes a deep breath.

'Jan wanted to try to help them but I wouldn't let him. I was too much of a coward.'

'No,' I say as firmly as I can. 'You were sensible. You knew it wouldn't work.'

Marek shakes his head. 'Some of the women knelt as if praying. They were yanked up by their hair and forced to stand. One of them pleaded with the soldiers, begged them to let her baby live. A soldier grabbed the baby from her arms and threw it to the ground. Two of the soldiers kicked the baby as if it were a ball, passed it from one to the other.'

'Dear God,' I whisper. I don't want to hear any more but now he has started to tell me, he is unstoppable. I try not to listen to what he is saying but it is impossible.

'Then there were more shots and it was over. It was getting lighter and from the tree, we could see that the Jews had been forced to stand at the edge of a giant pit. When they were shot they fell into this mass grave. Ten of the soldiers were filling it in. Up in the tree, we were terrified that we might be caught and thrown into the pit. We stayed there for hours after the soldiers had gone. At last

we climbed down, Josef grabbing the package of guns on the way. We shared them out. I thought I might kill myself but I was too much of a coward so I threw it down. It caught on a stone and exploded, sending a bullet into my knee.'

Marek is silent at last. I stroke his forehead, 'You can't blame yourself.'

'I can and I do.'

'You couldn't have saved them. How could three men fight against thirty?'

'We might have saved someone. Perhaps in the confusion, someone would have got away.'

'Marek, they wouldn't. Miles from anywhere, probably weak with hunger and fear, they'd be lucky if they managed a hundred metres before they were caught.'

'Leave me, I want to sleep,' the harshness was back in his voice.

'Marek, you couldn't have done anything.' I fall into silence, knowing I will never convince him. The story horrifies me; I wish he hadn't told me for now I have a picture in my mind of babies being shot and thrown into graves dug by their fathers and I can't bear it.

March 13th - Piotr's birthday. I wake up feeling sick. The third time this week. I am hungry all the time and weak. There is never enough to eat. I have no energy, nor has Marek but Tomasz somehow manages to keep his never-ending runs going. It exhausts me to watch him. Dear God, I feel terrible. Tired. Feeble. Can't see the point in getting up. But I do, if only to differentiate between day and night. There's little else to tell them apart, only the small rectangle of light from the tiny window. I get out of bed and piss in the bucket and the sick feeling

passes. My breasts are tender from having weaned Piotr; I thought by now they'd be back to normal.

I go over to our store of food. There is very little left, scarcely enough to keep us alive. I'll have to ask Kasia for more today. I've still got some bread from last night. It is hard, barely edible. When I bite into it, my gums start to bleed. Marek calls to me and I go back to bed. At least it is warm there. Perhaps I'll be able to go back to sleep. Dreams are better than real life. In my dreams, I play with Piotr. Tomasz speaks to me, tells me he loves me. Marek smiles at me in my dreams, a loving smile full of warmth. And best of all, we are in the flat in Krakow sitting round the oak table, my mother's finest lace tablecloth covering it, piles of food on the plates. I long for sleep...

'Marek, Ewa, wake up.' Jan is shaking us.

I fear the worst. 'Piotrek... is he all right?'

'What? Yes, yes, of course. Get up. There's word that the Nazis are in the area.'

I grab Marek's hand. 'How near are they?'

'We don't know for sure. Bronek came by this morning with the news. You remember ... the farmer who wanted to use our cellar.'

I remember that plump, smiling face and wonder if he is to be trusted.

'What do you want us to do?' asks Marek.

'Pack up and go? Only kidding ...' he holds up his hands.

I don't smile. It didn't sound like a joke to me. Not that I blame him; Jan and Kasia are putting their lives at risk by hiding us. I have to remember that.

‘We’ll have to tidy the cellar to make sure that it looks as if it’s just old furniture lying around. All the food will have to come upstairs and you can’t leave clothes lying about.’ He sniffs. ‘It smells a bit doesn’t it? We’ll need to do something about that. The buckets will have to go.’

This is unbearable. I let go of Marek’s hand. I get out of bed, wrap my shawl tightly round me and go over to the line to take down the washing. Jan watches me, seemingly unsure of what to do next. I pile up the clothes in the washing basket and hand it to him.

Jan looks down at the clothes, ‘What should I do with them?’

‘For God’s sake! What do you think? Take them upstairs.’

He doesn’t move. Typical, he’s probably frightened Kasia will shout at him.

Marek’s eyes are bloodshot and bleary. ‘Perhaps we should go ... I should go. I mean, it’s me who is putting you all in danger.’

‘No,’ I say. ‘We stick together. If you go, we all go and that means Piotr too.’

‘You don’t mean that.’ Kasia is at the top of the stairs, glowering. She comes down into the cellar.

I stare at her, ‘I do.’ Kasia drops her gaze. I take the basket from Jan, hand it to Kasia. ‘You’ll have to hang these outside. They’re a dead giveaway if we’re searched.’

Kasia wrinkles her nose. It is pinker and damper looking than ever. Her face, normally very pale, has reddened. The colour does not go well with her sandy hair. She’s looking her age. Wrinkles round her eyes, on her forehead,

etched into the sides of her mouth. She is too thin and it doesn't suit her. For a moment I feel sorry for her. Forty and childless, it can't be easy.

Kasia smiles, her eyes narrow. 'Piotr said his first word today when I lifted him from his cot. It was lovely. He looked up at me when I said good morning to him and he opened his mouth and said mama.'

'What?' My voice is quiet. A haze of rage is shimmering over me. Through it I see Jan frowning. At least he has the sense to realise how foolish Kasia is. He speaks quickly.

'No he didn't, Kasia. He said 'Where's mama?' He's always looking for you, Ewa.'

Kasia opens her mouth to speak, but shuts it at Jan's glare. I feel powerful now that the worst has come. The Nazis are in the area; we could be found at any moment. I have nothing to lose. I look at them and smile. 'I think it's time for Piotr to come downstairs again.'

'Let's not be hasty,' says Marek. 'We can discuss this after we've sorted out the cellar. This is not the right time.'

'You're right,' Jan takes the damp clothes from Kasia. 'I'll take these upstairs. Marek, you get the buckets and I'll empty them.' He wrinkles his forehead. 'What else? Ah, yes. Food. That'll have to come upstairs too.'

The moment has passed. We work through the afternoon until the cellar is more or less bare. Only the mattresses remain. The bedding is hidden in the hole behind the brick wall. What little comfort there was is gone; the cellar is bleaker than ever. Tomasz has sensed our mood and is in a state of agitation, hitting out at everything in reach, working up to a screaming session. I take his hand and start to run with him. It isn't easy; I have to stoop to avoid hitting my head on the

joists but it works and within a minute he's back into his ritual, secure again. I wish I could be diverted as easily.

'Any news?' Marek gets up from the bed when Jan brings down the bucket for our afternoon ablutions.

Jan puts the bucket down in the corner. 'I was in the village this morning. The Nazis have arrested some of the men: old Jagodzinski, the Witaszek brothers.'

'Christ. What on earth for?'

Jan shrugs. His face is pale and tired; he looks older than his forty or so years. 'God knows. They're picking on people at random. I think it's only a matter of time before they come here.' He nods towards the bucket, 'I'll come down later to get that. Best not to come up tonight. Kasia's very anxious.'

He leaves without another word. I put my head in my hands, rock myself as a comfort. 'Any excuse, anything to stop me seeing my son.'

Marek reaches out to me and I jump back as if his touch would burn me.

For hours I sit on the bare mattress picking at the dry skin on my arms, fretting about what to do. Kasia wants Piotr; I know she does. She's doing everything she can to take over from me. Perhaps I should leave, take my chance in the countryside. No, I can't do that, how could I manage with two young children in tow. My bravado of a few days back has gone. It is impossible; there is nothing I can do.

I run to the bucket, feeling sick. The stink of urine hits me as I lean over it, heaving. I retch for what seems like an hour, bringing up nothing but yellow bile, my ribs aching from the effort. At last it is over; I cover the bucket, stumble back

to the mattress, feeling as ill as I was last time I was ... dear God, it hits me; the cause of my nausea, my tender breasts. What an idiot I am.

Another week passes. I decide I have to tell Marek. He is in good humour; Jan has passed him some information about what the resistance are doing.

‘Marek,’ I begin.

‘Mmn?’ he doesn’t look up from his reading.

‘Look at me, there’s something I have to tell you.’

He raises his head. ‘Sounds serious, what is it?’

Before I can answer there is an urgent thumping from above, wood battering the floorboards. It can only mean one thing.

‘Do you think ...?’ I can’t bring myself to say what I think this means. Marek’s face is pale, the only colour the tiny broken capillaries round his nose. He nods. We scramble round the cellar, making sure we have cleared every trace of our lives away. It doesn’t take long, Kasia was right after all to insist that we keep the cellar as bare as we can.

I squeeze into the hiding place first and gag. There is something dead in here, a rat probably. I crawl in as far as I can, praying I won’t put my hand on whatever is making the smell. Twisting round, I take Tomasz from Marek. He is asleep and I lay him out on the blankets that are already there. Marek joins us. The pile of bricks for walling us into this hole is between us. We work together, me handing him one brick at a time. My hands shake; I am terrified I’ll drop one. It takes forever for Marek to put them in place, each one blocking out a little more light, until there is nothing, not a glimmer. It is darker than anything I have

ever known. I hold my hand up to my face. Nothing. My heart beats faster, I take a deep breath; I mustn't panic. I search for Marek's hand. It is moist, clammy.

'Are you all right?' he whispers.

I nod, forgetting he can't see me, then, 'Yes.'

We sit in the darkness and listen to Tomasz's steady breathing. For several minutes that is all we can hear. Then, banging at the door and footsteps above us. Not Jan's or Kasia's. My head swims. This is happening to someone else, not me, not us. The voices are harsh, interrogating, save for the quiet mumbles of Jan. It goes on for several minutes. The voices stop and it is quiet for a bit. Broken by a baby's cry – Piotrek. What is happening?

The cry has disturbed Tomasz; he kicks out, his foot striking my anklebone. I stifle a cry and gather him in my arms to comfort him but he hates cuddles, tries to wriggle away. Sixth sense tells me he is going to scream. I whisper sorry as I hold him tighter, put my hand over his mouth, stroke his forehead to try to calm him. I'm losing him; any minute he'll break free. I try to visualise the space; there is enough room for me to lie down. Perhaps if I lie on top of him ... I tell Marek what I am going to do and he moves to give me more room. I lie on top of Tomasz, my hand over his mouth still, feeling him buck like a trapped animal beneath me. Please God, don't let me hurt him. Above us the voices are growing louder, the trapdoor thumps open. They're coming down into the cellar.

'What is this place used for?' A German accent.

'Nothing. Years ago we used it as a storeroom. For potatoes mostly.'

Kasia's voice is high, tense. A crackle of nerves.

Sound of someone creeping round, hitting out with a stick. I feel as though my very breath can be heard. Tomasz's movements are frantic as he tries to break free; this must be killing him. His foot brushes against the outside wall, dislodging some mortar; it trickles down sounding like heavy rain. I push down harder on him; he mustn't move again. Sweat pools under my arms.

'What was that?'

Jan's voice is slow and steady. He's keeping his nerve better than Kasia.

'Rats. We're plagued with them. Can't you smell them? That's why we stopped using this place as a storeroom.'

Footsteps approaching. I keep my hand over Tomasz's mouth, stay on top of him. He stops wriggling but even then I daren't let go. I can scarcely breathe I'm so frightened.

'What's behind here?' The harsh voice is so close I imagine I can feel the soldier's breath on my cheek. My heartbeat pounds in my head.

'Nothing ... earth, the foundations of the house. I'm not sure.' Jan's voice wavers. He sounds terrified. And he's been doing so well. I brace myself. A prod from a stick and we will be discovered. How could we have thought this was a safe place to hide? My legs are cramped and I feel a spasm of pain in my right calf. I bite my lip to stop crying out.

Someone retches, 'There's a hell of a stink. Let's go. There's nothing here but dead rats and filthy Poles.'

'Do you have any other property?' The voices are moving away. Clump of boots on steps. Thank God. They're leaving. Thank God. My heartbeat slows down, but only a little, the pulse in my neck throbs. I dare to stretch out my leg and ease the cramp. How long before we can get out of this hole? I start to count

the seconds. Strange how ten seconds can be so long. Keep counting; the seconds multiply into minutes. Why are they still here? Four minutes twenty three seconds before the door slams shut. Another minute passes, more feet running down the steps, Jan's voice as he pulls away the bricks to set us free. Marek creeps out, his knees cracking as he stands up.

'Oh Christ! I thought they'd never go! Jesus, Jan, you were brilliant. You kept so calm. How can we ever thank you?'

I sit up and shuffle towards the opening. I pause to look into the cellar. It has never seemed so welcoming. Sunshine streams in through the tiny window. A few motes of dust dance in its beams. Praise God, we have done it. We have hidden from the Germans! We are safe. I open my mouth to call out my thanks to Jan and Kasia. Stop. My heart thumps painfully as if someone has kicked me in the chest. Why is Tomasz so quiet and still when I have released him? He should be kicking, screaming. I look back, reach out to him, feel his leg. Warm. Relief surges through me and I lean over to pick him up. There is no resistance in his body, even when I shake him. Dry mouthed and dizzy, I break out of the hiding place and pull him out into the cellar. I kneel before him caressing his face, his blue-tinged mouth. What have I done?

When darkness falls, Jan and Marek go into the forest to dig a hole in a clearing. Six feet down, two feet wide, four feet long. Marek's face set in a grim mask. Both men silent.

Back in the house, I stare at the wall, my face blank. I don't react even when Kasia puts Piotr into my arms. Kasia catches him before he falls to the floor. She puts him in his cradle and rocks it until he falls asleep.

The men return and we all go out. Body wrapped in a white sheet. Marek carries him like a baby, cradled in his arms. Kasia takes my hand and leads me out into the night. Full, yellow moon, low in the sky. Only a few stars and Mars, red-shimmering above us. I stumble through the field into the forest as I have done so many times before. I count my footsteps as we walk, three hundred and twenty nine. Twenty nine, Tomasz was born on the twenty ninth of January.

At the graveside Marek says, 'I can't do this.' Jan tells him he must, and gives him ropes to tie round the body so they can lower it into the grave. He stands at the bottom, Marek at the top and together they let the ropes slip slowly through their hands. Jan says a Hail Mary, faltering over the final words - pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Kasia holds her rosary beads loose in her fingers, mother-of-pearl glistening in the moonlight like tears. Marek sobs, I gaze at the moon. It is left to Jan to fill in the hole and mark a cross on a nearby tree.

I feel nothing. Marek tries to talk to me but I cannot understand his words. I am unable to move. I sit and stare at the wall, looking for Tomasz's face. Sometimes I think I can see him out of the corner of my eye but when I turn, he is not there.

Kasia brings Piotr to me but I cannot bear to look at him.

'You mustn't blame yourself,' says Marek, over and over. 'You were trying to keep him quiet. He was noisy. Could have given us away. You were terrified, we all were.' If he says the words enough times maybe he will believe them.

The others talk in hushed voices about what to do with me. They are worried because I eat so little. Sometimes I take a piece of bread and sit with it in my hand, occasionally ripping a piece off and putting it in my mouth where I let

it sit on my tongue like a communion wafer before swallowing it with some water.

Eczema covers my arms like a second skin, a scaly red skin. I scratch at it until I bleed. Marek wants to take me to a doctor.

‘No,’ says Jan. ‘It’s too dangerous.’

‘But she can’t go on like this. She’ll be dead soon if she doesn’t eat.’

‘She’s grieving,’ says Kasia. ‘It’s only natural. Give her time and she’ll get better.’

I know I never will.

Kasia makes chicken broth, easy to eat, nourishing. She sits beside me, presses it on me. I can’t lift my arm to take the spoon from Kasia so she puts the soup in a cup and raises it to my lips. Soup dribbles down my chin on to the floor. Kasia tries again the next day and the next but I eat only dry bread. On the fourth day, Kasia gives up.

‘I don’t know what to do with her.’ She hands the bowl to Marek, ‘You’re her husband. Maybe she’ll listen to you.’ Marek takes over, sitting for hours at a time trying to get me to eat but I keep my mouth closed tight.

Three weeks after Tomasz’s death, I sit up in bed in the middle of the night and start to scream. I have realised what has happened. Dear God, how can I live with this knowledge. Marek takes me in his arms; I fight him with a strength that comes from deep within me. I claw at his face with my fingernails, drawing them down his cheeks, leaving thin red weals. He holds my arms as I try to hit him until, exhausted, I give up, lie sobbing in his arms.

The next morning I cannot open my eyes they are so swollen from crying.
When I speak, my voice creaks because I have not spoken for so long.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say.

‘It wasn’t your fault.’

I shake my head, ‘You don’t know that.’

Marek sighs, ‘I’ve told you over and over. You were frightened for your life, for all our lives. The Nazis were inches away. It’s terrible ...’ He stops, takes a deep shuddering breath. ‘We have to leave it behind us. There’s Piotr to think off.’

Piotr.

‘I need to see him,’ I say.

‘Of course. We’ll go upstairs later when it’s dark.’

He acts as if I were a stranger. Have I seen him in the past weeks? I can’t remember. His lip quivers when I hold out my arms to him, he buries his head in Kasia’s shoulder, refuses to look at me.

Kasia speaks kindly to me. ‘Keep talking to him. He’ll be fine when he recognises your voice.’

I sit down at the table. I don’t know what to say to my own son. I am a bad mother, useless. Everyone’s eyes are on me, waiting for me to speak; I can’t think of anything to say.

‘Piotrek,’ I manage at last. ‘Piotrek.’

He turns and smiles at his name and I smile back. It feels strange. I study his face; he looks so like Tomasz and yet so unlike him at the same time. The colouring is the same, dark hair and eyes like Marek, but Piotrek’s behaviour is

so different: the way he looks at me, his interest in people not things. I flutter my fingers in front of him and he makes a grab for them, laughing as he does so. I feel confident enough to hold out my arms again; this time he comes to me without a murmur. He smells of spring, of flowers and sunshine. I hold him close for a moment before memory threatens; I pass him back to Marek.

‘I shouldn’t hold him,’ I say. ‘Something might happen.’

‘No, no. Don’t be silly.’ But I saw the anxious look on Marek’s face as I held Piotr and know he will never trust me again.

‘It’s all right, I’m fine. A little tired. I think I’ll go out for a walk.’

‘Be careful. There are still Germans in the area.’

I nod and open the door. ‘I won’t be long.’

The air is so sweet after three weeks inside. I breathe in deeply, feeling my lungs expand. It makes me dizzy. I look around. The sky is cloudless, littered with stars. The moon is waxing, before long it will be full. Of course. My jaw aches from clenching my teeth so hard; I make an effort to relax. Head bowed I set off towards the field and the trees beyond. It has to be done. I have to find Tomasz’s grave.

The woods are darker than I remember. How many times have I walked in them? Countless. I know where the clearing is but somehow I can’t find it. An owl hoots nearby and I almost fall over with fright. Leaves rustle. Am I being followed? No. There is a slight breeze, that’s all. Something touches my hair and I spin round in terror but it is only a low hanging branch. My nails dig into the palms of my hands.

‘Stay calm,’ I tell myself. ‘Stay calm.’

A dark finger of cloud splits the moon in two; it is difficult to make

anything out. Eyes blurred, I look round, catch my breath as I realise I have found the clearing. I spot the small mound three yards away. Stand staring, unable to believe my son lies cold in the earth beneath it. After a few minutes I move nearer, kneel down and lift some of the dark soil, letting it trickle through my fingers. It is dry, like sand, only thicker; there can't have been much rain in the last few weeks. I grab another handful and hold it to my nose, inhaling. It smells like the cellar. Like mushrooms. He'll be at home with that scent. I bend over in pain and rock myself.

I have no idea how long I've been here. I want to cling to the earth, to lie there until I die but a voice inside tells me to think of Piotr and my unborn baby. Stiff with cold, I stand up.

'Forgive me,' I whisper and turn to leave, to stumble back through the woods.

I don't hear the footsteps behind me, scream when a deep voice asks, 'Is everything all right?'

No point in running. I am so weak from grieving that any attacker would catch me in seconds. Brushing away tears with the back of my hand, I turn round to face him. The man standing in front of me looks familiar, who is he? He smiles and I remember.

'Mr Bronek?'

'Kasia's pretty little sister-in-law,' he says. In the moonlight his smile is sinister. 'What are you doing here at this time of night?'

Dear God. Has he spotted the grave? I have to get him away from here. 'Nothing, I was walking.'

‘Alone in the dark?’

‘A ... a fight with my husband ... you know how it is.’ I try to smile.

‘Lovers’ tiffs. He’ll have forgotten it already. Would you like me to walk back with you?’

‘No, thank you,’ but he takes my arm anyway. His grip is tight.

The walk back is interminable. I have nothing to say to him, he is very quiet too. When we reach the house, I hesitate then ask him in. What else can I do?

Marek grabs me as we enter the house, leaving Kasia and Jan to greet their neighbour.

‘Do something about your face, it’s obvious you’ve been crying,’ he hisses.

I go through to the kitchen to wash my face. I can hear Bronek’s voice loud and hearty. ‘What a beautiful baby! And don’t you have another son too? The one who runs everywhere?’

How does he know that? I stand in the kitchen trying to think back to his last visit. Tomasz was in the cellar; I’m sure we didn’t mention him. Someone must have been talking. Marek mumbles that he’s with my parents.

‘I see. And are you staying here for a while?’ asks Bronek.

‘No.’

Through a crack in the doorway, I see Bronek smile. He is enjoying their discomfort. What does he know? I join the others, sitting down beside Marek, feeling his hand cold on mine. ‘We always enjoy our visits, brief as they are. The countryside is so beautiful.’

‘It is, isn’t it?’ He beams as if he is personally responsible. ‘Well, I must be going.’ He rises and goes to the door, ‘God bless.’

He is barely gone before they turned on me - what was I thinking of, bringing him to the house, where did I meet him, did he see anything, say anything. The questions flood in on me, pressing down until I think I might drown in them. I say nothing, occasionally shaking my head until they give up. They argue for a while about whether they can trust him or not.

‘Perhaps we should let him store whatever it was he wanted to hide in the cellar,’ suggests Kasia.

‘Are you mad? We know nothing about him. It could be guns, anything.’

‘And if he stores something he’ll never be away from the place,’ adds Marek. ‘We’ll never be safe if he can turn up at any moment.’

They argue on while I sit in the corner, rocking Piotr’s crib with my foot, smiling down at my son. When I am sure he is asleep I slip down to the cellar and undress in the dark. My heart is a stone in my chest. The future looks bleaker than ever. I make up the bed, slip into it. The bedding feels damp as it always does and I shiver uncontrollably for several minutes until at last I fall into a fitful sleep. I dream of Piotr, of taking him for a walk in the woods, his hand trustfully in mine. A beautiful spring day, daffodils and bluebells sway under the trees. As we walk he looks up at me, laughing. Then the sky darkens, a wind blows up from nowhere and he starts to cry. I bend down to pick him up but before I can, one of the trees has come to life, snatches him in its branches, swallows him up. My face is soaked with sweat and tears when I wake up.

The next few days are stressful, uneasy, adults snapping at one another while

Piotr, sensitive to the atmosphere, cries in response. Or maybe he misses Tomasz; he used to laugh when Tomasz went into one of his runs. I put the thought out of my mind; my own grief is more than I can bear.

After a week we begin to relax, allow ourselves to feel safe again. No news is good news. Late one evening, Jan comes in from a trip to the village saying he's heard reports that the Germans are on the move.

'They need more troops on the Eastern front. They say there will only be a few soldiers left in the region.' He puts some more wood on the fire. 'We can start thinking about getting back to normal.'

'Do you think it's safe enough?' asks Marek.

Jan smiles, 'Yes, I do. There's real optimism in the air. I haven't seen people look so relaxed for ... well years really.'

'Thank God. No more heaving those damn buckets up and down stairs,' says Kasia.

I lie awake that night thinking about what Jan said. Is it possible that the war is coming to an end? It would be five years in September, a long time. I pull the blanket tighter round me and shiver. It is impossible to sleep. I dread the hours of darkness. Every night is the same. No sooner do I lie down in bed and shut my eyes and I am back in my nightmare. In the hiding place, Tomasz waking up, the kick at the wall, my hand over his mouth. Why did I not notice that he had stopped struggling? When did he die? If I had released him as soon as the Germans had left the cellar, would he have lived? The questions whirl round in my head. I can't believe he has gone, can't accept what I've done. Although the

others keep trying to console me, saying it was an accident, I know that in their hearts they don't mean it.

No matter how much I cry, I never feel any better. I think of nothing other than that dreadful day. Beside me, Marek sleeps. He says little to me these days when we are alone. With the others present it is different; he speaks to me, keeps up appearances. But down in the murkiness of the cellar, nothing. He lies on the mattress and reads. He has started to drink during the day and I fear he might lash out at me. Not that I care. I deserve to be beaten. I wish someone would punish me for what I have done.

It is uncomfortable in the makeshift bed. The mattress is old and lumpy. I try lying in a different position to see if that helps. It doesn't. I might go mad if I don't sleep soon. Every night, hours spent going over the same thing. I try to think of something else. But nothing comes to mind, nothing other than the hopelessness of the situation. If it weren't for Piotr I would leave. Walk into the village and confess. Let Tomasz have a proper burial. But if I do that I would be condemning them all.

Marek mutters something; I can't make it out. He turns over, dragging the blankets from me. I move closer to try to draw some warmth from him, but he avoids me, moves away from the pressure of my body.

At last I start to drift off. Outside a cock is crowing; memories of Good Friday come to me. I have betrayed you Tomasz, forgive me. My last thought before I fall asleep, is that I would prefer not to wake up.

I can't take my eyes off Piotr as Kasia plays with him. He is a healthy child, tall and fair, doing all the things a child of his age should: walking, talking, smiling,

laughing. He rarely cries. A joy to be with; Kasia adores him. Her thin face is tender as she rolls a ball for him to kick. Several times Kasia tries to encourage me to join in the game but each time I shake my head. I have lost the right to be his mother. I blink back tears as he calls Kasia, mama. No one says anything to correct him. Only a few weeks ago I would have screamed my rage at this but now it no longer seems important.

‘Ewa, why don’t you take over while I get us some drinks?’

I get up from my chair. I hate it when Kasia is kind. ‘No, it’s fine. I’ll get the drinks.’ I go to the kitchen area and lean my head on the wall, trying not to listen to what is being said behind my back. Words seep through to me: not right, need to do something, help her, poor soul. I draw back my head and hit it against the wall. It feels good, takes away the pain in my heart. I do it again, several times, until someone rushes through and holds on to me, makes me stop. I stand, head bowed, watching the blood drip on to the floor, ‘I’m bleeding,’ I say.

Hands all over me, putting me to bed, kind but firm. Funny how cherished I feel, now, when I least deserve it.

Will I ever sleep in peace again? I think of Tomasz under the earth, cold and alone. I wish I could join him. There is nothing to live for; Piotr is lost to me, Marek too.

My head spins so much I don’t know whether I am awake or asleep. There are noises all around me. I can’t make out what they are: thuds, something being dragged, a scream of terror? Where are they coming from? I struggle to awaken from this nightmare.

But it isn't a dream. Soldiers surround us, shining torches in our eyes. Before I can sit up in bed, rough hands push and pull at me. Coarse voices yell orders I do not understand.

We are outnumbered; eight soldiers lead us outside. One of them yawns, showing large yellow teeth and a coated tongue; his eyes bloodshot as if he's been drinking. It is almost dawn, the sky lighter in the east. I hold my breath. Is this the end? A firing squad at daybreak; what I have feared for years. I look round for Piotr. Marek has him in his arms. I try to move near them but the soldier with the red eyes bars my way, pushing his rifle into my chest so I have to retreat. Kasia is on her knees, trying to bargain.

'You can have my house. I have money, jewels. Please, let us go. It's them you want. They're the communists, the Jew lovers.' She babbles on, poison streaming out as she tries to save herself. I feel sorry for her. Poor Kasia, she never wanted us here. I wonder when she'll realise she's wasting her time. They're not going to let any of us go.

Something pokes into my back, a rifle, and I tense, waiting for the shot. A hand shoves me, someone shouts 'Schnell.' They march us down the stony footpath. We stumble; it's hard to keep our feet. I fall and a soldier grabs my hair to haul me up. Marek sees this and exclaims. I force a smile, mouthing, 'I'm fine.' The soldiers increase the pace until we are trotting. I can see a truck at the junction of the main road and the farmhouse track. For a moment I let myself hope, maybe we aren't going to be shot after all. No, no hope. It isn't allowed. I deserve to die. The words sing to me over and over as we draw towards the truck: de-serve to die, de-serve to die. The rhythm keeps me going.

We reach the road. One of the soldiers opens the back door of the truck. The floor is covered in bundles of rags. One of the bundles moves and I see that the truck is full of people, huddled together on the floor. They smell of fear. No one looks up. At the back, two soldiers stand guarding them, their faces dulled with boredom.

‘Get in,’ a soldier pushes us forward. I am last to enter. I fall to the floor beside Marek and Piotr and hug them as close as I dare. Marek strokes my arm. Nearby, Kasia continues to shout that she has always admired the Germans while Jan tries to get her to be quiet. No one listens. As the soldier pulls the door across, I catch sight of an onlooker, standing twenty yards away, by the side of the road. It is not yet light, but my eyes are sharp and I could swear he is smiling. He touches the side of his forehead in a mock salute. It is the farmer, Bronek.

Chapter Six

Glasgow

My box, the beautiful wooden box that Jack gave me not long before he died, sits on my lap. I trace the exquisitely carved roses with the tip of my forefinger; for a moment I can smell the blooms that Marek gave to me when Tomasz was born and I look round expecting to see him standing in the shadows, his arms full. He is not there.

My past lies in this box; the letters and notebooks are a testament to who I really am. It helped to write about what happened to me, to the others, when it was too hard to speak. My conscience tells me Hannah has to be told the truth but after so long, after so many lies and evasions, it is difficult to know how or where to start. Perhaps if I read once more what I have written ... maybe this will help me decide what to do.

My fingers are very weak; I can't get a proper grasp on the lid and I struggle, trying to open it. After ten minutes I am on the point of giving up but I am consumed by my desire. It is many years since I read my journals and although I have a good idea of what is in them, some details escape me. There's a knife on a tea plate; I use it as a lever. The lid springs open, showing the contents of the box: the dark red covers of the notebooks clash with the mossy green interior, the pink ribbon that holds the letters together is faded now. I put Jack's letters to one side. They are of little interest to anyone but me and even then, truth be told, not much. It is the notebooks that concern me. I open one of them. It is about Ben. I have written it in English, not very good English I'm afraid.

24th September 1974

Another little boy for Hannah. He is called Benjamin but already they make it short to Ben. He is a large baby, almost nine pounds. A hungry, noisy boy, always eating.

I smile when I read this. That is Ben exactly. Even now, nearly thirty years later, he is the same. Loud, extrovert, with a huge appetite. He is not at all like Hannah or her husband. They used to joke that they picked up the wrong baby in hospital. Although the other two boys are tall, a half inch off six feet, Ben is three or four inches taller. He is very muscular, built like a rugby player. His hair is fair, unlike the others who are dark-haired. He stands out in family photographs.

I read on. To begin with the journal is a little boring, a list of what he weighed and what presents he was given: *Mr and Mrs McCallum – a blue romper suit, Mary Coulter – a rattle (yellow), Jack's parents – £100.* As I read through it, uneasiness sneaks up on me. There is a bias towards favouring David that I don't remember from the time. I always thought I was scrupulously fair to all three of my grandchildren, but the journal entries belie this: *Ben start to crawl today. He is not so quick as David; I think Ben is not clever like David; Ben is rather a fat baby, greedy.* Incredulous, I read on. Did I really write this? Was I crazy? Anyone reading this would think I did not like my second grandchild: *This baby cry so much, he need a good slap; it would be better if he is a girl.* I have no memory of writing these words, but the handwriting is indisputably mine. I thought I always loved him but then I was in a bad way at times during the nineteen seventies. It was a dark time for me.

Towards the end of the book, there is a sentence that shocks me. *I do not think Ben is handsome like David. He looks like the soldier that Anna fear so much. The devil is in him.* I find my handbag and rummage through it for my pen. When I find it I score over these words, my hand shaking. No one must ever know what I thought. I must have been even more disturbed at that time than I remember.

The notebook is back in the box. I am not sure what to do about it. At first I want to destroy it but for whatever reason, I am reluctant to do this. Some of what I wrote is horrible but it is what I felt and I need to think about this and sort out my feelings. It helps to explain what happened on Friday when Ben visited me. When Ben said those few German words, it must have triggered a hidden memory. This unsettles me. My past is breaking through too frequently. It is confusing and I don't know what to do about it. Why is it happening now when I managed to hold myself together after the war? Only once before has it threatened me, in the early seventies, when I had my breakdown.

My fiftieth birthday. A half century. For many people this is a time of reckoning. My family wanted to surprise me with a party. They took me out for a meal to a local hotel. It was all I wanted, to be with my family enjoying good food and wine. At half past nine we returned home. My heart stopped, I swear it did, when I went into the darkened sitting room and someone put a lit torch up to their face and shouted 'surprise'. In that instant, I was back in the cellar with the Germans and their torches, being hauled out into the dark night. Everything went hazy and

I fainted. When I awoke, I was in bed. Jack sat beside me, his face crumpled with concern. 'What happened?' he asked. I shook my head, unable to explain.

The guests had gone home. There weren't that many of them. I kept myself apart from most people, not wanting to get close to anyone. But Jack had lots of friends and they all had wives who tried their best with me. I wondered if I would see any of them again after that terrible display.

The next day I was unable to get up from my bed. I had lain awake all night, thinking about the cellar, thinking about Tomasz. It was unbearable.

I shake my head to empty it of those dark memories. I pick up one of the other notebooks. It is written in Polish. This is the one in which I wrote all my secrets. I thumb through it. I have jotted down memories of Marek, the pen has skimmed over the paper, marking it lightly as if I was ashamed of what I wrote, of my betrayal: *Today is my wedding anniversary; we would have been married forty years. Marek's hair will be grey now, like mine but his eyes will still have the same light as they had when he looked at me that first night. How he loved me, and I, him.* As I read through my musings, I wonder if he is alive, if he ever thinks of me, or our children. There are drawings of Piotr and Tomasz. Beside one of Piotr I have written: *Is this how he looked? Oh how I wish I could remember. Sometimes his face flashes in front of me, a fragmentary illusion, and I try to hold on to it but it slips away, as elusive as a dream.* I look at the drawing closely. When I drew it, Sam was a baby. He looked like Piotrek, I always thought. I used to sit and gaze at him for hours, pretending he was mine. Now, looking at the picture for the first time for many years, I find I cannot remember anything individual about him, anything that made him Piotrek rather

than Tomasz or Sam or any other child. He was a baby, a beautiful baby but aren't they all? When you have no memory of what someone was, how they were or what they looked like, it is hard to believe they ever existed. I shudder, thinking of all the children who died at Auschwitz and how most of them are forgotten, their mothers killed at the same time. Dear God, why am I thinking about this now?

I think I should destroy the notebook. There is an office downstairs with a shredder. I could ask to use it. I flick through the pages, unsure of what to do. Another passage catches my eye and I read it wishing I'd never opened the damn book: *I keep thinking about that despicable man, Broadside. Why did Jack make me see him? I wish I'd never set eyes on him. He blames me I know he does. He should help me, but instead he says I am a cold mother and because of this, my son fell into a depression and wanted to die. I think this is rubbish (I underlined this three times). Now I think maybe Marek was right all along. He always said there was something wrong with Tomasz. And there was. Right from the start. Even when he was a little baby, he was not like other infants. He hated to be cuddled, used to go rigid. And it was so hard to feed him; he did not like his food, used to spit it out. Piotrek and Hannah were so different. I suppose if I'd had Piotrek first I would have known what a normal child was like.*

I close the notebook and put it away. I tidy the already neat room, try to read the *Herald* but the distractions don't work. I can see his face, Dr Broadside, so-called psychotherapist. Jack took me to see him after my breakdown; he said it would help.

The clinic was in the West End of Glasgow, in one of those magnificent terraces set back from Great Western Road. I sat in the waiting room and looked around. The ceilings were high, perhaps fifteen feet. There was wooden panelling on the walls up to the height of the picture rail, which was three feet short of the ceiling. Between the picture rail and the ceiling was a frieze of Grecian urns painted in dark blue with gilded highlights. The cornicing was extremely elaborate, vine leaves and bunches of grapes I think, but in one corner there was a piece missing. My eye was drawn to that imperfection repeatedly. I waited ten maybe fifteen minutes, nibbling my fingernails as I hadn't done since I was a child.

At last I was called to his room. He got up from behind his desk when I went in and came over to shake my hand. I should have known from his handshake what he was like. His hand felt like a dead fish in mine. But his smile seemed sincere and I put my prejudice about his handshake behind me. He was a small man, five foot four maybe, not much taller than me, my age, early fifties and carried a lot of weight. His hair was going grey and was too long for a man of his age. I thought he was trying to look younger than he was, fit in with the fashion.

His voice was quiet and he had a pleasant manner. I thought he was kind. That first session lasted nearly two hours. To begin with, his questions were gentle but insistent and I told him things I had scarcely allowed myself to think about for many years. I'm not sure why I chose to say so much. It wasn't only that he was easy to speak to. For me, it was perhaps the right time. Scared by my breakdown, weighed down by all my secrets. Whatever the reason, I spoke about Tomasz for the first time in many years. I told Dr Broadside about the way he was: how he never spoke, his tantrums, his odd behaviour. I also told him about

the terrible accident. All the time he listened and nodded and I thought I was safe. He said little – just things like, ‘That must have been very difficult for you’ or ‘I see’. At the end he said, ‘Come and see me at the same time next week.’ His voice made me feel as if he understood, and I went home that evening feeling better than I had for months. Jack was so pleased. We made love that night, but it was Marek’s face I saw when I closed my eyes.

The following week I returned and I told him about the camp; the things I saw there and he listened to me. He asked me some questions: how did I feel about what I had seen, what did I think had happened to Piotr, to Marek? I told him I thought Piotr had died as soon as we arrived at Auschwitz. If the soldier hadn’t attacked me, I would have been carrying Piotr, not Marek and it is likely that I would have died too. I don’t know. I said I thought Marek was dead. This was a lie. I thought he was alive. I wanted him to be alive. I should have scoured Poland for him. Now I could only dream. I did not tell the doctor this, however. There are some things that you must keep to yourself. Instead, I told him about how I withdrew into myself when I was first in Auschwitz and then how meeting Anna and Karla gave me hope. All the time he was so patient, so understanding. I even told him the truth about Hannah. Dr Broadside was very interested in Hannah, about our relationship when she was very young. I said I had found her difficult at times, but isn’t that the case sometimes with bright children? He asked how we got on as adults and I told him the truth; that we found each other hard to please; she would tell Jack things that she never told me. How did I feel about this, he asked. I said it made me sad but nonetheless it was a blessing to have a family. He nodded and smiled; I thought he understood.

I was wrong. The following week, I returned and he gave me his report, a copy of what he would send to Jack.

A staccato knock on the door drives my reverie away. I make sure the box is closed before calling out 'Come in.' It is Hannah. She takes off her jacket and puts it on the arm of her chair.

'I didn't know you were coming today.' I sound ungracious.

'It's Thursday, I always come on Thursdays.'

'Oh.' I can't think of anything else to say. Hannah sits down in the seat across from me. We look at each other. She is getting old. Her dark hair, although it is as thick as it ever was, is streaked with grey and there are deep wrinkles on her forehead. I always told her she frowned too much. And she never took care of her skin. I continue to gaze at her. She is uncomfortable with this and looks away.

'How is your work?' I ask.

'Not great,' she says. I wait and she sighs. 'The waiting lists are getting longer, especially for diagnosing autism.'

I nod. I have read about the increase in numbers of children with autism. It is ironic, I think, that Hannah chose to specialise in this area. Why have I never asked her more about it? I should show more interest. 'Why are there so many children with autism these days?'

'Better diagnosis,' says Hannah. No hesitation. She is confident about everything in a way I could never be.

'Not this injection then – what is it called?'

'MMR.' She shakes her head. 'No, there's no evidence to suggest that.'

I find myself saying, 'Hannah, what do you know about refrigerator mothers?' I am treading on dangerous ground here.

She gives me a look, impossible to decipher. 'Quite a lot, I'm writing a paper on it for a book on the history of autism. It was a theory popular during the fifties and sixties. Some people thought autism was caused by a mother rejecting her child.'

'And is it true?'

She laughs. 'No way. It's a lot of nonsense. No one believes it now. Well, no one apart from a few psychoanalysts in Europe, France mainly.'

'But in the past they did.' My voice shakes, a betrayal and she looks at me sharply.

'Why do you ask?'

I smile. 'No reason, just showing an interest in your work.' I don't know how I do it but I have offended her. Something about the tone of my voice, I hear it, sarcastic. She doesn't reply. For five minutes we sit silent. I know because I look at my watch. I have to say something so I ask after the boys. Her eyes are furious as she turns to me.

'You really upset Ben the other day. Do you understand that? He adores you. God knows why. You always whine about them not coming to see you. Well, they're busy: work, wives, children. But when one of them makes the effort, you shout at him for no reason. I wouldn't blame him if he never comes to see you again.'

My stomach churns; I feel sick. She cannot believe I would really want to hurt him. I try to say something but before I can, she is off again.

'You're hiding something. All my life I've known it. But you're slipping

now, mother. Letting little bits out. Thomas, whoever he is. And Sam said you used to call him Piotrek when he was a little boy. He thought it meant sweetheart, says that's what you told him when he asked. But it doesn't, does it? It's Polish for Peter.'

The room lurches to one side even though I am sitting still. I am losing touch with reality. She carries on speaking, her voice harsh and insistent. Despite its tenacity, I feel myself slipping away from it. I do not want to listen.

She is shaking me, 'Mum, wake up.'

Her face is out of focus. My tongue feels thick, swollen. 'Have I been asleep?' I look at my watch but only a minute has passed.

'No. I think you fainted.'

I allow myself a smile, 'You were shouting at me. No...' I raise my hand as she tries to speak. 'It's all right. I deserved it. I don't know what happened with Ben. It's terrible and I'm so sorry about it. But my memory is going and ...' I stop. I know I should tell her the truth but I have never spoken it aloud since seeing Dr Broadside thirty years ago. It did no good then. I cannot believe it will do anything but harm now.

She is contrite. Sorry for her outburst. I do not deserve a daughter like her. I do not deserve any family at all. I want to be alone, to cry, so I tell her I am tired and would like to sleep. As she nods, I see the disappointment in her eyes.

*

Hannah helps her mother into bed. She is more shaken than she wants to acknowledge. Years of resentment poured out in that little outburst. Strong displays of emotion frighten her. She goes over to the wash hand basin to get a

glass of water. When she returns, her mother seems to be asleep; for a moment she wonders if she should sit by the bed, wait for her to wake up. Maybe not, she feels agitated, churned up, wants to get home. Ewa's hiding something, that's for sure.

She is about to go when she remembers her jacket and crosses the room to pick it up. A wooden box on the table beside Ewa's chair catches her eye. It is unusual, a pretty little thing, ten inches by six perhaps. She lifts it up. Her fingertips trace the carved surface, feeling the outlines of the petals. Hannah isn't sure what the wood is, but guesses mahogany. It's hard to believe she's never noticed it before; her mother must have bought it recently, or perhaps it was a gift. Hannah opens it and closes it and opens it again. The lid is a perfect fit; nothing snags or sticks. The box is lined with green felt, torn in places, so it is not new. It is crammed with papers, mainly notebooks and letters. The letters are tied with a pink silk ribbon. Hannah takes them out. They are yellow with age and have a brittle fragility about them. Casting a quick glance to make sure her mother is asleep, she unties the ribbon. The letters are in her father's handwriting. She holds them in her hand, feeling a tug of longing. She wants to know what they say. No she mustn't look - they are private after all. But she is drawn to them ... pulls out one at random.

My darling Ewa,

How can I bear to be apart from you and your little Hannah for even one more day? It seems like an age since we were last together. But what a night it was...

She stuffs the letter back in its envelope, doesn't want to know any details; it is enough to know her parents loved one another. At times she has wondered about this. It isn't easy to tie the ribbon in the same way her mother does but she perseveres until she is sure she has got it right. Her heart is beating fast; she feels like a spy. This box holds answers; of that she is certain. Another quick look to check on her mother. A little snore escapes from her open mouth. Hannah cannot resist. She takes out the notebooks, more letters. Beneath them, at the bottom of the box is a piece of knitwear. She lifts it out of the box. A baby's hat; it must have been hers. It is hand knitted, beautifully crafted. Lifting it up to her face she breathes in its scent. There is a faint hint of lavender among the mustiness. The white wool has dulled to ivory. Hannah puts it to one side and picks up one of the notebooks. It too is old. A cheap notebook, not like the fancy ones you can buy these days. A soft cover, dull red, spotted with stains, A6 size with lined paper. Hannah opens it. Every page is covered in Ewa's handwriting, the letters distinctively foreign. She rummages in her handbag for her reading glasses. She can do without them for most things but her mother's small cramped script is impossible to read without help. She flicks through the pages looking for names she knows. As is often the case with your own name, Hannah leaps out at her. With a smile she starts to read.

15 June 1972

Two days ago, Hannah had a little boy. She calls him James David. This is how it is in Scotland; sometimes they call the first born for his father. He is a beautiful baby, no marks on him.

It is hard to hold him. Even now, after all these years, I am frightened. I see Hannah watching me as I hand him to Jack after only a second or two. She is puzzled.

Last night I dream of Krakow and of Tomasz. He is a baby, only a few weeks old so it is before the dark time. Marek is there with roses and I am feeding Tomasz. When I awake, my breasts are aching and my pillow is wet with tears. Now I do not want to sleep.

Hannah reads it again, uncomprehending. Tomasz and Marek? It sounds as if ... no, it isn't possible that her mother had another child and never told her. She can't believe Ewa would keep such a thing from her. All her life Hannah wanted a brother or a sister. She hated being an only child. Once, after the family next door had produced yet another wrinkled red faced infant, she dared to ask why they couldn't have a baby like the Donaldsons' but Ewa had shaken her head and the sadness in her eyes stopped Hannah pressing her further. She closes the notebook, no longer wanting to read it. Her mother must have made it up. She was imaginative; she often said she would have liked to be a writer. That's it, a story. For a moment she allows herself this fantasy but common sense prevails. She is deluding herself; if it were fiction, Ewa wouldn't have used real names and dates. David had been born on the 13th June 1972. Her mother whimpers in her sleep and Hannah jumps. Appalled at what she has done and at what she has read, she puts everything back as it was and creeps out of the room.

*

When I awake, day is turning to night, a silver grey twilight, a time of shadows. I turn on the bedside lamp and look at the clock – 7.15. I have been asleep for half

an hour. Dreamless sleep. It will be supertime soon, but I don't want to get up. I lie in bed and look at the ceiling. There is a crack in the corner. It reminds me of Dr Broadside's room and with no warning the memories move in, surrounding me until I am drowning in them.

I had no idea it was coming. No one had said to me that he would write a report. I suppose I should have known. No, how could I? I walked into his room without any suspicion of what was to come. I was almost looking forward to talking some more about myself. It would be good for me to speak of the terrible things that had happened. That way I would cleanse myself. During that week, I had had none of my usual nightmares, so the therapy must be working. When I entered the room, he didn't meet my eyes. That should have warned me. The other times he had smiled at me, made me feel welcome. This day, he sat at his desk, writing, and said, 'Sit down, Mrs Connor,' without so much as a glance. I sat down, disappointed at this formal greeting, and waited. There was a large clock on the mantelpiece. I remember thinking it was strange that an office should have a fireplace. In those days the fashion was to get rid of big features like this, have clean lines throughout. The clock wasn't particularly grand. It didn't fit the style of the room at all. The room needed something grander, a wall clock in a mahogany case at least. This was a typical fifties style wooden cased timepiece, arched in shape. It had a very loud tick, which was hypnotic; I felt myself drawn into it.

'I have a preliminary report here that I would like to discuss with you before sending a copy to your husband.' Dr. Broadside didn't look at me as he said this.

I blinked, puzzled. 'A report? Why?'

'Didn't your husband explain?' He continued to write.

I shook my head and waited.

'Treatment here is on the basis of our initial assessment. After the first three appointments we give a report of what has been discovered so far.'

'I see.' I was angry. I hadn't known I was being assessed. Like a child. As far as I was concerned I had been getting therapy. 'And what does your report say, Dr Broadside?'

He rose from his seat and paced up and down the room. No eye contact. 'It is my opinion, Mrs Connor, that your child, Tomasz, was autistic.'

I was baffled. I thought I was there to talk about me. 'I don't understand.'

'Autism is a condition that affects a small number of children so that they cannot interact properly or communicate. The best way of describing it is that they are in their own little world.'

This made sense. Tomasz was like that. I thought back to the cellar and to how he was when Marek and I tried to play with him. The screams, the inability to share toys. Day after day I tried to get him to look at me and always his eyes avoided mine. Sometimes I thought it was because of where we were but he had been like that in Krakow too. He had been such a difficult baby, his back arching when we tried to cuddle him as if he was straining to get away from human contact. Yes, I could see that he may well have been autistic. 'I understand,' I said. 'But, how did he come to be like that?'

He continued to walk up and down, never once looking at me. It was irritating and I think my dislike of him started at that moment. What sort of man does that when he is talking about such important things? 'There is a theory that

children become autistic because they feel they have no hope,' he began. 'They are not loved so they withdraw into a hopeless state.'

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I started to laugh. It must be a joke. 'OK, so that's one theory, but what's the real reason?'

'It is no laughing matter. The parents of these children wish they didn't exist so the child becomes autistic.'

'That's nonsense. I loved Tomasz. Marek loved Tomasz.'

Silence.

'Don't you believe me?'

He didn't look at me, fiddled with his tie. 'It's easy to say that of course.'

I was aghast, all traces of laughter disappeared; instead, tears of rage choked me. I took a deep breath, calmed myself. 'Where does this theory come from?'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes,' I had difficulty not shouting it out.

More fiddling, this time with his hair. 'It came from a psychiatrist caller Kanner who was one of the first people to identify autism in children. He noted that the parents of these children seemed unusually cold, especially the mothers. He called them refrigerator mothers.'

'Refrigerator mothers,' I repeated. 'And why did he think they did not love their children?'

'Um. That idea came from a psychoanalyst called Bettelheim. Bettelheim was a prisoner in Dachau and Buchenwald in the late thirties. He saw people in the concentration camps who had given up hope, Musselmänner I think they

were called, and thought they were just like the autistic children he'd worked with before the war.'

He went to his bookshelves, picked out a book, thumbed through it and started to read aloud. I don't remember the exact words but it was something about autistic children choosing to withdraw from the world as a reaction to extreme situations, just like the prisoners in concentration camps did. I remembered the way some prisoners were, how I was, at one point; the despair I felt. But that wasn't like Tomasz. It was completely different. I *chose* to withdraw; Tomasz didn't have that choice.

It was absurd. I wouldn't listen to this nonsense. I stood up. 'How can a baby choose to withdraw?' I asked. 'Tomasz was born that way. He was a difficult child from very early on.'

'Yes, no doubt he was, because you rejected him. And you know what that rejection ultimately led to. It is my opinion, Mrs Connor, that the killing of Tomasz was no accident. Subconsciously you wanted him dead.'

I gripped the back of my chair to stop myself hitting him. 'I think I will leave now.'

A few days later the report came through the post. I got to it before Jack did and hid it. When he asked about it, I told him I felt much better and didn't need to go back. As always, he trusted me, and Dr Broadside was never mentioned again. I have no idea where it is though and I hope I never see it again. I should have destroyed it.

*

Hannah flops down on the sofa when she gets home. It's hard to think about what she read in the notebook. She wants to forget it, picks up the *Herald*, starts reading the letters page, but she cannot concentrate. Her eyes close and within a few minutes she is asleep. Jim finds her like that when he comes home from work. She senses his presence and opens her eyes.

'You look terrible,' he says.

Hannah gets up from the sofa, stumbles over one of her shoes. 'I haven't started dinner yet. What would you like?'

'It'll be ready in five minutes. I didn't want to disturb you. Do you want something to drink?'

Hannah runs her fingers through her hair, trying to tidy it. She nods, thinking not for the first time, that she's drinking too much. Jim brings through a bottle of wine, opens it and pours Hannah a large glass.

'Something's worrying you.'

Hannah sighs. 'I had a go at mum today, about her shouting at Ben. I think I overdid it... she had a bit of a funny turn and I had to put her to bed.' She hesitates, not wanting to admit what she's done, then in a rush says, 'I was about to leave and I saw this box, on her table. I opened it up, expecting, well, I don't know what I thought would be in it. But it was stuffed with notebooks and letters.' A pause to gulp some wine. 'Anyway, I did something terrible. I read a page in the notebook. I know ... I shouldn't have.' She looks up.

Jim shakes his head. 'No you shouldn't. What on earth were you thinking about?'

'I don't know,' Hannah feels worse than ever. She wishes she'd kept her nose well out of the damn box.

‘Well, it’s done now. Do you want to talk about it?’

‘It was about David. At least I thought it was. It starts off with David’s birth. I thought it was going to be one of those baby diaries that you always mean to keep but never get round to. You know, baby’s first tooth, that sort of thing.’ Hannah puts the empty glass down on the table. ‘But after writing a bit about David’s birth she goes on about another baby, Tomasz. She doesn’t say in so many words but it’s clear that the baby is hers. And she also writes about someone called Marek, from the sound of it, the baby’s father.’ She sighs, ‘I suppose this clears up the mystery about the Thomas she keeps asking about.’

‘Yes, I suppose it does.’ Jim hesitates, ‘Do you remember exactly what it said in the notebook?’

‘More or less.’ Hannah recites what she can remember. Jim listens, his face is expressionless. When she had finished, he takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. ‘Well, it certainly sounds as if Tomasz was her child. I can’t see any other way of interpreting it. What are you going to do?’

Hannah puts her head in her hands; pushes her hair back from her forehead. ‘I don’t know. Should I talk to her? Tell her what I read?’ Her eyes are stinging.

Jim will not make it easy for her. ‘I can’t tell you that. You have to make up your own mind.’

‘I think I’m going to have to, but I don’t want to. It scares me. It’s as if I never knew her. Maybe I’ll wait a while. Think about it a bit more.’ She senses Jim thinks she is trying to avoid the issue. He’s right of course. But she can’t avoid everything, after dinner she’ll have to phone Ben to find out how he’s feeling.

Ben is careful about what he says. He downplays everything – the old woman is senile, not surprising at her age. Hannah knows he is hurt though. Just because someone doesn't mean to hurt you, doesn't mean it is all right and you feel fine about it. She presses him for what was said. He capitulates.

'It was nothing. I told her about my new job, said I'd like, have to learn German and stuff, and bang! She was off on one. I got the impression she thought I was someone else.'

'Yes, I think you're right. I wouldn't swear to it but I think she called you a bastard.'

'Charming.'

'She didn't mean it, Ben.'

He sighs. 'It was horrible. Not like her at all.'

Hannah tells him about the notebook and what she has done.

'Maybe you should try to get hold of them all.'

'I can't do that. I feel bad enough as it is.'

'I think you have a right to know.' His voice is bitter; Ben is more hurt by her mother's words than he is prepared to say.

Hannah doesn't visit her mother the next day. She phones David and Sam and asks them to pop in over the weekend. Exhausted, she feels she does not want to see Ewa. Visits are hard enough at the best of times but this issue is eating into her. Old resentments churn her up and she sits in her study at home, writing reports and brooding. Jim comes looking for her.

'I want to go out for the day,' he says, 'get away from work. Get you away from work.'

Hannah protests she has too much to do. 'I have two assessment meetings on Monday. If I don't do the reports ...'

He grabs her hand, pulls her to her feet. 'They can wait until tomorrow. Come on, it's a gorgeous day, we can climb Ben Lomond.'

It is one of those stunningly clear days when you can taste the sharpness of the air. The sky is a hard, cold blue, with no clouds to soften it. To the north are Ben Nevis and Ben More and countless other hills bumping over the landscape. The more rugged outlines of Arran and the Arrochar Alps are over to the west. And the Trossachs, as always, are gently beautiful. The only problem is the hundred or so other walkers who have also been tempted out by the sunny weather. It's hard to find a place at the top that isn't occupied by someone on a mobile shouting, 'I'm at the top of Ben Lomond.'

Jim finds a quietish spot and sits down to scan the view. 'Glad you came?'

Hannah nods. A day on the hills is what she needs. Her mind is more focused and she wants to talk about what she read. 'I've been thinking,' she starts to say.

'About your mother?' says Jim.

'Don't do that. It's spooky.' Hannah laughs but she is perturbed. Sometimes she feels she has no secrets from him.

'Are you going to ask her about the notebooks, tell her what you read?'

'You tell me. You already seem to know what I'm thinking.' The words come out more abruptly than she intends and she smiles to soften them.

'I think you are.'

Hannah doesn't answer. In the end, she is not as ready to talk as she

thought. She starts off down the hill. It's murder, all aching muscles and wobbly knees. Jim senses her mood and tells her stories about his clients and their efforts to avoid paying tax. Before long Hannah is laughing, her worries forgotten, for the moment. At the bottom, they go into the Rowardennan Hotel for a drink and she tells him she will talk to Ewa.

*

With every day that passes I am slipping more and more back to the past. That's what they say happens, as you grow older. Things that took place years ago come into sharp focus, while the minutiae of everyday life escapes. I am forgetful of what I had for dinner, that sort of thing. Hannah persists in asking – what did you eat today, mum. The first few times she did this, I panicked, but I know what to do now, I just say chicken or fish. It's only conversation; she doesn't really want to know, it's not as if she'll check up. It's strange but I am becoming reconciled to the past. It's as if it happened to someone else. I try hard to bring my children's faces to mind but I can't. Sometimes I take out the notebook where I tried to sketch them and I stare, hoping something will come back but nothing ever does. Yesterday I tried to draw Marek. I did my best but how difficult it was to capture him to my satisfaction. And yet I see him every night in my dreams, sitting in the same café, a serene smile on his face. Last night I almost touched him before I awoke, my fingers only inches from his. I live for these dreams. I want to sleep forever in that time before the war.

Hannah knows something. I can tell. She comes to see me in the evenings after work and she stares at me as if I am a stranger. I should tell her but the words will not come. Instead I say foolish things like – isn't East Enders terrible? – and she looks at me with disdain because she never watches soaps. I make

another mistake tonight and call her Anna, but she doesn't notice. Her visits are a trial. I am always watching what I say, in case I let something slip again, so I say as little as possible. She in turn sits silent and still, watching me.

At last she has gone. A particularly difficult visit tonight; long minutes of no conversation. I open my box to look at my past.

I must have fallen asleep. It is dark in the room when I awaken and I sense a presence. 'Marek?' I murmur. There is no response. I sigh and close my eyes.

'Was Marek your husband?' Hannah's voice comes from the other side of the room. My heart thumps in shock and I speak without thinking. 'Yes,' I whisper.

'And Tomasz? Your son?'

'Yes.'

She crosses the room, kneels down beside me. 'Why did you never tell me about them?'

I cannot see her face and this, in a strange way, makes it easier to speak. 'Too painful.'

Her hand is on mine; it is cool. What is it they say here in Scotland? Cold hands, warm heart. I wonder. She is holding on tight. 'Tell me, please. Is it something to do with the war?'

I nod, forgetting she can't see me. She waits, saying nothing. I don't know where to begin; there is so much to say.

'Do you remember when you were a little girl, how you always liked to ask me questions about Poland?' My voice is creaky as if I haven't used it for a long time. I don't wait for her to answer but carry on. 'I know it frustrated you

when I said so little but I had good reasons for not saying anything. I wanted to forget what had happened to me. Yes, Marek was my husband. He was a communist, a good man. We married in 1938 when I was only eighteen.'

'So young?'

'Yes. Everyone says it I know, but we were very much in love, couldn't wait to bed each other. Marek and I were very happy. But of course, it couldn't last. In 1939, the Germans invaded Poland and Marek joined the resistance. I stayed at home, carried on training as a nurse. Marek and I met as often as we could but it was dangerous. We had a little boy, Tomasz. He was born in 1940.'

Hannah sighs, 'My half brother. I always wanted a brother or a sister, you know.' Her voice is full of yearning.

I ignore her. Now I have started I have no wish to digress. I speak with little emotion, try to think of this as someone else's story. 'Tomasz was a very difficult baby. He was always crying, difficult to feed. I became pregnant again and had another little boy, Piotrek, in 1943.'

'Piotrek, that's what you used to call Sam. Did he look like Sam then?'

I rub my forehead to try to ease the ache that has started there; I wish she would just listen. Surely she must realise how hard this is for me. 'Please, Hannah, don't interrupt. Let me say what I have to say.' Her grip lessens a little and I continue. 'Marek was wounded, a bullet to the knee. He could no longer fight in the resistance. We stayed on in Krakow but we were nervous, terrified we might be caught. People were denouncing each other to the Nazis; you couldn't trust anyone. Tomasz screamed all the time and our neighbours complained. They were suspicious of Marek's limp. We thought they might tell the authorities and so we fled to the countryside, to a hamlet near Warsaw.

Marek's sister, Kasia, lived in a farmhouse there and she and her husband agreed to hide us.' I pause, not wanting to go on but I have to. I get up from my chair. Hannah remains on the floor, just a shape. Her features are indistinguishable in the poor light. I can sense her watching me as I walk over to the bedside table.

'Can I get you anything?' she asks.

'It's fine. I just need a tissue.' I take one from the box and sit down again. 'There was a cellar under the farmhouse,' I say. 'A small room, damp and with light only from one, tiny window. This was where the four of us lived. It was horrible. No toilet, no place to wash, nowhere for the children to play. Tomasz was very difficult. I think he was probably autistic. Many years later a doctor told me that but at the time we didn't know about autism. We had a little boy who looked normal but who couldn't speak, who screamed if you tried to play with him.' As I say this, I think I can see Tomasz in the half-light of the spring dusk, over in the far corner of the room, knocking down a tower of bricks. Perhaps if I close my eyes, he will be clearer-

'Mum, are you all right?' Hannah is shaking me. The light is on. I blink in the harsh yellow glare.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I can't do this. Can you leave now?'

Hannah shakes her head. 'I'm not leaving until you finish.'

For several minutes we sit in silence. She means what she says; I can feel her determination so, resigned, I get up and switch off the light. 'I can only do this in the dark.'

'That's fine.' Her voice is gentler. Perhaps she is beginning to realise how painful this is for me.

‘We had a hiding place, a tiny hole behind a false wall in the cellar. One day the Germans came and we hid there, Marek, Tomasz and me. Piotr was upstairs with Kasia and her husband. When we went into the hole, Tomasz was asleep.’ I stop; my voice is shaking so much I can barely speak. ‘But the Germans made so much noise in their search that it woke him up. I was terrified he would scream and I put my hand over his mouth. He kicked out, made a scuffling noise and the Germans heard. They were suspicious but Kasia’s husband persuaded them it was rats. Tomasz was squirming, he could have kicked out any moment and we would have been discovered so I lay on top of him, held him as tight as I could to keep him still and quiet.’ The palms of my hands are damp with sweat and I wipe them on my skirt. This is harder than I thought it would be. My mouth is dry and I moisten my lips. ‘When the Germans left, I found I had killed Tomasz.’

‘Dear God.’ Hannah’s head is in her hands. I think she has recoiled from me. I don’t blame her. I get up and walk over to the cupboard where I keep some drink. I pour some whisky into a glass and gulp it down. ‘Say something,’ I beg her.

Hannah’s voice is surprisingly calm. ‘What happened then?’

‘We buried him in the woods that evening. A few weeks later we were arrested. A farmer had betrayed us. God knows why. Kasia was killed almost immediately. Shot. She kept begging the Nazis to let her go. Her pleas annoyed them I think. The rest of us were transported to Auschwitz.’

A gasp, ‘The scar on your arm, of course. But you said it was a burn.’

‘It was easier that way. When I met Jack, I begged him to arrange for the tattoo to be removed. He paid for an operation. I wanted never to have to explain the number. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about what had happened to me.’

‘Yes, I can see that.’ Hannah’s voice is thick as if she has a cold. ‘Don’t say any more unless you want to.’

I nod, grateful. I am worn out. ‘I can’t say any more now. I’ll tell you more tomorrow.’ I can sense her disappointment but I am exhausted. She gathers her things together to leave, stopping at the door to ask whether I am all right. I manage to reassure her, keeping my voice steady for I am now desperate for her to go. She closes the door quietly and I am alone once more.

But not for long. The shadows close in on me and I can see her, my friend Anna, who saved me from myself.

Chapter Seven

Poland, 1944

A writhing mass surrounded Anna; she was hemmed in on every side. The long line of men, women and children, mostly Jewish, all clutching suitcases with their names painted in bold letters on the side, surged as one towards the train. Many of them moved like sleepwalkers, unaware of what was happening but some had faces set in grim lines, lips pursed tight together. Anna swore as someone behind her banged his case into her thigh. Swinging round to protest, her glare turned to a smile when she saw he was a child, maybe eight years old, his suitcase almost as big as him. He stuck his tongue out at her and she laughed, held out a hand to help him but he shrugged her off. Her own luggage was minimal, a small handbag; it was all she'd had with her when she'd been picked up on the street the night before. She'd lingered too long at a shrine of flowers, laid where some civilians had been executed. When the trucks had trundled to a halt and the soldiers started to round them up, she surrendered with a sense of inevitability. For months she'd thought it would come to this. Now, as she was carried along in the crowd, she cursed herself for not having tried to escape, thought of making a run for it but there was no point; soldiers were everywhere, all too ready to shoot.

Anna was one of the last to be herded in. Every truck was the same: a wooden cattle wagon, crammed with people. As she clambered in, she saw a notice on one of the walls: this wagon accommodates 12 horses or 24 cows. There were at least seventy people crammed into the wagon. The lucky ones had

their backs against a wall. Thank God there was enough space for them to sit. She'd seen one packed so full there was barely room to stand.

Anna pushed her way to a small space in the centre, murmuring excuse me, pardon, I'm so sorry. No one acknowledged her; they were too busy trying to sort out where to sit. The air was dense with a bewildering combination of smells: body odour, perfume, garlic, urine. Her stomach tightened in protest; she felt sick. It was almost twenty hours since she'd last eaten: a bowl of foul tasting soup that she had been given in her cell yesterday evening.

She jumped, startled, as the doors were slammed shut leaving the wagon in semi darkness. The only light came from a small window over to the right of Anna and through gaps in the uneven boards. It took her a minute to focus so that she could see around her. A baby's cry cut through the air. Anna watched as its mother tried to soothe it, offering it an empty sac of a breast. It sucked for a moment then spat out the nipple and continued to wail. Poor thing. Anna put her handbag down and sat on top of it. In the poor light it was impossible to see what was beneath the straw on the floor. She hoped there was nothing too unpleasant. As the train started to move she leaned forward and put her head in her hands, desperate for some rest.

A little sunlight crept in through the window. From time to time it was possible to make out the scenery; even so, no one knew where the train was going. Rumours insinuated their way round the group: they'll kill us all, no, we're going to Germany, to work, a labour camp. Anna didn't listen. A woman had taken pity on her and offered her some food. It was as well she did, for the Germans had given them nothing. Not even water. Anna took only a small piece of cheese, not

wanting to deprive the woman's children of their share. She was light headed with hunger but what else could she do? She chewed the cheese slowly trying to make it last. When she finished, she smiled her thanks at the woman and closed her eyes hoping for some rest. She'd not slept well for some weeks. But exhausted as she was, she couldn't sleep here; her legs were cramped and pains shot through her back. She'd never known such discomfort, such filth.

There was a bucket in the corner of the wagon; someone had put up a sheet to cordon it off, give a little privacy. There was no hiding what it was, though. One poor man had diarrhoea. He apologised profusely for this but he would have been as well not to bother. No one wanted to know. It had only taken a few more people to use it before the contents spilled over onto the floor. The whole wagon stank of shit and piss.

Some hours later, she saw a space near the door and squeezed her way over. There wasn't enough room to sit but there was a slight breeze coming in through the splintered planks. She breathed in the fresh air with greedy gulps. At least she wouldn't suffocate. The swaying of the train was soporific but the moans of the old people and the cries of the children kept her from sleeping. At her feet was an old woman. She had sunk to the ground some time ago and was hunched up using Anna's legs as support. The woman's knobbly spine pressed into Anna's shin and she longed to shake her off but she looked like her grandmother; fine white hair pinned up in a French roll and wearing a long black skirt. All of the woman's clothes were black. Maybe she was in mourning. She looked unhappy enough. Anna wriggled her toes to stop them getting cramp. Something wasn't right. For a moment they were pleasantly warm. But then she felt something wet

seep into her skin. Damn! The old woman had peed on her. Anna's heart beat faster and she dug her nails into the palms of her hands as she made fists of them. She wanted to hit the woman, tear at her hair. She pulled her feet away, watching how the old woman jerked as she removed the support. Anna glared down at her but she didn't look up. Too embarrassed to meet her eyes, no doubt. And then she saw it; the single tear caught in a deep wrinkle on her cheek. Anna's fists unclenched and she made herself take a deep breath. What was she turning into?

In spite of her discomfort, she must have drifted off. She opened her eyes to near darkness. Around her, most people seemed to be sleeping. There was a gap in the boards beside her and she picked at the wood with her fingernails. It was rotten and she managed to enlarge the hole to several centimetres so she could see out. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of a lamplit window in the distance. There were very few of these sightings; they must be well into the country. Anna peered into the twilight wondering who sat in front of the fires in these homes. What did they eat? Did children play outside? Did they know of the mass arrests? Did they care? She blinked back tears as she thought of her own home and family, unseen and unheard of for several months. But there was no point in crying; she'd be better saving her energy for more urgent things. Her bladder was full although she'd had nothing to drink for the best part of a day. Within minutes she could think of nothing else; crossed and uncrossed her legs in a desperate attempt at control. She would have to use the bucket. It was shameful. She whispered into the semi darkness, 'Does anyone know – is anyone using the bucket?' There was no reply. For a moment she panicked. What had happened to everyone? The old woman who had wet herself was slumped, unmoving, her

mouth gaping open showing blackened teeth. Anna prodded her with a foot and she groaned. At least she was alive. Anna calmed herself. Probably people were too frightened to say anything, too fearful of what was to come. She tried not to think of her bladder. Something would come up.

The train was stopping, groaning to a standstill. Those who had been lulled into sleep by its movement woke grumbling. A child started to cry. For some minutes nothing happened. An undertone of mutterings and then a woman started to scream – they're going to shoot us. Over and over, each time her voice higher and more hysterical. It was infectious and within seconds some of the other women were also wailing. There was keening from all sides, mingling with the drone of despairing prayers. Anna wished she had someone with her, someone to comfort her. Beside her, a middle-aged man whispered 'mama'. She touched his shoulder and he grabbed her hand. A rifle shot sounded outside the truck and this increased the panic. Anna held her breath; so this was to be her fate, death in the countryside on a beautiful April evening. The doors were hauled open and a soldier shouted orders through a megaphone.

'All of you, out. Now.'

Anna, near the doorway, was one of the first to stumble out, her body tight with terror waiting for the rifle fire. A group of twenty or so soldiers was standing side by side with guns pointed at the prisoners. They were as young as she was, some even younger. One, a boy of about eighteen, told them they could relieve themselves. 'We know how many of you there are. If anyone is missing, we will shoot you all.'

Heart thumping with relief, Anna moved to one side, to avoid the surge of prisoners behind her. Her legs were weak from fear and hunger; she could barely hold herself upright. She swung her arms, feeling the wind caress her. It was so fresh and sweet outside, the air tinged with the scent of spring blossom, meadowsweet. The western sky was a deep jade with pale pink and gold streaks merging into the darkness. She watched it for a few seconds before looking round for a place to pee. There were some bushes nearby and along with some others she made towards them but the soldiers blocked their way, refusing to listen to pleas from the women for privacy.

‘Please don’t look,’ said one woman. ‘What if it were your mothers standing here?’

She should have known better. One of the soldiers hit her with the butt of his rifle and laughed as she fell to the ground, blood streaming down her face. ‘Anyone else want to complain?’ he shouted. ‘No? Well get on with it then. Fucking whores.’ He spat on the ground, the spittle landing on the ground beside the woman’s face.

Anna closed her mind against the eyes that watched her. She lifted her skirt and pulled down her underpants to her knees before squatting to pee. The stream of urine gushed out of her, a torrent. It went on and on, steam rising into the cool evening air.

One of the soldiers pointed her out to the others. ‘That cunt there. She pisses like a cow.’ The men laughed, made rude jokes, vying with each other to see who could be the coarsest like small boys in a playground, then one said, ‘Quite a pretty cow though.’ He strolled towards her, his right hand rubbing the front of his trousers. Petrified, Anna couldn’t take her eyes off him.

‘Like what you see, do you? Want to see more?’ He was right in front of her, his groin almost in her face. There was a stain on his trousers. Blood? Anna’s tongue felt as if it had swollen to twice its size. It was blocking her throat. She tried to swallow, couldn’t breathe. Her bowels... oh dear God, don’t let her shit herself. She squeezed her buttocks together, praying her sphincter would hold. Eyes fixed on her he unbuttoned his flies and exposed himself. The other soldiers had come closer and were cheering him on. Behind them she saw the other prisoners watching. None of them made eye contact. A woman crossed herself.

‘Go on, stick it up her arse ... no, get her to suck it ...’ The taunts were coming from all sides. Everything was focused on her. He had his cock in his hand. Running his fingers over it, a mottled piece of meat. She could smell it, taste it almost, a rancid mixture of sweat, piss and semen.

‘Open your mouth, cunt.’

She closed her eyes. The cries of the children and shouts of the soldiers faded into the background and she heard nothing save the song of a blackbird in a nearby tree. Anna gave it all her concentration, tried to transpose the notes into sol-fa. It was familiar, the beginning of the rondo from Beethoven’s Violin Concerto. She almost had it when her head was yanked back as the soldier pulled at her hair. She felt his rough hand on her face, smoky, garlic-tainted fingers pushing through her lips, trying to open her mouth. Bile rose in her gullet and she swallowed hard to keep it down. She struggled to focus on the blackbird’s song but it was gone, displaced by the jeers of the soldiers. Then, as she thought she would have to submit, there was a sudden commotion from the edge of the group; a shout followed by a shot. The soldier pushed her aside and Anna fell to

the ground, covering her face with her hands. She didn't want to look. All around she could hear whispers, muffled sobs and the outraged shouts of the soldiers. She took her hands away to risk a look at the scene; the soldier was gone, the prisoners were being rounded up. Anna scrambled to her feet, pulling up her underpants, brushing down her skirt and ran to join them. She had no idea what had happened and didn't want to ask. None of the prisoners looked at her or spoke to her. She was more alone than ever. People were speaking in low voices. Anna listened carefully and picked up that a man had tried to escape and had been shot. She heard a woman say, 'He thought he'd get away. All the soldiers were looking at the girl. God help him.'

Anna wondered if he'd had family with him. She hoped not. It was irrational but she felt his death was her fault and they would blame her. The mutterings and sidelong looks continued until there was a roar, 'Quiet. Or I'll shoot the lot of you.'

The soldiers were on edge, their faces shiny with sweat. Anything was setting them off; a child calling out for its mother triggered a frenzy of beating in one soldier who kicked and punched at the person nearest him, a young woman with a child in her arms. 'Shut the fuck up,' he yelled as his heavy-booted foot made contact with her belly. She collapsed to the ground clasping her child and lay, silent, unmoving, tears running down her face. The child, a little boy, was barely more than a baby. He started to howl and a man picked him up to soothe him. The child nuzzled into his neck and was quiet. No one moved. The soldier glared round at them all before shouting - get a move on, you morons. Another soldier, he looked fifteen, offered the woman his flask of water but she turned her face to the earth. Anna longed for that drink; as they all must do. You could feel the

desperation in the air. No one looked at anyone else; to do so would confirm their wretchedness. They kept their heads lowered. Shrugging, the soldier drank some of the water, 'Suit yourself, bitch,' he muttered before pouring the rest on the ground. It was all Anna could do not to dive down and suck the blades of grass.

The soldiers continued to count them back into their wagon. Along the length of the train it was the same story; prisoners ushered into misery. There must be ten or twelve trucks thought Anna, maybe as many as eight hundred prisoners. All going God knows where. An argument started. One of the soldiers was sure there was another prisoner missing, apart from the one who had been shot. He shouted at the others, 'I'm telling you. There were sixty eight prisoners and now there's only sixty six.' For several minutes they debated whether to bother with a recount until one of them remembered that an old man had died when they were loading the truck. He'd been left behind in Warsaw. Anna let herself breathe again but she hadn't reckoned on the soldiers, bored, frustrated, worked up by the shooting. They were looking for blood.

'I swear if I hear another brat cry, I'll fucking kill someone,' said one. He fingered the trigger of his rifle.

'Sadist,' muttered a young boy near Anna. One of the soldiers heard him and hauled him out of the line, grabbing him by the hair. The boy yelped and the soldier cursed him as he unbuckled his belt, his eyes sweeping the crowd, challenging. It was the same soldier who had attacked Anna. She pushed back into the crowd, who melted away at her approach, and stood behind an old man. If only she were invisible or at least not so tall. She bent her knees trying to make herself smaller. Her eyes were lowered, as she didn't want to take the risk of catching the soldier's eye, but when she heard the boy's cry she had to look. The

soldier was using the belt to whip him. It was a frenzied beating; the soldier's face gnarled with fury and frustration. Anna couldn't help thinking the frustration was sexual, and again she felt that futile sense of guilt. The beating went on and on and Anna thought they were going to see this young boy die in front of them. If she were brave she'd push herself to the front as a diversion. But she knew she was a coward like everyone else. The secret of survival was not to draw attention to yourself. Just as she thought the boy could surely bear no more, a languid voice spoke up.

'Leave the kid alone, sergeant. You always take it too far.'

Everyone's head turned to see who had spoken. He pushed his way to the front and took the belt from his colleague. 'Put this round your waist where it belongs. We don't want your trousers to fall down. I think we've all seen enough of your prick today.'

There was an uneasy silence. An ugly flush swept over the sergeant's face as he took the belt and fastened it. One or two sniggers from the group of soldiers. The prisoners kept quiet, unsure of what was happening. The second soldier stood in front of them.

'Get into the train.' His eyes were cold as he looked them over. 'Faster!' The prisoners continued their reluctant shuffle. He turned away.

Anna sighed in relief. Too soon. She'd thought her assailant had gone but he was approaching her, his fists clenched. The prisoners made way for him and within seconds he was in front of her. He punched her in the face, hissing, 'Don't think you've escaped. I'll get you. You wait and see.' Anna reeled from the blow but managed to keep her balance. She thought he was going to hit her again but

he pulled back and walked away leaving her to the pitying looks of the others. Her legs trembled as she climbed into the carriage.

The train started to move. Anna had lost her place at the wall. She sat on the floor in the middle of the carriage. No one was nearer than a yard away. It was as if she had an invisible shield around her. The other prisoners avoided her gaze. Some of them were peasants; maybe they thought she had the evil eye. It was laughable. Anna crouched in her space as the train lumbered on through the night. Around her, people dozed off only to be woken by the moans and cries of those who could not sleep.

At last the journey was over. The train stopped. Someone near the window peered out and read the name of the station - Auschwitz. The doors of the trucks were thrown open and the prisoners lurched out of the train into a night made harsh by floodlights. Voices yelled instructions – get out, move yourselves, as quick as you can. There were soldiers everywhere and some men and women in striped clothing. They separated the men from the women and children. Sobs and cries rose into the air as families parted and said goodbye. The soldiers mingled with the crowds to reassure everyone that they would see each other soon. Anna didn't see where the men were taken. The women were forced into lines five abreast and marched past a man who looked important. He was immaculately dressed, his uniform that of an officer. He gave each person a quick glance before indicating a line of people on either the left or the right of him. In front of Anna, a woman who had been told to go left begged for her teenage daughter to be allowed to come with her. The man laughed, 'If that is what you want; your wish is my command,' and the girl and her mother were

reunited. Anna watched as they hugged one another and called thank you to the officer. He smiled in return, a tight smirk. It chilled Anna and when it came to her turn, she followed his instruction without a word and went to the right. She was so tired she would do anything she was told. The line of women moved forward. There were no small children she noticed. They'd all been sent to the left with their mothers. In a few moments she was in a large room, like a barracks. A man in a striped uniform ordered them to remove all their clothes. One elderly woman protested and she was beaten with a stick. She lay on the floor, unconscious, as the other women undressed. It was so shameful thought Anna, to be naked in front of a man. Like many of the others she tried to cover her breasts and private parts with her arms, hunching her body. When they were all naked they were ushered into a room for 'disinfecting' and sprayed with hoses. Screams echoed round the tiled room as the cold jets of water hit them. They were given nothing to dry themselves with and stood shivering as they waited for the next torture.

After a few minutes they were pushed into another room. Several men in striped suits awaited them. Some had scissors, some razors. The women shuffled forward to take their turn. Their hair was cut off and what remained was shaved. Not only their heads but their crotches and under their arms too. Anna blinked back tears as she watched her dark plaits being swept into a pile with mounds of hair of all colours. With insistent efficiency they were marched through these successive rooms. In the final one they were thrown some clothes and shoes to put on. Anna looked in disbelief at the dress she had been given. It was far too big for her. She was about to say something when she heard someone else protest

and immediately get beaten. Her face set in a grim smile, she put on the dress and squeezed her feet into shoes that were a size too small.

Anna had never seen anything like this huge hut. Were they expected to sleep here? It was difficult to breathe; the air was thick with the stench of urine and excrement. Her feet slipped on the soggy ground and she dreaded to think what she was treading on. The beds were wooden tiers, three high with at least two women on each level. There was a layer of covered straw, which presumably served as a mattress. The blankets were thin. Nothing very clean, but there was no point in complaining. They were given some greasy, rancid tasting soup, told to undress and get into bed. No one made eye contact and no one spoke as they obeyed the stark commands. Anna climbed up to the top where someone lay unmoving, rigid. She crawled in beside her and within minutes, fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

As dawn broke, she awoke to the sound of sobbing. She sat up, bewildered, no idea where she was. It came back to her as she took in the scene of the huge hut, filled with pallets, each of them containing at least two bodies. The sobbing was coming from her bedmate. Now there was a little light, she saw it was the young woman who had been beaten so badly on the journey. She had thrown off her blanket so that she was exposed. The lower part of her body was covered in blood. Immediately Anna knew what it was; she'd seen it once before when it happened to her mother. Poor mama, she'd been horrified at Anna witnessing such a thing. Thank God she hadn't seen what the soldier did. Anna put a hand on the woman's shoulder. It was shrugged off.

‘Leave me alone. I deserve it.’

Anna looked round the barracks. None of the other prisoners was awake.

‘You don’t deserve this. No one does.’

The woman was feverish, her eyes unfocused and bloodshot. She stared past Anna into the room. ‘Piotr, where’s my Piotrek? What have they done with him?’

She must mean the child. Anna took the woman’s hand and stroked it. It was extremely thin; the bones of her knuckles shining like ivory beneath her skin. A wedding ring hung loosely on her third finger. Anna was amazed she’d managed to hang on to it. She’d lost her only piece of jewellery, a gold bracelet, before the journey began. It had been taken from her at the jail in Warsaw, Pawiak, when she was arrested.

Anna had no idea where the child was. All the children she’d seen had been with their mothers. ‘He’s safe with his father. I saw them together. They were laughing.’ It was a lie but she couldn’t think what else to say.

The woman’s eyes focused and she clutched at Anna. ‘Dear God, the pain.’ Her fingers were digging into Anna’s arm. They were very strong for one so thin and ill looking.

‘Let me go for help,’ Anna whispered.

‘No, stay with me.’ Her fingers were iron bindings round Anna’s arm. Anna prised them away with some difficulty. She had to get help for the woman. She was bleeding profusely; Anna could smell the blood, coppery.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Ewa.’

‘Ewa, listen to me. You could bleed to death. I think you’re

haemorrhaging. I don't know what to do, I must get help.' Anna shuddered as Ewa, convulsed with pain, tightened her grip. She looked down at the bloody mess on the bunk. In between Ewa's legs was what looked like a large clot, a foetus of perhaps three or four months gestation. Ewa followed her gaze.

'You see. It's over. I'll be fine.' She turned her head away in the same gesture she'd used on the train. Her grip had loosened and Anna lowered herself down from the bunk, not knowing what to do. She gasped as a hand clutched her ankle and a low voice said, 'Stay where you are.'

'I can't. My friend, she needs help.'

A face appeared. Blunt featured, wary. 'What's wrong with your friend?'

'A miscarriage. She needs a doctor.'

The face looked at her, eyebrows raised. 'If she goes to the hospital, it's a death sentence. We can deal with it here.'

Anna started to argue. Ewa would surely die without help. But within a minute it was taken out of her hands. Another woman in a striped uniform appeared and took charge. A few minutes later, Ewa was hustled off to the infirmary. Anna watched as she was taken out, huddled in a blanket. She turned to the woman who had argued with her.

'What did you mean by a death sentence?'

The face was blank. 'Nothing,' she said and walked off. She returned a moment later and added, in a voice so quiet Anna wasn't sure she'd heard right.

'Better you don't know.'

Sinister words; Anna shivered. She pulled on her dress and waited to be told what to do.

Chapter Eight

Hannah stumbles down the stairs, not watching where she is going. She trips on the final step and almost falls. She wrenches her wrist as she grabs hold of the banister to steady herself. Matron is lurking in the hall and comes over but it's not to see whether she's all right..

‘Doctor, do you have a moment? I’d like to speak to you about the furniture in your mother’s room.’

Hannah glares at her. ‘Not now.’

‘When would be suitable then?’

Hannah stares at her, wondering what would happen if she hit the woman’s fat, smug face. It’s not an option though.

‘I’ll let you know,’ she says and pushes past Matron to the front door. She wants to tell her to fuck off but knows she’d regret it later. Once in the car she leans back against the headrest and closes her eyes.

She’s home without realising it. Her car is in the driveway; the engine is off. How long has she been sitting here for? She tries to remember something about the journey, anything. All that comes to mind is her mother’s words - I lay on top of him, held him as tight as I could to keep him still and quiet – they rattle round her brain. She can’t let herself think about it. Drink, she needs something strong to take the words away but she can’t move. Get into the house where it’s safe. She takes a deep breath and frees herself from her car. Where are her house keys? Why are they never where she thinks they are? She sits on the doorstep, not noticing her next door neighbour who has just got out of her own car.

‘Are you all right, Hannah?’

‘What? Oh, yes fine.’ She empties her handbag onto her lap.

‘Looking for a screwdriver are you?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You know, for all those loose screws?’

Hannah forces a smile. She can’t stand the woman but you have to get on with your neighbours. So Jim says. She’d be happy never to speak to Pamela again. Thank God, she’s found her keys. She waves them at Pamela, ‘Got them! Must dash, Jim’ll be home any moment looking for his dinner.’ Hannah opens the door and goes inside, feeling she’s escaped. Another second and she would have had to listen to Pamela’s views on education (she wouldn’t send her dog to a state school), asylum seekers (scroungers every one of them) and mental health (no such thing as depression, they should be told to snap out of it). Pamela makes Thatcher look like Mother Teresa. Hannah has promised herself that one day she will argue back, but not tonight.

Without stopping to take off her coat, she goes straight to the drinks cupboard and grabs the first bottle she finds. She pours herself a large Bowmore. Usually she savours malt whisky, takes time to smell the peaty, smoky aroma that always reminds her of the holiday on Islay where she first tasted it. But not tonight, tonight she drinks it down in one, gasping as the fire hits her throat. It does the trick, the words stop. She can breathe again. Now she has to keep busy to stop them coming back. She takes off her coat, runs upstairs to their bedroom. She’ll change the bed linen, clean the spotless bathroom, Hoover the stairs.

An hour later, the housework is finished but Jim isn't home. Where is he, when she needs him? Hannah pours herself another whisky, changes her mind, throws it down the sink without touching it. She needs to stay sober.

Even though she isn't hungry, Hannah decides to prepare the evening meal. There are two steaks in the fridge and some salad. She puts the salad together, places the meat on a plate where it sits in a bloody pool ready to be grilled when Jim finally comes in.

At last she hears his car roar into the driveway; the exhaust needs fixing. She runs to meet him at the door, something she never does. The change in routine alarms him.

‘What is it? The boys, are they all right?’

‘Yes, they’re fine. Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for hours.’

‘Accident on the M8.’ He accepts the whisky she has poured for him, peers into her face, ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Not really. Sit down, I’ve something to tell you.’

Hannah recites her mother’s story, her voice flat, lifeless. She tries not to think about what she’s saying. Her voice drones on; she hates the sound it makes but the silence when she comes to the end is worse.

‘Say something,’ she pleads.

Jim shakes his head, ‘I can’t believe it. She’s always so gentle.’

‘It was an accident, Jim, a terrible accident.’

‘Yes, of course.’ He looks confused, ten years older, runs his fingers through his hair, making it stand up on end. ‘But what happened to Marek and her other son?’

‘I don’t know. We got as far as them being captured and she couldn’t go on.’ Hannah’s eyes fill up. ‘I suppose they must have died there.’

Jim nods, saying nothing. The room is very quiet. Hannah hears herself breathing; it is fast, uneven, as if she has been running. The shrill ring of the telephone breaks into the silence, making them both jump. They stare at it until it stops. A moment later it starts again. Hannah moves to answer it.

‘Leave it,’ says Jim, ‘if it’s important they’ll leave a message.’

‘It must be important if they’ve rung again immediately.’ She’s almost there when it stops ringing. For a moment she stands with her hand on the receiver, unsure of what to do but she can’t face talking to anyone else. Not yet.

‘I’ll make supper,’ she says.

They eat their meal in silence. Hannah leaves most of hers untouched while Jim, normally able to eat anything, pushes his meat round the plate.

‘It’s overcooked isn’t it?’

‘It’s fine. I’m not hungry. Do you want anything else?’

Hannah shakes her head, ‘Nothing, thanks.’ The unanswered phone is niggling at her; what if it was something urgent? I’ll check who phoned.’ She goes through to the sitting room.

The uneven dialling tone tells her there’s a message. She dials 1571. Sam’s voice is terse, *can you phone me, Mum, as soon as.*

Her hand shakes; she was right, something’s wrong. She shouts to Jim to come through, replays the message.

‘Better phone him. Put it on speaker phone so’s I can hear.’

Sam picks up the phone at once. He must have been waiting for her call. Her mouth is dry with nerves, please God, let everything be ok. She manages a

croaky, 'Sam? It's me, is everything all right?'

'It's Gabriella.'

She can't breathe, can't speak. Has to sit down before she falls down.

Sam sighs, 'The health visitor was round today. She didn't seem happy with Gabriella's progress.'

Not as bad as she'd feared but bad enough. It's time to face up to what she's been worrying about for months. 'What did she say?'

'I don't really know,' he lowers his voice. 'Celia's really upset. I can't get a proper account of what went on.' He pauses, 'I don't suppose you could come round, have a chat with her. She needs some reassurance.'

'Yes, of course. We'll be over in twenty minutes.' She puts the phone down. What on earth will she say to them? To Jim?

Jim goes to pour himself a drink. 'Dear God, I thought Gabriella – I thought something terrible had happened. Do you really need to go over because a silly health visitor has put the wind up Celia? There's nothing wrong with Gabriella.'

'I'm not so sure.'

He puts the bottle down, 'What do you mean?'

Hannah kneads at the creases in her forehead; she feels twenty years older than she did this morning. All their lives will be changed by what she has to say about Gabriella and although it's unreasonable, she feels she's to blame. She can't look at Jim as she speaks. Instead she picks at a thread on the sofa, pulls at it until it threatens to unravel. 'I can't be sure, but I think she may be autistic.'

He shakes his head. 'No, she's not. She can't be.'

Hannah looks up. His eyes are bright. In over thirty years she has never

once seen him cry. 'Jim, why would I say it, if I didn't think it was a possibility?'

He doesn't answer.

'Jim, speak to me.' Hannah is immeasurably weary. Her eyes feel as if they are being pulled shut; she'd give anything to wipe out today, to drink more whisky and sleep where she sits. Jim looks as if he's going through all the stages of grief in quick succession: the shock, the disbelief and yes, here it comes, the anger.

'Why the hell didn't you say something before this?'

'I don't know.' And she doesn't. Or does she? If she were to be completely truthful, she wanted someone else to take the responsibility. There was also the fatuous belief that by not voicing it, it was less real. Hannah has always been scornful of people who ignore signs of illness: women with lumps the size of grapes in their breast, who pretend they didn't feel them, men with chest pains who tell themselves it's indigestion. Well, you're never too old to learn. Here she is, a couple of years short of sixty, professional, well-educated, confident and only now beginning to understand why people don't always want to rush into knowing the worst. She tries to say some of this to Jim but he's not listening. He's raving on about Gabriella: how she smiles and laughs, how she walked at only ten months, how she sat at six months, how bright she is, what beautiful curls she has.

She lets him have his say, before quietly asking: 'When was the last time you heard her say anything?'

'I don't know, a couple of months ago, maybe. But that means nothing, I mean she could be talking all the time when we're not there.'

'Have you ever seen her pointing at anything?'

‘What?’

Hannah repeats the question, adding, ‘Have you managed to get her to attend to something you want her to look at?’

‘I don’t know what you’re getting at.’

‘Joint attention, the ability to share attention, to look at something you’re looking at, show awareness of another’s being. The lack of this is an early indicator of autism.’

‘I’ve often seen her pay attention to things.’

‘Yes, to details of objects. She’ll look at toys for hours, that mobile that hangs from the ceiling above her cot, but try to get her to look at a book with you, and she squirms away.’

She’s getting through to him. His silence tells her this. Hannah swallows before asking him to run her over to Sam and Celia’s. He gets up from his chair without looking at her. Hannah follows him out to the garage.

It’s a twenty-minute drive to where Sam lives in Eaglesham, a village on the outskirts of the city. For the first five minutes, Jim says nothing. Hannah looks out of the window at the rows of terraced houses, built from sandstone. Good, solid houses; they’d lived in one when the children were small, before their presence demanded a bigger garden where they could burn off some energy. They’d been happy there, perhaps they should sell up and downsize. Their present house was far too big for them. They’d probably live there until they died though, never moving because it was such an effort –

‘Tell me again why you think there’s something wrong.’ Jim’s tense voice interrupts her reverie.

Her voice is flat as she repeats her fears. Jim's hands tighten round the steering wheel; she's beginning to convince him.

'And nothing can be done about it?'

'There's no cure, if that's what you mean.'

'But, there must be something ...' His voice trails off.

Hannah doesn't feel up to making the usual positive noises that she does with all the parents of children she's diagnosed. She has to save her energy for the difficult evening ahead. She glances at her watch: nine thirty. No wonder she's tired. She should have told Sam she'd see him tomorrow. 'There's no cure,' she repeats.

Sam answers the door; his face, normally so cheerful, is tense. He shows them into the living room. It's been done up since they were last there a couple of months ago. It looks unlived in, like something out of a magazine. They've removed the original fireplace and re-plastered the wall, leaving only an opening for one of those modern living flame fires that have pebbles instead of fake coals. The walls are white, bare except for an unframed canvas above the fire. It's painted a different shade of white and has grains of sand scattered across the lower right hand corner; Hannah saw something like it in their local art gallery, it cost well over a thousand pounds. The only ornament is a large brown vase with twigs spiralling out of it. Hannah sits down on one of the sofas, feeling the chill from the leather on the backs of her thighs despite her trousers. You'd never guess they had a child: no toys, no bib crumpled up in a corner, no piles of clothes waiting to be ironed.

Celia is curled up on the other sofa, reading a book. She doesn't look in the least distraught. Sam's been projecting his own feelings on to his wife. 'I don't know why Sam got you to come over,' she says, laying her book down. 'Can I get you a drink?'

'Not for me,' Jim and Hannah speak simultaneously.

Hannah rarely feels at ease with her daughter-in-law. Celia, with her blonde highlighted hair, tanned and toned body, perfect features, makes her feel old and dowdy. They have nothing in common. Celia works as a beautician and is always trying to give Hannah advice on skin care. The first time they met, she asked Hannah what cleanser she used and on being told soap, lectured Hannah on its drying and ageing effects. It did not get them off to a good start.

'You look tired, mum,' she says now.

'I wish you'd call me Hannah,' she speaks without thinking.

'Whatever,' Celia shrugs.

Silence. Celia fiddles with her book. Its lime green cover and illustration of a cartoon-like fashion model scream chick lit. Hannah can't imagine what Celia gets from them other than pointers on the latest fashion accessories to buy. Hannah had read one, felt obliged to, as Celia had given it to her as a birthday present, and had been dismayed by the way it belittled women's lives. Were young women really as self-obsessed as this, distraught over a broken fingernail or a weight gain of two pounds? When Celia asked her what she thought of it, she tried to explain that she found it demeaning that the young woman in it could only define herself by her relationships with men or by what she bought. Celia shrugged and muttered something about it not being for old broilers anyway. She had a point.

Hannah breaks the silence; they've not driven across the city late at night to sit and do small talk. 'What did the health visitor say?'

'Lot of crap. She said Gabriella isn't developing normally. Something about her not pointing.'

'What do you think, mum?' asks Sam.

It's the question she has dreaded for weeks. May as well get it over with. 'I think she may be right. I ... I think she's showing some signs that she may have autism.'

Sam sinks down beside Celia, puts his head in his hands. Celia's face is expressionless. She gets up from the sofa, goes over to the fire where she holds out her hands to warm them. For a moment she doesn't speak then with her back still to them snaps, 'What do you know about it, anyway? You're not her mother. I know her best and she's fine.'

This is worse than she'd feared. Hannah's stomach twists with nerves despite Jim's comforting grasp of her hand, 'Celia, this is something I know a lot about.'

Celia turns round then, her mouth twisted, 'Tell us then.'

Sam looks up at the tone of her voice, shakes his head.

For the second time that evening, Hannah speaks of her fears for her granddaughter. She has little energy left; this is worse than any feedback meeting she has ever experienced. There are tears in her son's eyes; she longs to comfort him, to rub his back as she did when he was a toddler, but she fears that if she stops she'll break down. When she finally stops speaking she feels she has ruined her son's life, and that he will never forgive her. His head is bowed; he doesn't want anyone to see his tears. Celia is still standing in front of the fire, staring into

space, her face blank now, so blank that Hannah wonders if she has taken in any of what has been said. Jim's grasp on her hand tightens and he smiles the briefest of smiles, just enough for her to know he understands how she feels. If she could say any more she would but she is worn out. Too much, she tells herself, too much for one day. She needs her bed but knows she can't leave Sam and Celia until they tell her to go.

Celia picks up her book from the sofa, 'Don't know about you, but I need my bed. Goodnight, everyone.'

Sam doesn't look up as she leaves the room and a new fear comes to Hannah. They are a couple drifting apart and this will be the final wedge between them.

'What am I going to do?' asks Sam.

That he says I and not we, is further confirmation to Hannah that they are not as happy as they once were. This crisis is something to be faced together, not apart. Hannah decides to act as if Celia has not left the room.

'The first thing to do is to get Gabriella referred to the child development centre.' It's against all her principles but for Christ's sake this is her family. 'I'll speak to someone tomorrow and you'll get an appointment within a few days.'

'Can't you just do it?'

Hannah shakes her head, 'I'm too close. It needs an objective eye.'

'Yes, I suppose so.' Sam sounds unconvinced.

'What happens then?' asks Jim.

'Usual procedure. One of the community paediatricians will carry out a developmental assessment, then if they agree that autism is a possibility they'll refer you on to the CAT team.'

‘CAT?’

‘Community Autism Team. It’ll be one of the other consultants who sees you. Along with a speech and language therapist and an educational psychologist.’

Sam isn’t listening.

‘They’re very good, very professional. You’ll get an excellent assessment.’

He nods. It’s time to go, thinks Hannah. She mouths ‘home’ to Jim and stands up. ‘It’s almost midnight, Sam. If there’s anything you want to talk about, phone me.’

An hour later, she’s in bed, unable to sleep. She lies wide-awake; the day’s events won’t leave her alone. She can’t bear to think of her two half brothers, one killed by her mother, the other in Auschwitz. Her mind can’t take it in. Auschwitz. She knows little of Auschwitz, grainy images of skeletal men in striped uniforms come to mind from television programmes but she rarely watched them all the way through. Instead she’d switch to another programme rather than find out how inhuman people could be. All her life she’s avoided thinking too much about it. She’s good at avoiding. Two half brothers, how has her mother managed to keep this secret for so long, for sixty years? By a strange coincidence Sam’s second name is Thomas. Hannah thinks back to when he was born. Is it the benefit of hindsight or did her mother wince when she told her what she was calling her baby? Ewa had reacted strangely to all the children when they were young. She never liked to hold them for long. Hannah had thought her a cold and unloving grandmother at first, but she relaxed as they

grew up. Now she knew why. She must have been terrified of harming another child, frightened of loving someone else who might be taken away from her. Dear God, what her mother had endured. Two dead children. Hannah can't bear to think of it. Gabriella comes to mind. How will they all cope if she is autistic, will Celia manage? Will Sam? Of course they will; they love her dearly. They'll do their best for her, even if, as Hannah suspects, their own relationship isn't what it should be.

She turns onto her side, tries to find a cool spot on the pillow. Gabriella, Tomasz, Piotr, the names march through her mind vying for her attention. There's a link she isn't getting, something to do with concentration camps. What has Gabriella to do with concentration camps? Of course, Bettelheim. He was in a concentration camp, watched prisoners withdraw into a hopeless state. Made a giant leap into a stupid theory because of this. He thought the prisoners were like the autistic children he'd worked with and concluded that the children had also sunk into a state of despair because they had refrigerator mothers who rejected them.

Hannah thinks about Gabriella, of how loved she is, of all the children she has diagnosed as autistic. Only once has she seen anyone who could remotely be described as a refrigerator mother and she suspects that woman was herself on the autistic spectrum. That sets her off on another track, genetics. From what her mother said, it sounds as though Tomasz was autistic. And now, Gabriella. Maybe there is a family link. What would this mean for the rest of her family?

She's wide awake now, lies on her back listening to the gentle half snores of her husband; little sleepy snuffles. She resists the urge to wake him; what good would it do to have them both awake? But she wants to talk, to explain why

she said nothing about Gabriella, about how frightening it was to be the only one who seemed to see anything wrong. She should have spoken sooner; she should have been the one to say something, not a stranger.

A tear escapes from her left eye, runs down her cheek to the side of her mouth. She licks it away. That's so like her, always brushing things to one side.

Hannah gets out of bed. There's no point lying here when she could be catching up with some work. She goes downstairs, gets out her notes, her Dictaphone and completes two reports.

Chapter Nine

Glasgow

I wish Hannah would come. Now I have started to speak I find I want to tell her about my time in Auschwitz. Strange that after so many years of silence I want to talk about it. I wonder why? Could it be that I want to explain myself? I know she's never been happy with our relationship, that she feels I should be warmer. Or maybe I need to speak about it to be free of it. That's what the counsellors would say. No matter. I wish she were here. It's nearly half past six, she'll be here any minute.

The knock at the door is tiny, as if a baby has bumped against it. After a few seconds, Hannah opens the door and comes into the room. I hope my surprise doesn't show in my face; she's aged ten years overnight. There are dark shadows under her eyes, a deep crease in her forehead, her hair is lank. I did this to her. She must hate me. In silence we look at each other. What does she see? An old woman? Or the young terrified woman who killed a baby?

She doesn't smile or greet me but sits down in the armchair and looks out of the window.

'Would you like some tea?' I ask. I sound like someone who is greeting a stranger. She shakes her head.

'Shall I continue with my story?' I think perhaps she does not hear me for she doesn't respond, continues to stare at the distant hills. I am panic-stricken. What will I do if she rejects me; my family is all I have. But she seems to come to. 'Yes,' she says. 'Tell me about Auschwitz.'

Four words. Easy to say but can I do it? Can anyone do justice to the horror of that place? I don't think it is possible for those who were not there to understand. Words are not up to the task of describing it. How can I describe the hunger I felt; the despair; the fatigue? Perhaps that is why I have been silent for so long. I don't have the vocabulary to tell people what it was truly like. And when I try to remember, my memories are like fragments. This is not a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, although I know that it is a story, *my* story. But parts are missing. I don't remember what happened after we were captured, how we got to Auschwitz. I remember arriving there: the noise, the screams, the strange orange glow in the sky, the smell. Dear God, the smell. But how did I get there? I don't remember, nor do I remember our daily grind. Other things I remember well. They are vivid, too vivid: the memory I have of the cellar and of Tomasz's death, executions, a woman trying to hide her baby and having it snatched from her. The soldier threw it down on the ground as if it were rubbish. Then he shot the mother. Such things come at me like scenes from a film.

I'm not sure where to begin — then it comes to me. Anna. She should know about Anna. So I tell her about how I met her, the miscarriage; the loss of a baby I had not wanted ... even now it hurts to think of it.

I stop talking and look out of the window. The dusk is deepening from turquoise to jade; there are streaks of yellow and pink in the west. It is as beautiful a sunset as I have seen for some months.

'Go on,' says Hannah.

I take a deep breath. 'Anna saved my life, though at the time, she thought she had killed me. Later, when we met again, she told me the words of the woman in the block kept coming back to her, 'If she goes to the hospital, it's a

death sentence.' It didn't take long for Anna to find out what that meant. Two days after she arrived one of the kapos laughed at a woman who was asking everyone if they'd seen her mother. The kapo pointed to a chimney with smoke rising high above it, told her *there's your mother*. The woman didn't understand, had to have it spelled out that her mother had been gassed along with thousands of other Jews. The next day she killed herself by running on to the electrified fence.'

Hannah has her hand to her mouth. She is shocked. But surely must know such things happened?

'Anna had wondered if I too were dead. The hospitals were known as waiting rooms for the crematoria.' I grimace. 'But I was a nurse, too much use to kill. One of the doctors recognised me and I was recruited to help as soon as I was able to stand. If Anna hadn't sent for help I would have died, no doubt.'

I don't know what Hannah is thinking; perhaps that it would have been better if I had died. I wish she would speak; she is very still, her head bowed so I cannot see her eyes. I wait for a moment but she doesn't look at me. I continue with my tale.

'When I met Anna for the second time, I was in a terrible state. I had decided I wanted to die. Every day I woke I felt cheated. What had I to live for? Piotr would have been killed at once; I don't remember anyone telling me that or seeing it happen but it was obvious; there were no children to be seen anywhere. I had no idea what happened to Marek but wherever he was, he must hate me: I was responsible for Tomasz's death and I felt sure that it was my fault Bronek betrayed us. Stupid, but I thought because I had brought him into the house that night - that somehow I was to blame.

We met outside the punishment cell. Everyone feared being sent there, everyone but me. It was a tiny room, about a metre square with standing room only - they put up to six people in at a time. Sometimes in the morning one or two would be dead. I hoped one day I would be one of them; that I would slide from one darkness to another.

It was very gloomy in the room outside the punishment cell. The only light came from the corridor through the door, which was ajar. Outside, the soldiers on guard smoked their foul-smelling cigarettes. I had been there for about fifteen minutes, sent because I had defied one of the German doctors - I barely noticed when the others were pushed into the room.

“Three of us, it could be worse,” one of them whispered. I didn’t reply; it had been some time since I had spoken to anyone, other than when I had to. The guards forced us to crawl through the small square opening that led into the cell. Inside the stench was overwhelming. Urine, sweat and, above all, fear. The door closed, the bolt grating into place.’

I fall silent, remembering. The darkness in that place was complete; it surrounded you, eating into you so you lost all sense of your body, where it ended and the world began. Years later I was on holiday with Jack and we went on a tour to a cave. The guide switched off the lights and I panicked, pleaded with him to turn them on again. He did so, but laughed thinking it was a joke. I thought I would be sick, had to get out immediately. Jack was annoyed with me but I couldn’t help myself.

Hannah’s voice brings me back to the present. ‘What happened in the cell?’

'I thought I was going to die. It was what I wanted so I wasn't afraid but I was light-headed with hunger and fatigue. One of the women was finding it difficult to breathe; she gasped as if she were trying to suck in the little air there was.

I felt sorry for her so despite myself I spoke. "Try not to panic. There's enough air for us all." My voice was a croak.

"How do you know?" she said. "There's not enough room for three people in here. There can't possibly be enough air."

"I've been in here before." I replied. "Several times. One night there were four of us. We were all still alive in the morning."

Her breathing slowed down a little. "It's so black."

"Keep your eyes closed," I said, "that way you don't expect it to be anything other than dark."

She said nothing for a moment then, "But even with my eyes closed – it's darker than anything I've ever known." Her voice faltered.

She sounded very young. "Try not to think about it."

The other woman spoke. Her voice was coarser, gruff. "Why'd they put you in here, then?"

"Does it matter?" I was too weary to talk.

She must have sensed my reluctance for she didn't press me.

Time passed, maybe a minute, maybe an hour, there was no way of knowing. At last the younger sounding woman spoke.

"My name's Anna and my friend is Karla." There was a pause; she was waiting for me to respond. I didn't have the energy to speak.

"What's your name?"

I made an effort, 'Ewa,' I told her.

"Ewa? Not Ewa Czerniakowa?"

My heart thumped, already I was used to being a number. "How do you know my name?"

"I've been thinking - outside in the room, you looked familiar, then I remembered but I thought you must be dead. I was with you that first day here ... when you miscarried."

I felt sick, remembering.

"What happened to you in the hospital?" she asked.

I thought of all the things I could say. This was no ordinary hospital where doctors and nurses cared for people and made them better. We made some better, that's true. Young, strong people who could work. Like me. But if someone was very ill, they had no chance. They would be picked out in one of the regular selections and sent to the gas chambers. But that wasn't the worst that happened. I had seen terrible things: babies killed as soon as they were born, not allowed to take that first breath. If the child lived, both it and the mother would be ashes within twenty four hours, but if it died the mother would be allowed to live. Over and over I'd told mothers that their babies were stillborn, listened to their sobs, bound their breasts to stop the milk. I said nothing to try to comfort them. I knew there was no point. Who knew better than I the pain of losing a child? There were other things too. I hadn't seen them for myself but I heard rumours: a doctor who liked to experiment on women, on their private parts. I couldn't talk about these things to anyone so my answer was brief. "They found out I was a nurse and made me work there."

‘Why didn’t you work as a nurse here?’ asks Hannah.

I smile at her. ‘Believe me, after working in that place I did not feel I was a nurse. But I don’t want to talk about that.’

‘Sorry, go on with your story. I’ll try not to interrupt again.’

‘Where was I? Ah, yes. Anna told me then about the note. Her voice was taut with tears and I knew at once what it must be. “If it’s about my son, about Piotr ... I know he’s dead. You only have to be in here a few days before you find out that children have no chance of surviving.” My voice was steady.

The tension lessened, I felt Anna’s breath on my cheek as she talked; it was warm in the cold space. One of them found my hand, squeezed it. I pressed myself into the wall and made myself listen to what she had to say.

Anna and Karla worked in a factory, making pots and pans. Every day they had to walk there and back. It exhausted them; the work was hard, the distance was two miles, maybe more. Nothing if you were fit and well fed, but of course the food was poor: thin coffee with bread in the morning, a soup made of God knows what at lunch and more dry bread at night. On this particular day, Anna was feeling ill; the walk back to the camp seemed longer than ever, she’d grown yet another blister on her heel which made her limp badly. She could barely keep up with the others and was trailing at the end of the line as they passed the men’s camp. As always, the shouts reached them as they passed: men trying to contact their families, calling out the names of loved ones in the hope of a response. Sometimes a woman would hear the voice of a husband or son and there would be a brief burst of joy in the air. Mostly though, they filed past, wishing. The first few times Anna heard her name, her heart pumped a little

faster but she never recognised the voices though she tried to filter the names out and listen for a familiar tone. Once she heard someone who sounded like her brother Stefan, and she scanned the faces with hope, but it wasn't him. Day after day she kept on looking, refusing to give up hope.

When the stone hit her ankle, Anna was a few yards behind the others. She bit back a scream. You must never draw attention to yourself; she'd found that out early on, not unless you wanted something unpleasant to happen. Her eyes flicked over the ground. In front of her was a stone wrapped in paper. That must be it. It was risky, but she had to know what was written on it. In a fluid movement she bent down and grabbed it as she passed, stuffing it into her pocket.

It was the next morning before she had a chance to look at it. She thought of bringing it out and letting the others see but there was usually someone prepared to drop you in the shit for an extra portion of soup or a piece of bread. Messages in the camp were strictly forbidden. It was tantalising having it there and every so often she would put her hand in her pocket and enclose it, feeling every bump, stroking the paper.

She closed the door of the latrine, for once barely noticing the smell and took out the stone. With great care she unwrapped it and smoothed out the paper. *Please, has anyone seen my wife Ewa, or my son Piotr. Piotr is 15 months old. Ewa is twenty three, small with long dark hair. Marek Czerniak.*

Long dark hair? Didn't he realise everyone had their heads shaved? Someone banged on the door and Anna almost dropped the paper. She shoved it

back into her pocket and hastily peed into the pit before going out to join the walk to the factory.

All day Anna was quiet, lost in her thoughts. Ewa, Piotr and Marek. Ewa, that was the name of the woman in her bunk that first night. She had called out for Piotrek. There had been a man with them on the train; the child had snuggled into him. Was it the same family? It could be, but Ewa and Piotr were hardly uncommon names. It might be a coincidence.

Anna finished her story. I sensed she wanted me to say something but I was lost in thoughts of my family. At last I said, "When was this?"

"Two, maybe three weeks ago."

I was sucked into a terrifying whirl of emotions: anger, grief, despair churned me up and I knew I hadn't really believed that Piotr was dead, that underlying my so-called acceptance had been a hope that somehow Marek had hidden Piotr, had kept him safe. Before I could stop it, I cried out in despair. Like so many times before, I dug my nails into my flesh, hoping the physical pain would distract me; it didn't but I managed to calm myself down enough to speak.

"Sometimes I think I'm going mad," I said. "I think back to what I had and how unhappy I was. Or was I happy? I can't remember. Sometimes I think I had two children but no matter how hard I try, I cannot bring their faces to mind. Can you imagine not being able to see your children? I have no photos of them. Will never have any. Piotr, he was only a baby and for the last two or three months of his life I hardly saw him. That bitch Kasia wanted him for herself you know. She was mad with jealousy."

I knew I wasn't making any sense but they listened to me as I rambled

about my lost boys. I didn't tell them how Tomasz had died. I couldn't. At last my disjointed mutterings came to an end. The only sound was our breathing; then Anna, I think it was her, began to hum a lullaby. Karla joined in, harmonising. It was so beautiful, so unexpected in that dark place.'

I stop speaking. Hannah is crying. Large fat tears run down her face. It is strange to see. She has never been very emotional, always so controlled. I put out a hand and pat her awkwardly on the shoulder. I was never good at comforting her, even when she was a little girl. Anna would have known how to help her, what to say and do to make things better. She was a great comfort to me, and to others. It was terrible what happened to her. Yet she kept her humanity, more so than anyone I knew in that place. She was kind, funny. And she was only eighteen.

Chapter Ten

Poland, 1944

Roll call again, the second that day. Not content with making them work, starving them of food, the Nazis made them stand for hours on end; every evening without fail and at other times too. Even the dead were lined up, dragged from wherever they fell to the central courtyard, pulled along by an arm or a leg with no respect by kapos. Every prisoner had to be accounted for.

Anna and Karla made their way to the courtyard, trying to avoid the puddles and mud. Sometimes the Nazis would decide to inspect clothing or footwear and make an example of someone whose cleanliness was not up to scratch. They would beat and humiliate them in front of everyone. It could happen to any one of them; it was so hard to keep clean. The courtyard was lined with kapos, who would do the counting and patrol the endless lines of prisoners to make sure they stood in line.

Over two hours later and still they stood in rows. Anna felt faint, dizzy. Her legs were weak, not up to the work of supporting her. She whispered to Karla, 'I feel ill.'

Karla looked at her, frowning at what she saw. She rummaged in her pocket and handed her some bread, which Anna accepted gratefully. Taking care not to let any of the soldiers or the kapos see her, she ate it. The tiny bit of food and the fact that Karla cared made her feel better.

'Look out.' A soldier was coming along their line. Anna lowered her eyes. She always found it best not to look at them. Although she had been in the

camp for several weeks, she was not used to these roll calls. The soldiers terrified her with their random acts of violence. No one was safe from their brutality. By not looking at them she felt herself to be invisible. She knew this was stupid but so far it had worked.

Not this time. She could smell the soldier in front of her. He stank: stale food, boiled cabbage, onions and, underneath it all, unwashed maleness. Anna was used to bad smells in the camp; they were everywhere: the latrines, the kitchens where the stench of rotting turnip got into your clothes, the huts, many of the women had given up on any effort to keep themselves clean, but this was different, more rank. She felt a finger underneath her chin. There was nothing for it but to obey. She raised her head.

‘Look at me.’

Slowly she lifted her eyes to see tight narrow slits, cruel. She recognised him at once. The scene came back to her: the cattle trucks by the woods, the blackbird’s song, the soldier and his stench. She’d known she would see him again. She let her eyes slide past his, hoping he would not recognise her.

He frowned. ‘I’ve seen you before.’ There was a dim light of recognition in his face, scarred angry with acne. ‘Now where could it be?’

Anna did not want to speak to him but she knew she had to. She thought quickly. ‘Please sir, I believe you spoke to me once before on a roll call. Some weeks ago.’

He looked her over, taking his time. His eyes lingered on her breasts. ‘Ah, yes that’s what it would be.’ With a click of his heels he went on his way. Anna felt her knees give way beneath her. Karla held out an arm to hold her steady. ‘Who was that?’ she whispered when he was out of sight.

Anna did not want to talk about it. She shook her head and said she had no idea. 'I'm exhausted,' she said. 'Will they never let us go?'

Thirty minutes later, the roll call was over and they were sent back to their barracks. The women walked quickly, desperate to get to their pallets and lie down. A stone was digging into the side of Anna's foot and she fell behind the others. She stopped to get rid of it, working quickly for she did not want to walk back alone. It wasn't a stone, it was a piece of metal and she looked at it wondering where it had come from. As she was standing looking at it, a hand covered her mouth, something sharp pressed into her throat. A knife.

'Turn round.' The rough tones of the soldier. 'Bitch. I knew you at once. We have some unfinished business.'

Her heart was leaping in her throat as she turned round. He had exposed himself. Like the last time he didn't take his eyes off her as he rubbed his prick. It was worse than she remembered. She prayed she wouldn't faint. Where were the others? She didn't know whether to hope for them to come back for her or not. It might be worse if they did. He shoved her against the wall of the hut, his hand underneath her skirt, his fingers probing. Painful, rough. As he pushed inside her, she wanted to scream, it hurt so much. Surely she would be torn apart. She looked past him to the stars in the sky. So much beauty when there was so much ugliness in the world. Focusing on the brightest star – not a star, but the planet Venus, she remembered how she had longed to grow up, to be a woman, to be loved by a man. Now there was this, a sick travesty. As he pumped on and on, his grunts becoming more and more animal, she thought she might be sick. Only her terror of what else he might do - stopped her. She would sooner choke on her own vomit than antagonise him more.

It was over. He pushed her away, buttoning up his flies, cursing her as she scrabbled away from him. 'Whore,' he shouted as she ran as fast as she could towards her block. As she ran, blood and semen trickled down her legs.

Inside the block, she went straight to the washroom. She stood at the troughs and scrubbed at herself, the cold water chafing her thighs. She thought she would never be clean again. When she stopped, her hands were white and shrivelled with cold and she held them under her armpits to try to warm them. She stood in the washroom, unable to move. Through the wall, in the main room, the chatter went on. For everyone else it was a normal evening. She began to shake as she took in what he had done to her, jumped, startled as someone put a hand on her shoulder.

'Are you all right? You look terrible.'

Anna turned round. It was difficult to focus; she was tired and terrified and there was little light. She did not want to speak, feared that if she opened her mouth she might start screaming and never stop. The woman's face was kind, her eyes soft. Anna looked away. There was too much understanding in them, as if she knew what Anna had been through. The woman patted her on her shoulder and whispered, 'Try not to think about it. You'll go mad if you do.' She left Anna curled up in a corner of the washroom on the cold stone floor, rocking herself backwards and forwards. Karla found her like that some minutes later and took her in her arms. Anna pushed her away. Too much sympathy and she would break down, might never put herself together again. Karla, thank God, understood. She disappeared for a few minutes and came back with some food. Anna tried not to grab it. How had Karla managed to find the one person who

had something to give or, as was more likely, sell? She nibbled at the dry biscuit, grateful for the scrap of comfort.

‘Want to talk about it?’

Anna shook her head.

‘It might help.’

‘No.’ But it was hopeless; she would have to let go. Karla held her as she cried, murmured motherly words, stroked her until she calmed down.

‘What would I do without you?’ said Anna as she wiped her face.

Karla was more serious than Anna had ever seen her. ‘If we don’t stick together, we might as well be dead. I’ve talked to a lot of people in the time I’ve been here. People who’ve been around for years. They all say the same – you’ve got to have someone to trust and you’ve got to have hope. It helps to have someone to care for. If I didn’t care for anyone, I wouldn’t care for myself and then what would happen.’ She hugged Anna, who snuggled in closer, glad of the warmth of a friendly body. ‘Some people are out for themselves. The kapos. But afterwards, how will they live with the knowledge of their petty cruelties, their meanness, their ...’ she stopped, unable to continue. After a minute or so she added. ‘People like you are the only family I have now. A long time ago I had two sons, little boys, not yet ten. They were taken from me when I was arrested. I have no idea what happened to them.’ She shook her head. Anna watched her closely. A tear ran down Karla’s face and Anna wiped it away. She gripped Karla’s hand tightly and whispered, ‘Thank you for telling me this.’ Karla squeezed her hand back but did not speak. They sat like that until curfew then walked together to the bunks.

As Anna lay in her bunk she shivered, unable to sleep; the pain and thinking about Karla's little boys kept her awake. She wondered what had happened to them. Perhaps they were safe with relatives somewhere; or maybe a neighbour had taken them in. She didn't want to think of the alternatives: two little boys trying to look after themselves or worst of all, lying dead somewhere. Anna pushed those images away and prayed they were safe somewhere. Poor Karla, always so optimistic and caring, she was a source of strength to them all. Anna thought about what she'd said about hope, about caring for others. She closed her eyes, tried not to think of the soldier and what he had done to her. Try as she might, the thought that this was only the beginning of something much worse wouldn't leave her. As night moved into day, she closed her eyes; only to be woken a few minutes later by the shrill whistles and bells.

Chapter Eleven

Glasgow

Her mother's hand lies heavily on Hannah's arm. It has the coldness of age; blood doesn't circulate as well in the elderly. She wants to brush it away, like an insect. When she was a child she longed for Ewa to cuddle her, but she never did. Hannah remembers how she would run to her mother for comfort and how brusque she was – you're fine, nothing wrong with you. Hannah had learned to control her tears, to look after herself. Her father was kind but he worked hard, was rarely there.

She takes a deep breath to control herself. She should say something to Ewa, but everything seems trite. How ironic that she has at last got what she has wanted for so long, a proper conversation with her mother. Be careful what you wish for. Nothing in her life has prepared her for these revelations. As a psychiatrist, she knows that she should be able to talk this through, should be able to help her mother but it is all she can do to tolerate the hand on her arm; the coldness seeping through her skin into her bones. Finally she manages to pat it. Ewa grabs at her fingers. Her grasp is surprisingly strong, like a newborn baby's.

'I'd best be off, mum,' she says.

Ewa grips her fingers tighter, 'Please, Hannah, don't leave me. Stay with me until I fall asleep.'

Hannah's heart beats a little faster. More than anything she wants to be out of this room, away from the stench of death and destruction that has arisen with Ewa's tale. She swallows hard, 'All right,' she agrees. 'I'll stay.'

It's suppertime. An orderly comes with a tray of food, macaroni cheese

and plum crumble, comfort food, but Ewa won't eat. It lies congealing on the plate until Hannah, repulsed by the greasy smell of cooked cheese, picks it up and leaves it on the floor outside the room.

'You shouldn't do that.'

'Why? With any luck, Matron will trip over it and fall down the stairs.'

Ewa smiles weakly at this attempt at a joke. 'I think I'll sleep now. You can go.'

Hannah hesitates, feeling she has failed her mother somehow. It is a feeling she has had all her life. Memories of never being clever enough, or pretty enough to satisfy her mother flood back. She knows now why Ewa was so aloof, understands the trauma that has scarred her. 'If you're sure you'll be all right.'

Ewa nods. 'Go now, I'll see you tomorrow. We can talk some more then.'

*

I am exhausted. My memories of Auschwitz are mercifully blurred and confused, like a faded patchwork quilt. Occasionally I think I have forgotten it all, then something sneaks up, takes me by surprise. Ben speaking German, that was a terrible shock that threw me back in there with the guards yelling their orders. A smell, especially a bad smell: rotten vegetables perhaps, or sewage, or the chill metallic hint of snow on a winter morning can transport me to the past and I see it all as moving pictures in front of me. I tried to write it down, thinking it would help, but although I felt a little better, I was dissatisfied with what I'd done. How do you write a memory, capture its essence and put it on paper so that someone else can share it? Does not the act of writing it down, transform it so it is no longer yours? I wonder whether my memories are specific or am I remembering general things only: the thin soup for meals; the roll calls; the beatings; cruel

faces; kind faces; fleas and lice everywhere. Even as I think this, a memory comes into my mind, of a roll call, and I know that it is not a general memory but it is specific and horrible. I want it to go away but it is there inside my head and I give in to it.

Late October. The air crackled with cold; the frosts were heavy, the ground hard. This was a blessing. Around the camp the soil was boggy, marshy, even when the weather was dry. When it rained it stuck together, clung to your shoes, making it difficult to move through. Now the march to work was easier even though cold winds bit into us, making us long for the heat of summer. The work was as relentless and grim as ever, making pots and pans, but it was nothing compared to the work that Sara and Luisa were given.

Sara and Luisa were two young girls we had befriended when a group of Italian Jews were sent into our block. They looked terrified as they were pushed in and left to fend for themselves. They didn't understand anything: not the language, not the situation they were in, nothing. Almost immediately, some of the older more experienced prisoners started to steal from them. Shoes, clothes, their meagre ration of food all disappeared from under their very noses. The two girls clung to each other, crying. Anna went to help them.

‘Do you speak German?’

The girls looked at Anna for what seemed like an age, their eyes sad and distrustful. At last the taller one said, ‘A little.’

‘You must look after each other,’ said Anna. ‘There are people here who will steal from you if they get the chance. Not because they are bad, but because they are hungry and they want to live. Come with me.’ She brought them over to

us and tried to explain to them how things were.

‘You are in a death camp. Many people have died here. Some from illness but most from being gassed after a selection. The SS pick out people who look as if they cannot work. We don’t know for sure when these selections will take place but they happen frequently and they look for people who are ill. So you must try to look healthy at all times. Pinch your cheeks to make them red, stand straight and tall even if you want to lie down. Always be on your guard. Never leave your food for an instant. Eat everything given to you. You don’t get enough to eat so you can’t afford to be fussy.’ As she spoke to them I wondered whether they understood what she said. It was impossible to tell. They stared at her with their huge brown eyes, unblinking, not saying a word.

They soon settled in. Sara was the older, only fifteen, and her sister Luisa was twelve. Someone had told them to lie about their ages; the Nazis killed anyone under sixteen and the girls were well built enough to pass as older. They were bright girls, likeable, though Luisa was a handful at times. Anna especially was very fond of them. She taught them Polish and in return Sara taught her Italian.

The girls were with us some weeks before they were given any work. This worried us. Anyone who didn’t work was seen as useless, worthy only of the crematoria. Rumours spread throughout the camp when it was realised that there was little or no work to do. Some said the Red Army were very near; it was a matter of days before we would be rescued. Others said there would be a shooting one night; everyone would be marched into the forest, forced to dig their own grave before they would be shot in the back of the head. They had it on good authority. Had seen the papers signed by Hitler himself. I knew it was

rubbish, they would never be able to dig into the frozen earth but there was always someone else to pronounce in a gloomy voice that the ditches had been dug by a special kommando and were waiting to be filled.

It was hard to know what to believe. We tried to ignore the rumours both good and bad but we all felt the tense atmosphere among the Germans. They were more liable than ever to acts of violence or cruelty. At roll call, there would often be someone beaten for no obvious reason.

It was with relief then, that we saw Luisa and Sara taken off to work one morning. The girls left smiling, pleased to have something to do to alleviate the boredom. But that evening they returned to barracks, grey with dust and fatigue.

‘What on earth have you been doing?’ I asked.

Luisa muttered a curse and climbed up to her pallet where she lay down, silent. Sara, less impetuous, sat down beside her. She drew a hand across her face and stared at the dirt she had carried in with her. Her face, pale and thin, was grim.

‘We were taken to a big mound of rocks. They were this size; huge heavy lumps of stone.’ Sara gestured with her hands, about eighteen inches across. ‘They told us to take this pile of rocks and put it over on the other side of the yard, a distance of maybe one hundred yards. Without trolleys or pulleys or anything to help. We had to use our bare hands.’ She closed her eyes and was silent. I wondered if she had fallen asleep and glanced at the others, wondering what to do, whether to wake her up. They shrugged. As I reached out to touch her shoulder, Sara shuddered and opened her eyes. ‘Where was I? Oh, yes. All day we picked up these rocks and trailed them over to the other side. We must have worked for ten hours until we had taken them all and piled them up in a

different place. It was exhausting, but worse was to come. As we were being lined up for the march back, a soldier came up to us and said that tomorrow we will have to put them all back. It's all so pointless.' She closed her eyes.

'I won't do it,' shouted Luisa. 'Look at my hands. I can't do it.' She held out her hands, palms upwards. They were bloody and blistered, painful, raw looking. She burst into tears. Karla hugged her.

'Ssh,' she said, 'Don't let them get to you. Be brave, little one. Lie down and rest before the evening roll call.'

Karla rocked Luisa in her arms and soon Luisa drifted off to sleep. She looked very peaceful. I couldn't help but envy her. It seemed like years since I had slept well.

Roll call. Luisa wouldn't get up. She lay in her bunk, her face screwed up into a fury and said she would rather die than go back to work in that place. She was too tired to stand in the roll call. She showed her damaged hands to Anna as she lay in the bunk and shouted that no one would make her do anything she didn't want to do. Anna hit her, hard, on her face. Luisa stared at her, shocked into silence.

'I'm sorry,' said Anna, 'but you have to get up. If you don't, you will be killed.'

'I won't do as you say. You're not my mother. You've no right to tell me what to do. Anyway, I don't care. I want to die.' She pulled her blanket over her head.

'Leave her,' said Sara. 'She'll get up, don't worry.'

'We'll have to go in a few minutes. She needs to get up right this minute.'

Sara took Anna's hand. 'I promise you. I'll get us there on time. You look after yourself.'

We had no choice but to leave Sara with the task of rousing Luisa. Reluctantly, we left and ran to catch up with the streams of women walking towards the courtyard.

The roll call was underway and there was no sign of the sisters. Anna looked round scanning the rows of prisoners to see whether they had managed to slip behind them somewhere. Nothing. She nudged me, whispered her fears. I squeezed her hand. We stood together as the soldiers counted the prisoners; it took over an hour. At the end, we were kept standing, hundreds of us in the cold, silent and still. Anna's grip was beginning to hurt me; she was panicky.

'Can you see anything?' she murmured.

I tried to look but I was small and could never manage to see much. I asked Karla who shook her head, then said, 'Look, over there about ten rows back, is that them?'

Anna craned to see. It was hard when there was little to distinguish one prisoner from another and the dark made it more difficult. 'I don't think so.'

The soldiers who had been doing the counting were huddled together. Then in twos they set off to search the barracks. My mouth was dry, my heart pounding. I knew what this meant. So did the others. Anna said, 'The numbers don't tally. They're off to look for them.' We tried not to think about what might happen.

A scream and heads turned. Immediately the kapos lashed out at anyone who wasn't looking forward. We were in the middle of a group far from the

blows. Anna was the tallest and she stood on tiptoe to see if she could see anything. She saw them at once, told us what was happening: Luisa and Sara being dragged by their hair to the roll call. They were brought to a platform at the front of the courtyard and forced to kneel down. Luisa was fighting against the soldier who was pushing her, even though her arms were tied behind her back. At last the soldier had her on her knees. Sara was already kneeling, her head bowed. Another soldier stepped forward. He had a whip in his hand.

Five minutes later and it was over. We lost count of the number of lashes they'd received. The girls were kneeling in the same place, as every prisoner was forced to march past them. They were to be an example to us all. Beaten down so that others would comply. I didn't want to look but I had to know what had happened. They were unrecognisable. A raw, crimson, bleeding mess. Only their eyes, which flashed with fear and hatred told us they were still alive.

Back in the hut, we waited for their return. Curfew came with no sign of them. I made Anna get into her bunk, telling her there was no point in her getting into trouble.

'You must get some sleep. You'll be no use to them if you're exhausted.'

I knew they wouldn't be back. I was a nurse. Wounds that great did not bode well, not here. I was worried by Anna's state of mind. She was very attached to them and I feared she might do something foolish. I think she was comforted by my matter of fact attitude and she did as I said. I too went to bed, what else could I do? The other two women I shared with were already in the bunk and grumbled as I climbed in beside them and wrapped my blanket around me as best I could. I lay motionless on the straw mattress, wishing with all my heart that I had dragged Luisa out of bed. I should have helped Anna, been more

forceful. If I had, the girls would be here now instead of ... My mind played games with me – if I could hold my breath for two minutes they would be fine. But I was too weak from all that standing after a hard day's work and couldn't sustain it; after a minute I thought I'd die and took a gasping breath. My leg itched with fresh flea bites – if I didn't scratch them the girls would be back in their bunk tomorrow. The itching increased and I could feel infected blood running through me. It was so hard not to move my leg even slightly and let it scratch against the straw to ease the irritation. I made myself think of home, tried to imagine my bedroom, mine and Marek's, where I'd been so happy. There it was, the little room with white cambered ceilings and the bed with its cover of ... what? White cotton with yellow roses? No, that wasn't right. That was from my childhood bedroom, an eiderdown, stitched by my mother. Our bed was covered in red velvet. The yellow roses were on the wallpaper. I wished I could see it once more. It was a mistake to think of this; my eyes filled with tears and I blinked rapidly to keep them back. If I started to cry, I would never stop.

I thought I might go crazy. I counted to a hundred, calmed down a little. More composed, I thought of all the possibilities of what might have happened to the girls. I deluded myself; they were young and strong, most probably they had been taken to the infirmary. I would talk to one of the doctors; beg him to save them. It would all work out.

Morning, and with it a strange radiance. It had snowed during the night. I awoke, marvelling that I had slept at all. For a moment I lay there, wishing I could fall asleep once more. In the light of morning I saw only too clearly how deluded I was to think they'd survive in the infirmary. My heart was leaden as I got out of

bed.

‘They’re not in their bunks,’ Anna said as soon as she saw me.

I took her face in my hands, ‘I think they might be in the infirmary.’

Anna’s eyes brightened. ‘But that’s all right. You’ll be able to get them out.’

I stared at her; she looked younger than her eighteen years. I couldn’t bring myself to say what I really thought so I lied to her.

‘It will be very difficult, but of course I’ll try. There’s a doctor who is quite sympathetic. He might be able to do something, but I can’t promise anything.’

Before she could answer, the whistles and bells started their cacophony. I thought that if I ever got out of this place I’d buy every whistle I could lay my hands on and destroy them so I need never hear their shrillness again. We walked to the courtyard with the others, our blankets wrapped round us. They were poor protection against the snow and bitter wind. As we neared the courtyard, my heart thumped painfully. There were two snow-covered mounds against a wall. Anna had seen them too; she ran forward, I was right behind her. A bundle of rags, all I could think was that it looked like a bundle of rags. There was a pinkish glow to the snow on the ground. Anna scraped at it with the toe of her boot and exposed blood stained earth.

Karla whisked us away, made us run to our place in the courtyard. I have no memory of the rest of that day except that when we returned to the block that evening two strangers had taken the place of Sara and Luisa and were lying on their pallet. Anna walked over to them and stared at them, her fists clenched. I pulled her back, the last thing we needed was a fight. Anna shrugged me away

and climbed up to her bunk where mercifully she was alone for once. I watched over her as she rocked herself to sleep.

I wish I could sleep. I wish I could sleep without dreams, without memories. Sometimes I think I could live without memories. Once I thought that as I got older the pain would lessen. It doesn't. You forget for a while; days, sometimes even weeks pass without a thought about it. But eventually it gets you as it has got me tonight and it is as bad as it ever was.

Chapter Twelve

Hannah knows she is being a coward but she can't face her mother alone. She rallies her husband to come with her, for her sons to visit. She hasn't told anyone other than Jim of Ewa's past. It's too much to deal with at any one time, for everyone is devastated by the possibility of Gabriella's diagnosis. Hannah had been as good as her word and within a week, Gabriella had been seen at the Child Development Centre and referred immediately to the autism team. Now they have to wait and as Hannah knows only too well, the waiting list is lengthy. Sam tells her he is going private, against his convictions, against all their beliefs. She tries to dissuade him but her heart isn't in it. She gives him the name of someone she trusts. The first appointment will be in two weeks' time.

Jim nags at her to talk about it but she can't. Instead she buries herself in work: she has a deadline for her paper for the history of autism book as well as all her other commitments. Every evening after supper, she goes to her study and works until midnight. Books and articles are spread across her desk; when she started her career, there was comparatively little information on autism. A few books, some dedicated journals. Now if she googles 'autism' it comes up with well over ten million hits.

Seven o'clock. Supper's been cleared away and she has the whole evening ahead of her. If she works through to midnight she might have a first draft of the paper by then. It's beginning to come together but she knows she's going to have to work hard to remain objective. The more she reads about Bettelheim, the more of a charlatan he seems to be. She puts her head down and starts to read through her notes.

The Empty Fortress: Bettelheim's classic text on autism. Relates his theory of autism to his experiences of Dachau and Buchenwald. Bettelheim was imprisoned in both camps before the war, only getting out because he had influential friends in the USA. The book is badly written and is full of assertions that can't be proved.

Key quotations:

'Some victims of the concentration camps had lost their humanity in response to extreme situations. Autistic children withdraw from the world before their humanity ever really develops. Could there be any connection, I wondered, between the impact of the two kinds of inhumanity I had known - one inflicted for political reasons on victims of a social system, the other perhaps a self-chosen state of dehumanisation?' (Page 7)

'The precipitating factor in childhood autism is the parent's wish that his child should not exist.' (Page 125)

The book is full of idiotic statements. For example, he views autism as more extreme than suicide.

'Suicide involves a goal-directed action that the autistic child seems even less capable of performing than the suicidal person. Infantile autism might be regarded as a position of despair where even the requisite energy to end it all is lacking... ' (Page 90)

Hannah scoffs at the idea of an eighteen-month old child choosing autism rather than suicide. How could anyone with any knowledge of child development believe that a child of that age has the cognitive and emotional ability to think about killing himself? Irritated, she pushes her notes aside and opens her laptop. She creates a new Word document and starts to type.

The Myth of the Refrigerator Mother

To be told that your child is autistic can be devastating for a parent and all the harder because of how late it comes. In many cases the child is almost two before there is any suspicion that all is not well. Assessment and diagnosis may take as much as another year. The parent is then left with a three-year-old child who is difficult to relate to, and who, depending on the severity of their autism, may never be fully independent. And yet the child looks perfectly normal, making it difficult for their family, let alone outsiders, to understand the autistic child's behaviour. Parents given this diagnosis often report feelings of bereavement for the child they thought they had and certainly clinical studies of parents' reactions to diagnosis show classic bereavement reactions: disbelief, shock, anger, grief and a long period of adjustment before acceptance.

How much more difficult then is it if, having been told your child is autistic, you then are told that it is your fault. It's hard to believe that less than thirty years ago this was commonplace for many parents. One such parent, Margaret Greenwell, has written about this in her moving tale of living with an autistic child:

The doctor didn't look up when he told us Janine was autistic. He read from his notes without even a glance at us – Yes, clearly the child is autistic, no language, no empathy, no imagination. We asked him how it was that our beautiful baby was this way. Lack of love, you need to be more affectionate, mum especially.

Mum especially – those words were like a knife to my guts, a knife that was inserted and twisted round to hurt me as much as it could. I thought back to the first few hours after Janine was born when I had been exhausted after a long, difficult labour, and remembered how I had turned away from my darling child, desperate to sleep. Could it be that I had poisoned her little mind, made her autistic? Common sense told me no, that millions of mothers had similarly been less than enthusiastic, that I had embraced her, cuddled her a couple of hours later after a brief refreshing sleep, but the doubt was there for years: it was my fault, something I had done.

Hannah stops typing, reads over what she has written. It's harder than she thought to remain objective, for she keeps thinking about Gabriella and how

everyone will cope with the diagnosis. Sam will cope, she's sure, but Celia? She likes everything to be perfect. And everyone else, how will they react? Jim will be stoical, want to do the best. David's wife will be fine, she's one of life's copers, but David will worry about whether they might have an autistic child. Hannah thinks about how she breaks the news to families and the different ways they react. Looking at it from the families' perspectives she sees that perhaps she has been too glib in what she says. It's easy after all, to be positive when it's not your child's life that is affected.

The deadline for the chapter is less than a week away and Hannah works every evening. She asks her sons to visit Ewa instead. Jim tells her she must go to see her mother, to find out the rest of the story, if there is any, but she buries herself in work, taking time only to pop in for five minutes, careful to have some excuse to leave so there is never any time for Ewa to bring up the subject.

*

There is one remaining thing for me to tell Hannah, but it is impossible to get her alone. She has started to bring someone with her now, every time she visits. Her visits are fewer and fewer. It is as if she is terrified about what else I will say. We are back to conversations about what I had for tea. She even asks me now what is happening in East Enders. I am not easily fooled. She is avoiding me and my shadows.

My dreams are more real to me now than this nursing home. I spend more time asleep than awake. In my dreams I am young and fit. I never dream of the cellar, or of Auschwitz, only of Krakow cafes and bars, conversations with friends and making love with Marek. I wonder how the young would feel if they

knew the strength of an old woman's erotic dreams. I wish I could sleep all the time. I am happiest then. Awake, my memories of Auschwitz push Marek aside and I have to live through its horrors once more.

Chapter Thirteen

Auschwitz 1944

Two days later and still Anna was silent; could not speak about what they had all seen. She thought that perhaps she might never speak again although she knew she must; something about her belly worried her. It was a solid mass. She didn't like to touch it; it felt so strange. Anna thought of her grandmother, her lovely elegant grandmother with her soft white hair. Before she died, she had a stomach like this, all hard and rigid from a tumour. She didn't care whether or not she had a tumour but she wanted to know what to expect. They would all die one way or another. If this was to be her fate, so be it. She made up her mind to ask Ewa about it. She was a nurse; she would know what it was.

'No, it's impossible.' Anna stared at Ewa without blinking, willing her to say she was mistaken. Now she knew the truth she realised she hadn't been facing up to things at all. She had assumed Ewa would reassure her; tell her it was nothing to worry about.

Ewa shook her head, 'I'm sorry, but there is no doubt about it.'

'Get rid of it.'

'I can't. It's too late.'

'Please,' Anna started to weep; despairing sobs tore through her thin body. 'Please, you have to do something. I can't cope with this.'

Ewa got up; she looked away from Anna's pleading eyes. 'I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do.' She left Anna sitting alone in a corner. Anna stared at a spider making a web. It scuttled back and forth, unaware of being watched. A

flick of my finger and all your work is in vain, thought Anna. I can play God too. Ruin lives. Tears ran down her face. She spotted a small scab on the back of her hand, from an insect bite, and picked at it, willing blood to appear. When Karla found her she was picking at the healthy skin beneath. Karla knelt down beside her.

Her voice was softer than usual. 'Ewa told me. I'm so sorry.'

'What am I to do?'

Karla shook her head. 'I don't know.'

Anna allowed herself a smile, 'I thought you would always know what to do. You're so strong.'

'I know,' Karla patted her hand. 'And so are you. We'll get through this, don't worry.'

'It's a death sentence, we both know it.'

'You mustn't think like that. Remember... always have hope.'

Anna stroked her swollen belly. 'Once I've delivered it, they'll keep me alive for maybe twenty-four hours. Then we'll be sent to the gas chambers together. Ewa must have told you. She knows; she saw it happen again and again.'

Karla stood up. 'I won't let it happen to you. We'll think of something.'

Anna shrugged. Karla continued to talk to her but she couldn't listen. She was trying to engage her in fantasy, trying to get her to talk about her family. But it was time to face up to reality. Her family were gone, had been dead probably for months if not years. After about an hour of her silence, Karla left her, giving her a tight hug before she went. Anna stood impassive. Wraithlike she climbed up to the bunk and lay down on the filthy straw. All she could see from her bunk

was the Germanic writing stencilled on the whitewashed walls – Verhalte sich ruhig - the words mocked her as she tried to sleep.

It was becoming more and more difficult to get up in the morning. The water was frozen in the buckets, making it harder than ever to clean yourself. Anyway what was the point? Her time was up. If she was honest, she'd known it from the minute she'd seen that train with human beings crammed together in worse conditions than animals.

She knew the others were desperately worried about her. Karla did her best to make life normal. She told jokes, kept up a stream of cheery chat, never once alluded to Anna's hopeless state. It all passed over Anna's head. There were times when she knew they were talking about her. She sensed their concern but did not share it. Words stood out: plan, baby, hide. They were fools. No one outwitted the SS. Their death machine operated with deadly efficiency. It was unstoppable. She remembered the people she had worried about when she first arrived: the Musselmänner. Their dead eyes, their stooped walk. She had become like them. This was what despair did to you.

Each day, she forced herself to march to the factory; her feet, blistered and raw from shoes that were too tight, no longer worried her. She felt nothing. Karla tried to get her to bathe them but she refused to co-operate. One morning she saw a piece of glass on the ground. It glinted in the early morning sunshine. Something about it reminded her of her childhood, how children playing in the street would pretend that shards of broken glass were diamonds. She picked it up. It was sharp; she ran its edge across the back of her left hand and watched as the skin rose up in a red weal and parted to let the blood out. So she did have blood.

Karla must have seen her for she rushed over and grabbed her hand, forcing her fingers open until the glass fell to the ground.

‘What are you doing?’ she shook Anna.

Anna didn’t look at Karla or at Ewa who had joined them. Her head drooped as she walked on. She felt very tired. A drop of blood fell from her hand on to her leg. If only it were menstrual blood: thick, viscous, life affirming. She opened her mouth to speak then closed her lips. It was too hard to speak; what would she say.

She was aware of Ewa and Karla talking but couldn’t hear what they said. Or rather she could hear but was unable to make sense of it. I don’t understand language any more, she thought, I will not be able to speak to anyone. If mama were here, maybe... she didn’t, couldn’t finish the thought. The child inside her kicked, and she looked down at her belly. It was alien. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t realised sooner, but hardly anyone menstruated in the camp after their first month. Some thought it was because something had been put in the soup, but most women put it down to the terrible stress under which they were living. Why hadn’t she realised sooner when she could have done something about it? It was too late; she was too far gone, seven months. Ewa and Karla were planning something; she knew that. Planning to keep her away from the hospital where she would surely die. But she didn’t care about living. You lived only to die.

At first she ignored it. It was too early. Ewa had said early February and it was only January. Another surge and another and she could ignore it no longer. The pain took her breath away. She had heard people say that but had never known what it was to have pain so intense. When she had her period for the first time the

cramp had been so painful she had cried. This pain was incomparable. There was a low moaning sound; she wanted silence. Why wouldn't they shut up? It was several minutes before she realised it was coming from deep within her. Ewa and Karla ran over to help her as she fell back against the wall. A few others joined them. Anna felt as if she was outside herself watching a scene. She listened to the short sharp commands – get a blanket, as clean as possible. Any chance of water? You there... you watch out for the kapos. Ewa took charge, issuing orders with an assurance that Anna had never seen in her before. Karla kneeled down beside her and held her hand, telling her to be brave. I don't want to be brave, she thought. I want to have an ordinary life and be with my parents and my brother. Go to university as I planned, study languages, meet a nice boy and get married. Children? Yes, but not this bastard child of a rapist. Her mind went blank as the pain struck her once more. She was being torn apart. Her body was about to rip wide open and her guts spill out on to the floor. They would need more than a bit of water to mop that up. She laughed at the thought. Karla didn't like her laughing. She could tell by the frown on her lined forehead and the little look she had given Ewa. It made her laugh more. One or two of the women who had gathered to help (or was it to look on, the event providing some entertainment for the dark winter night?) drew back and muttered to each other. Anna caught the word lunatic and put it in her mouth to chew over, before spitting it out. 'LUNATIC! HA!' Even Karla was startled; she drew back from Anna for a second before recollecting herself. Anna beckoned to her, watched her index finger bow into the palm of her hand. It was extraordinarily elegant she thought. An officer bowing to a lady. She watched again as it bent. She could watch it all night. Karla shook her out of her reverie. 'What is it, darling?'

Anna focused on Karla. 'I want to die. But I don't want the Germans to get me. I want to do it myself. How can I do it?'

Karla shook her head. 'You don't mean that. You can't give up. The Russians are coming. They'll be with us in a few days. Everyone says so.'

She would not allow herself to hope. 'No, I don't think so.' Another wave of pain swept over her and she opened her mouth to scream. Karla was too quick for her. She placed a large rough hand over her mouth, stifling any sound. Anna pleaded with her eyes but Karla kept her hand there.

'I'm sorry, darling. I can't bear to do this but if you scream, the soldiers or the kapos might hear and we can't take that risk. I bribed the blockova and she'll stay away. But who knows who might be passing?'

Anna nodded to show she understood and Karla took her hand away. Another contraction started and she grabbed Karla's hand. She could feel bones grinding together as she squeezed. When the contraction ended she sobbed and said, 'Please, Karla, do something. You could kill me easily. A hand over my face would do it. I'll be dead within the day anyway.' Karla's eyes filled with tears and she turned away from her, muttering, don't ask me this. Anna, sensing her hesitation, tried again. 'If I were a dog, you'd put me out of my misery. There's no chance that I won't be found out. We could never hide a baby. Never.' She paused and looked round for Ewa. She was nowhere to be seen. 'I know you and Ewa are planning to try to hide the child. But they'll discover it and they'll kill you too. It's such a waste.'

Karla opened her mouth to speak but before she could, Ewa returned with water and a blanket that looked clean. Where had they come from? Ewa looked from one to the other, 'What's going on?'

Neither of them said anything. Ewa put down the water and the blanket and asked Anna to open her legs. Anna didn't move. 'For heaven's sake!' said Ewa. 'I need to see how far the cervix has dilated.'

'I don't understand,' said Anna. 'What do you mean?'

'You poor thing,' said Karla. 'You're a child yourself. The neck of the womb has to open up so that the baby can pass through. That's why there's so much pain.'

Anna nodded, not really taking it in. It was impossible that a baby would come out of her. She would surely die first. Ewa was talking to her again, 'I need to see, please open your legs.' With reluctance she did so, felt Ewa's cold bony fingers in her vagina. She tried to wriggle away from them but Karla held her back.

'Three fingers,' announced Ewa. 'Well done.'

'Is that good?'

'It's not bad. It won't be long before you can push. You'll feel an urge, like wanting to pass a bowel movement. Tell me when that happens.'

The contractions came quicker, lasted longer, each one a torture. There was only enough time to take a steadying breath before the next one started. At last she felt it, an amazing sensation between her legs, burning. 'Push, I want to push,' she managed to gasp. Ewa and Karla hauled her to a sitting position, 'It's better this way,' said Ewa. 'Let me see.' Again the cold fingers, probing. 'That's fine. You can push all you like. Wait for the next contraction.'

This time she must die. Her heart couldn't beat any faster. They were allowing her to die a slow tortured death when they could kill her within a couple of minutes. As she pushed, she thought about her mother and father who would

never see this child. But who would want this bastard child of a Nazi? Not her. Not them. She pushed again, feeling something tear and hearing gasps from the others.

‘That’s it. The worst is over. One more push should do it.’

Anna lay down, exhausted. Her only thought was sleep. Hands shook her. Voices all around, telling her to look at her daughter. She kept her eyes closed.

‘Darling, please look at her. She’s beautiful. Like you.’

Anna turned her head away. They would both be dead within hours, what was the point. Ewa whispered in her ear. ‘Look at her. She’s your daughter. Rejoice in this new life. She brings hope to us all.’

Anna struggled to sit up. Ewa gave her the tiny bundle. The child’s eyes were wide open. Looking all around. What a place to be born. She stared at Anna as if she knew her. Anna gazed back, enchanted. She had to protect this child. All her hatred had gone. What did it matter who her father was? The child’s mouth opened and a tiny tongue peeped through. Anna imitated her and to her delight the baby poked out her tongue further. ‘Look!’ she cried. ‘She’s doing what I am doing. Isn’t she wonderful?’

‘She wants to be fed,’ said Karla. ‘This is what you must do.’ She took the baby from Anna and pulled down Anna’s dress and put the baby to her breast. ‘You don’t have to do anything. She’ll find the nipple herself.’

Anna watched as the baby’s head turned, her mouth open, searching. She found the nipple and latched on, sucking hard. Anna felt the tug, but nothing happened. ‘I don’t have any milk,’ she cried. ‘What will happen to her?’

‘Give it a chance. It doesn’t come immediately. Relax.’

Anna looked down at her daughter as she continued to suck. At last she felt the flow of the first milk letting down. She had never felt so happy and yet so sad at the same time. She supported the baby’s head as she suckled. ‘Sarah. Her name will be Sarah. She mustn’t die without a name.’

‘Hush, darling. No one will die.’

The camp was in chaos. No more roll calls, no work to go to. Anna allowed herself to hope. The women in her block had all rallied round, giving her some of their rations, making tiny clothes out of scraps of hoarded material. Anna marvelled at it. The baby had given them all a purpose. They met together in their block to discuss what to do if there was a search. To begin with no one had any ideas and Anna felt the cold grip of fear on her heart. One woman poked at the ground with the tip of her shoe.

‘I’ve got it,’ she said, her face beaming. ‘We need to dig a hole and line it with wood and straw. It will need to be quite a big hole and we’ll need something to cover it. If they search the block, we can put the baby in there.’

Anna saw Ewa turn away when the woman said this. How hard it must be for her. Two little boys, both of them dead, and a miscarriage. It was more than anyone could bear. Ewa never asked to hold Sarah, not like the others who were always around begging for a cuddle. Anna wished she could say something to help her but the words would never come. It was impossible.

The women were doubtful about digging a hole. One by one they put forward objections: what if the baby cried, the ground was too hard to dig, the

child would be scared to death in the dark. But no one could think of anything else. There was nowhere to hide in the barracks. At last they agreed to try it.

‘If she cries, one of us will have to make a disturbance,’ said Karla. ‘I’ll do it. But remember, this is for an emergency and we may never have to use it.’

They had to heat the ground to help it unfreeze. The block stove was held over the ground for hours at a time. Even then, it took several days to dig the hole. They took turns, using any tool they could lay their hands on, mainly stones picked up outside. They scraped at the ground until their fingers bled.

At last they completed it. It was 30 inches long, they’d quarrelled over this, some said it was too big but others said they should be prepared also for when the child was bigger. Anna didn’t want to think about that. She wanted to hear people talk about liberation, instead of saying they might be here next year, the year after. They lined the hole with wood they’d found near the kitchen and straw to provide some insulation and for the top of it they had a piece of metal someone found lying on the road. It was all very makeshift and Anna prayed they would never have to use it.

The third week of January. The mood was lighter every day for everyone felt that they would soon be free. There was talk everywhere. Some said the Germans had started to destroy the camp at Birkenau, tearing down the huts, so the Red Army would not see how they had forced prisoners to live. Word spread that one of the crematoria had been blown up. There was great rejoicing. Then on the 18th January they were gathered together and told they were leaving the camp. ‘The Reich does not desert its workers, whether voluntary or not, to the mercies of the brutal communists.’

‘Oh, please, leave us to the Russians.’ Karla said under her breath. ‘They can’t be any worse than this lot.’

It was not to be. They were to be marched out of the camp, to God knows where. The weather was terrible. Freezing winds and blasts of snow. It was minus eighteen degrees Celsius. Together the three women began to get ready for the march. Blankets were torn up and wrapped round them. Ewa made a papoose for the baby. Anna was in despair.

‘She’ll never survive out there, in this weather. None of us will.’

Karla hugged her. ‘Don’t say that, darling. We are all going to survive.’

‘I don’t think so. They won’t want anyone left alive to tell the world what it was like in Auschwitz. They’re probably going to take us all away and shoot us.’

Ewa shook her head. ‘Why do you think they built the gas chambers? They started off by shooting their so-called enemies, but it wasn’t efficient enough. No, there are far too many prisoners to shoot. I think they don’t know what to do. They’re running away and taking us with them.’

‘Maybe we should try to stay behind.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Karla said. She looked worried, Anna thought. More worried than she’d ever seen her. ‘They’re making the patients in the hospital stay but...’ She didn’t have to finish. At the best of times the sick prisoners were vulnerable. They all thought that those left behind would be gassed.

A storeroom of clothing had been left open. By mistake? They didn’t know. They joined other prisoners searching for warm things to wear. In one corner was a massive pile of tiny baby clothes. It was unbearable to see. Anna searched

through it for clothes that would fit Sarah, tears streaming down her face at the thought of all the dead babies. Someone had told her early on that sometimes, if the gas chambers were very busy, the Germans threw babies alive into the crematoria. She picked up a tiny white bonnet. It was knitted with very fine, soft wool in moss stitch. Anna imagined the mother sitting beside a fire, her feet up, listening to the chatter of her family as she prepared for the birth of her child. She stroked it; it was exactly the right size for Sarah. Karla found a bulky coat and passed it over to Anna, telling her it would help to hide the baby. It was so big; it must have been a man's. A long, black woollen coat, like orthodox Jews wore. Anna took it, murmuring a prayer for its owner who was surely dead. Sarah was strapped to her body with the homemade papoose. She was such a quiet baby, no trouble. Anna kissed the top of her head. She put on the coat, marvelling at its warmth.

‘We’ll take it in turns to wear it,’ she said to the others.

‘No. You have it; you need it most. Sarah must survive. If anyone survives this, it has to be her.’

They all put on as much clothing as they could find. Anna dressed Sarah in the clothes she had chosen for her: the white bonnet, a long flannel dress that covered her entire body, tiny woollen socks that were only two or three inches long. They had been told to gather in the courtyard and they trudged towards it. Every so often a soldier would run past, tell them to hurry. Anna thought Ewa had been right; they weren't as sure of themselves as usual. In the courtyard, rations were doled out. They were all given some bread and margarine.

Slowly the lines of prisoners started to march; a huge column of women. Soldiers surrounded them. Anna was scared; what if Sarah started to cry. Karla

reassured her. 'They're not expecting to hear a baby so they won't. They'll think it's a cat or something. Anyway we'll sing to cover up the noise.'

Through the gates and they were outside. Along the road with the town of Auschwitz in the near distance. Past houses and into open countryside. A flat plain, snow covered, monotonous. They marched on, snow stinging their faces. It wasn't fast enough for the soldiers. They shouted at them, waved their rifles, made them walk faster. A young woman slipped and fell. She tried to get up. A soldier shot her through the heart. Crimson drops patterned the white snow as she fell. Everyone moved a little faster, watched their feet, terrified they might slip too. Anna saw that Karla was limping. 'What's wrong?'

'It's my shoe. The sole is coming away.'

Anna grew cold with fear. Without shoes, Karla had no chance of making it. She wouldn't be able to keep up and now they knew what happened if you fell behind. 'Can you tie it on with something?'

Karla nodded, 'I've done that. It's fine at the moment, but I don't know how long it will last.'

They stopped to eat and rest. Many of the prisoners were very weak. Anna saw one woman lie down in the snow and go to sleep in spite of her sister's pleas not to. When they were forced up again, ready to move on, the woman could not be moved and her sister had to leave her there where she would surely die, if she hadn't already. Anna thought of Sarah. Would she die in her sleep? No, it wasn't possible. She was warm and snug inside the little nest they'd built for her. They waded on through the snow, the soldiers growing ever more frenzied. They decided the women weren't going fast enough so they made them run.

Fortunately no one could go very fast but even so, it was hard to keep going. Karla fell behind, weaker than the others because of her age and because her shoe was falling off. When they stopped for their next break, Anna saw that Karla's shoe was in tatters. She tried to make Karla swap shoes but she refused. Anna persisted, knowing that Karla's chances were slim if she didn't do something.

‘How often do I need to tell you? The important thing is that you and Sarah survive.’

‘No. It's more important that we all survive. If we take it in turns to wear the dodgy pair of shoes then we're more likely to stay together and that way we'll get through this.’ Try as she did, Karla kept on refusing until Anna gave up. Although she tried to get Ewa on her side, Ewa took Karla's part. It was as if they had no hope left. Anna was in despair. The three of them had been through so much together, yet now, when the end was in sight, they were passive.

‘What do I have to do to convince you?’ she shouted.

‘Don't be angry with us, darling. We're tired and hungry.’

‘You've been hungry before. Here, take my rations, I don't want them.’

Anna pressed some bread into Karla's hand. Karla gave it back to her with a gentle smile.

The soldiers started rousing them. It was time to move on again. Once again as they rose, they saw that several women had died in the snow. At this rate there would be hardly anyone left. Anna's heart grew like stone. Her feet were heavy; she could feel her hope deserting her. Sarah gave a little cry and she looked round in terror. There were no soldiers in earshot. She told Karla that the baby was waking and together they managed to adjust the papoose so Sarah

could feed while they walked Anna walked on in a dream. Around her a blizzard raged, tiny snowflakes like the ash that sometimes fell on them when the crematoria had been busy. They flew into her eyes, stinging. She slowed down to brush them away from her face. She could no longer see Karla or Ewa. Where were they? The snow disorientated her. She looked around, hoping to see them. Were they ahead of her, or behind? She panicked at the thought of losing them; she needed them with her, needed Karla's words of encouragement, needed to see Ewa's kind face. They were her family now. The other prisoners marched on, pushing past her as she searched and she wondered what would happen if she lay down. Would they walk over her? She tripped on something and looked down. It was a body. With a clutch of terror at her heart she recognised the red scarf that Karla had tied round her head. She bent down to feel for a pulse. Her fingers slid round Karla's wrist searching until she felt a feeble twitch. Karla was alive but only just. Together, the cold and hunger were killing her.

Anna shook her. 'Please get up.'

Karla half opened one eye and mumbled, 'I can't go on. I want to sleep.' Her lips were cracked, her nostrils raw with cold.

Anna shook her harder, 'If you sleep you die. You know that. You have to get up.'

There was a look of terror in Karla's eyes. Had she been too rough with her? Anna stopped what she was doing but Karla's gaze was still horrified. Too late, Anna realised what it meant. She turned round in time to see a gun pointed at her head. 'Dear God, no.' But it was done. A flash and ...

Chapter Fourteen

Glasgow

I climb into bed and try to sleep. My only hope is that I will see Marek in my dreams. But I have awoken old memories, ones that should have stayed buried. I know I won't tell Hannah the terrible details of my life in Auschwitz. There are plenty of accounts that can do that so much better than I can. There is something else though. Something that I only spoke of once, to Doctor Broadside. My thoughts go back to January 1945 and the death march from Auschwitz.

We had been marching for hours before we stopped for the night. Some huge sheds loomed in front of us, shelter from the snow. Nobody knew where we were. I wondered if the guards had lost their way, but no one would ask them. They were only too ready to shoot for the slightest reason that day. We guessed we were marching west, away from the Red Army. I had no idea how far we'd walked; someone said twenty kilometres. My feet ached, and my eyes hurt from looking at snow all day. We had just walked through a blizzard and it had confused everyone. Somehow I had become separated from Anna and Karla. We piled into the sheds, pushing and shoving to find a place to rest. It was only a few degrees warmer inside but at least there was no wind. I searched through my pockets for my rations, wondering if I should eat now or wait until later. Better to wait till later, I thought. It might be hours, days, before we were given any more food. I was exhausted but I couldn't rest until I found the others. Barely able to stay awake I scanned the crowd, searching. One of the women from our block, a Frenchwoman, saw me.

‘Are you looking for your friends?’

‘Yes. I lost sight of them during the storm. Have you seen them?’

The woman hesitated, put a hand on my arm. ‘I’m sorry Ewa. I think they are dead.’

Dead. No, they couldn’t be. My heart constricted, suffocating me. If they were dead, life had no meaning. To lose them was more than I could bear after all I’d been through. I asked her how she knew.

‘I heard some of the women talk about it. They say that Karla lay down in the snow and Anna tried to help her. But a soldier saw her and he shot her in the head.’

I had to know, ‘The baby, what happened to her?’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know.’

I looked round the shed. It was dark with only a little light from some torches. Many of the soldiers were asleep, but the door of the barn was guarded. I had to get out, find out what had happened. ‘Where did this happen?’ I asked. ‘Was it far away?’

‘I think a kilometre, maybe two.’

I tried to remember. Had I heard a shot during the snowstorm, maybe an hour ago? I might have done but wasn’t sure. It was all so confusing. We had been in the barn for thirty minutes, so Karla and Anna couldn’t be too far away. I had nothing to lose. Bending double I approached one of the soldiers at the door.

‘Please, diarrhoea. Please let me out.’ It was a terrible risk. The soldier could easily have shot me.

He looked me over. ‘Can’t you keep it in?’

‘I’m trying but...’

He looked round, 'One minute. If you're not finished, I shoot you.' He pointed his rifle at me and laughed.

I couldn't believe my luck. I hadn't thought I would be allowed out. He opened the door and I slid through. I needed a few seconds to orientate myself; it was very dark. The snow was still falling but hadn't yet covered the tracks we'd made. I took a last glance back at the door and seeing that the soldier wasn't looking, started to run. It was exhilarating; I didn't care if I lived or died. I wanted to shout out something childish – catch me if you can. My feet slipped in the snow but I kept on going, running to God knows where. A shout – halt, then a shot. My muscles tensed, expecting a bullet but I must have been further away than I thought. I zigzagged through the snow. It was uplifting, so uplifting that I felt as though I was outside my body, looking down in it, a black cipher on the white landscape. I ran and ran, laughing, crying. Where were they? Had I come the right way? I stopped, bent over with a stitch in my side, took a chance and looked back. No one was following me. I relaxed and started to walk. My legs were heavy. All I wanted was to sleep, but I wouldn't, not until I found my friends, my family. Then I would lie down beside them and we would all sleep together. Was that them? I could see something, blood red against the snow and I slowed down, caught my breath. It was coming out in great misty clouds from my mouth. When I breathed in, it hurt my nose; a sharp pain that made my eyes water. No, that wasn't it; my eyes were filled with tears for my friends. I approached the two bodies that were slumped on the snow. It was not yet deep enough to cover them. A flash and I was back in the forest near the farm, standing yards away from the mound that covered Tomasz's body. It hadn't been so cold at that time; the warmth of spring had started to push through the frost.

As I'd done almost a year before, I reached out my hand. I wanted to touch them, moved towards them. Something stirred in the snow. Could it be ...? I started to run, slipping, falling, crying Karla, Anna, it's all right, I'm here. There was a fragile cry from the heap. I fell on the bodies, they were rigid, and scrabbled through their clothes until I found her, Sarah, blue with cold but alive. I put the baby's freezing flesh next to my heart and pulled off Anna's coat, wrapping it round us. I wanted to sit, to sleep but made myself walk on through the night, back towards the east. Instinct told me to go away from where the Germans were. As I walked, hugging the child to my body, I tried not to think of what I had seen of my friends: Anna with a hole in her forehead, splitting her skull in two, her mouth open in a silent scream. Karla unviolated but dead, frozen tears on her face. Had Karla seen Anna die? I prayed she hadn't. I hoped Karla had lain down in the snow to sleep and had slipped away. I wouldn't think about what had happened to Anna; she must have seen the soldier about to shoot her, must have felt a terrible fear.

There was no way of knowing what time it was. I passed a farmhouse and thought of knocking on the door, got to within ten metres of it and stood for a moment gazing at the lighted window that looked so welcoming. But I trusted no one. This could be someone like Bronek. Tears frozen on my face, I left the farmhouse and went back to the road. There was a barn up ahead. If I could make it there I could perhaps get some sleep but only if there was straw. With each step my legs grew heavier but I made myself carry on.

The barn was full of straw. I pulled some down, made a bed of sorts and nestled into it; it was rough, scratchy but I didn't care. Away from the bitter wind, everything was much better. Sarah was listless, very cold. I had to make

sure she was warm. I stripped off one of the blankets I'd wrapped around myself and started to place it round the baby. Remembering that layers of clothes were meant to be better I stopped and folded the blanket. I put the baby close to me. As I did this, Sarah rooted for a nipple. The feeling of joy it gave me to be nursing a baby was overwhelming and I started to cry, rocking the child back and forth, humming the lullaby that Karla sung to me the night we met. The sucking slowed down and Sarah fell asleep. Only then did I cover us with the coat and lie down in the straw. As I fell asleep I knew everything would be all right.

It is hopeless; I cannot sleep. The spectres of my past are crowding in around me, all clamouring for attention. I sit up in bed and turn on the bedside light. I think perhaps I will never get the chance to tell Hannah the truth.

An hour later and it is done; the letter will tell her all she needs to know: Anna's rape, the Italian girls and their terrible death, Hannah's birth and the death of Anna and Karla. It is all there. I put it in the box, safe from the prying eyes of the staff here. I know they look through our private things when we are out of our rooms. Tomorrow I will give it to Hannah.

I feel better now that I have written the letter. Better but very weary. It is time to sleep now. I feel very close to Marek.

Chapter Fifteen

Glasgow

Hannah has overslept. She lay awake until nearly five o'clock before drifting off into an uneasy sleep. She curses as she looks at her watch, almost eight o'clock. She should have left for work by now. The phone rings while she is struggling out of bed.

‘Shit,’ she picks it up. ‘Yes?’

She listens in disbelief to Matron’s voice.

‘But I saw her yesterday. She was fine.’

‘I’m so sorry, Doctor. She died in her sleep. They think it was about four o'clock. Margaret found her when she went in to wake her.’

There is so much to do to get ready for a funeral. Doctors, funeral directors, priests, caterers, insurance companies all need to be contacted. When she arrives at the nursing home, Matron has already dealt with the doctors and the death certificate is signed – heart failure. Thank God. A post mortem would be unbearable. Hannah thanks Matron. Before she can ask if there is a funeral director that she could recommend, Matron produces a typewritten list of things to do. ‘We find it helps if you know exactly what to expect.’ Hannah accepts this gratefully, feeling guilty about her ill temper the previous evening and the little malicious gossips she used to have with her mother about Matron.

The funeral is arranged without fuss, the death notice is placed in the *Herald* and the *Evening Times*, friends and relatives are contacted, a hotel is

booked for a meal after the funeral, appointments at work are cancelled.

The days pass in a blur of arrangements until at last it is time for the funeral. Hannah dresses in a smart black suit. She looks at herself critically in a mirror before leaving the house. All eyes will be on her. She sees a tall, middle-aged woman, pale and gaunt. Perhaps she should put on some makeup. But Hannah is unused to cosmetics and the result is a little clownish. Too much blusher. After two more attempts she is satisfied. The pallor has gone and her face looks more natural. Jim smiles his approval and says how nice she looks. Is it appropriate to look nice for a funeral? She decides it is. Thinks of all those eyes, appraising.

The church is busy, surprisingly so. Hannah didn't think her mother knew so many people. She walks down the aisle to the front, feeling awkward as she always does when she is the centre of attention. The coffin is on a bier in front of the altar. It has been there all night, as is the tradition. Hannah isn't sure if it is what her mother would have wanted but the parish priest persuaded her. It was hard speaking to him. He didn't know her mother well and Hannah resents the fact that he is running the show. She hates funerals and Catholic services are among the worst: so impersonal, the eulogies based on how good a Catholic you were. Merit points for piety. You could have climbed Everest, saved a child from drowning, discovered a cure for cancer, it didn't matter. All that would be ignored in favour of talk about meetings of the Legion of Mary. Well, Father McMillan won't have much to say about Ewa; she'd never been one for meetings.

Hannah stifles a yawn and fiddles with the sleeve of her black suit, pushing it back so she can sneak a look at her watch. Almost eleven o'clock; she's forgotten how interminable requiem masses are. The priest crosses the altar to the lectern. It's quite a show. He is impressive in his purple surplice. And immense. When he turns sideways he looks like everyone's favourite Quality Street, the one with the hazelnut and soft toffee. He starts to speak and Hannah sits up straight, attentive. Bland inoffensive statements about her mother wash over the congregation. She tries to relate what he is saying to what she knows about her mother ... devout Catholic, devoted mother and grandmother, loving wife to the late Jack Connor. He's wrong about the devout Catholic bit. Her mother was never particularly pious. Dad, yes. Always praying and always involved in church life. But not a creeping Jesus or anything: a good man. They'd been able to talk for a whole ten minutes about him. Ewa on the other hand, always kept herself apart, claimed her English wasn't good enough for all those church committees, even though she spoke it better than most. No, it's not a true account and Hannah's attention, never great at the best of times, wanders. She gazes round the church. It's pretty much as she remembers: the carved wooden Stations of the Cross, the uncomfortable pews, the green marble pillars supporting a stone canopy over the altar with INRI carved on it. It all looks much smaller than when she was a child.

Someone taps her on the shoulder and she jumps. Jesus! It's time for that handshake thing. Hannah hates this, leaning over to complete strangers and whispering 'peace be with you' as if it means something. She turns to Jim but he's staring straight ahead, lost in thought. The heat rises in her face as she shakes the hands of the three nearest people. She doesn't meet their eyes.

Thankful it's over, she allows herself to drift off into reverie, but there's worse to come. It's time for communion and the rest of the congregation wait for the family to go first. Hannah glowers at the priest and he beckons to the row behind. He must have forgotten they wouldn't be taking communion.

At last it is over and the congregation stands, waits for the family. Father McMillan nods at Jim and the boys, and together with two of the undertakers they lift the coffin and begin the slow walk to the hearse outside. Hannah's head is bowed as she follows, tears stinging her eyes. The congregation are singing the hymn she asked the priest to choose. He was shocked when she said the only hymns she remembered were God Bless Our Pope and Hail Glorious St Patrick. Muttering something about them 'not being ecumenical enough' he suggested the twenty-third psalm and the one they're singing now. Hannah has never heard it before and listens while the words rise into the air around her: *Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom, lead Thou me on! The night is dark, and I am far from home; lead Thou me on!*

It is raining, a smir of drizzle; Hannah stands inside the church door with her family and thanks people for coming. The line is never ending, mainly old women who probably have no idea whose funeral it is. It is always so with Catholic funerals. Hangers on. No, she is being unfair; they could have known her mother, how would she know? After innumerable thanks for coming, they are free to go to the cemetery.

Another shock. Hannah thought this, at least, would be private. When her father died more than twenty years ago, only the family went to the cemetery for the burial. Now it seems everyone comes. Can she have no peace to say good-bye?

She cannot bear to look at the crowd of onlookers as she takes one of the cords and holds it while the coffin is lowered into the ground. Behind her there is a mound of earth covered with Astroturf. The undertaker hands her a little dry earth and as she lets it drop onto the coffin, unreality sweeps over her.

The rest of the day passes in a haze of poor food and too many people drinking too much whisky. Hannah tries to catch Jim's eye as one of Ewa's old neighbours empathises with her, but warmed by the whisky and by the sight of so many of his relatives not seen since his own mother's funeral, he is busy enjoying himself and is not going to be prised away. He ignores Hannah and she is forced to listen as Betty tells her she knows how she feels, after all, she lost her dog last year. Hannah gapes at her, can't believe what she's hearing but the woman is genuine. How sad, Hannah thinks, to have no one to lose. So she smiles and nods and escapes as soon as she can. She walks past Jim with a glare, to which he responds with a big grin. She searches out her oldest son, David and sits down. He shakes her hand.

'Peace be with you.' He laughs as Hannah makes a face.

'You heathen.' She pulls her hand away. 'I find it hard you know... coming back to church. It's all changed. In my day all you did was sit and watch. None of this lovey dovey stuff.'

'No, it's not quite your thing, is it? When did you stop believing?'

Hannah shrugs, 'Nearly forty years ago. When I saw my first post mortem. They opened up the body and there wasn't a hint of a soul anywhere.' She smiles. 'I was very literal and I always believed the soul was there under your skin, a sort of internal vest. White of course - apart from the dirty marks

made by venial sins.'

David raises an eyebrow. 'Wow, mum! You were literal, weren't you? Sure you don't have Asperger's?'

'You young doctors, I don't know,' Hannah shakes her head. 'Always labelling people. It's appalling.'

'Come off it, mum. You're into labelling as much as anyone. Weren't you one of the first paediatricians to recognise Asperger's in Scotland? Labelled anything that moved I heard.'

They continue to argue. The affectionate bickering makes Hannah feel better. It's good to feel close to one of her sons for once. It's not often they get the chance to talk. His chat and the whisky keep her feeling of desolation at bay.

Across the room, she sees Sam watching her and immediately regrets the little jokes about Asperger's. David notices the change in her expression.

'Have they heard anything yet?'

'First appointment's next week.'

'Are you going with them?'

'No. I don't think that would be a good idea, do you?'

David shrugs, 'I think maybe Sam would appreciate the support.'

'Celia will be there. I wouldn't want to butt in.'

'Mmm,' David's face is closed, non-committal.

There's something he's not telling her but when she presses him he changes the subject and befuddled by too much whisky she lets it go.

Chapter Sixteen

It's the worst hangover she's ever had, worse even than the time in Greece when she drank nearly two bottles of retsina. During the night someone has trapped her head in a vice. Her mouth is drier than the Sahara. She can do nothing other than lie back and groan. The bedroom door creaks and she opens one eye, flinching at the bright sunlight. Jim stands over her, cup of tea in hand.

'Don't get up,' he gives her the china mug. 'I've called your secretary. She's cancelled your appointments for the next week.' He holds up a hand to silence her protests. 'Your mother died only a few days ago. You have to take some leave.' Jim has that look on his face, the one you can't argue with, and Hannah sinks back onto the pillow, thankful to let him take charge. She sips her tea, letting its warmth soothe her. When it is finished she pulls the covers over, sleep seems the best option.

It hits her hard when she awakens two hours later. She thought she had it under control but she was wrong. Grief pours out of her. There is no one left in the world to love her with the complete and utter unconditional love of a parent for their child. Hannah knows Jim loves her, and the boys, but there is nothing like the love of a parent. As soon as David was born, she realised that. Hannah also grieves for the relationship they never had; the unasked questions, the untold stories. Why was she so afraid to hear more about her half brothers, about Ewa's life in Auschwitz, about how she had escaped? She will never know the truth now.

It is too much effort to get out of bed, the depression she experienced when her father died, that stone in the stomach, that black weight, the

pointlessness of it all; it is all back. Multiplied by ten. She does get up however. Years of work have conditioned her not to lie for any length of time in bed; there is always something to do.

Hannah prepares breakfast: cereal and fruit like every day, though what she really wants is a fry up to help process the alcohol coursing through her. A bacon sandwich should do the trick. She searches the freezer and unearths an ancient packet of bacon. The cereal goes back in the box. She finds the frying pan and four rashers later she feels able to drive. She gets into the Golf and sets off for the nursing home to pick up the rest of her mother's belongings. The furniture has already been put into storage.

Everything is ready to take away. Hannah suspects Matron has someone lined up for the room.

'My dear doctor, how are you bearing up? Please sit down. Would you like some tea, coffee perhaps?' She chatters on. A long wiry hair curls out from her chin and Hannah tries not to stare at it as she drones on about what a lovely, friendly woman Ewa was. Hannah loved her mother but Ewa kept herself to herself and friendly is not the first word Hannah would use to describe her. She was reserved, a very private person and would have hated the false tributes rolling out of Matron's mouth. Any vaguely positive emotion that Hannah might have felt about Matron over the past week flees in the face of so much gushing. Hannah refuses the drinks offered and sits for the minimum time that is polite before rising to leave.

'Please keep in touch, doctor,' says Matron as she walks Hannah to the car. She stands for a moment waiting, as Hannah opens the boot and loads in the

seven boxes that contain what's left of her mother's life. There is something strange about Matron as she shakes Hannah's hand; her eyes keep flicking to Hannah's handbag. Only when she drives off does it dawn on Hannah that Matron expected a present. Shit. Yet another social gaffe. She imagines Matron bad mouthing her: the doctor with her huge salary and not a box of chocolates even. She'll put a cheque in an envelope when she has time; she should have thought of it before.

It's nearly two when Hannah gets home. She unloads the car and carries the boxes into the house. How little there is to show for her mother's life. Of course she got rid of most things before she moved into the nursing home. Now there are only her clothes and papers, family photographs, items of sentimental value and the wooden box. Hannah puts it to one side and with brisk efficiency goes through everything else. Two hours later, Ewa's belongings are sorted into three piles: one for Oxfam, one for friends and family to choose mementoes from, and the final one, her personal papers. Hannah picks up the box wondering whether she should read through its contents. She decides to wait; this is not a good time. There are other things to do. Best take the clothes to Oxfam while there's time. Moving swiftly she gathers up the black plastic bags and bundles them into the boot of her car.

Kilmarnock Road is busy, not a parking place to be seen. Hannah drives down one of the side streets and parks half a mile from the shops. She's been too ambitious. The bags are heavy and it is a real effort to carry them round to the shop. Needless to say, it is closed, shut at four p.m. It's nearly five. Hannah looks at the sign on the door exhorting donors not to leave donations on the doorstep. She looks at the red weals on the palms of her hands, puts down the

bags for a moment while she thinks what to do. There's a charity bin at the local Morrison's; she'll use that. Cursing, she picks up the bags once more and struggles back to the car.

Back at the house she makes coffee. Jim won't be home for two hours. Perhaps she should go through the insurance policies but Jim is an accountant, used to that sort of thing. She picks up the wooden box and opens it. The notebooks are still there, and the letters. Hannah takes out the baby's bonnet and strokes it. A family heirloom, there's not many of these; she'll give it to her next grandchild but for now it should go back in the box. As she puts it away, she sees a white envelope lying at the bottom. Hannah takes it out. On the front her mother has written her name. The envelope is fresh looking. She opens it to find several sheets of paper. At the top of the first, is the date. It was written on the night her mother died. Hannah puts on her reading glasses and sits down on the sofa.

Hannah's hands shake as she reads the last page of the letter. Her breath comes from high in her chest. A panic attack. Nothing is as it seems. All her life she has been someone else. She cannot focus; her vision is blurred. She concentrates, forces herself to read the last page again.

The only thing that remains is for me to tell you what I know of your mother, Anna Mickiewcza. She was eighteen years old and came from Warsaw. Her father was a Professor of Philosophy at the University there and her mother was a teacher. She had a brother Stefan who was two years older. Her family had disappeared a year before she was arrested.

She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was all it took in those days.

Anna was bright and funny and beautiful. When you were born she called you Sarah after one of the Italian girls but I wanted to remember Anna and so I changed your name. You look like her. She was kind. It was she who chose to help the two Jewish girls. She taught them some Polish and they taught her Italian. More than anything she wanted to be a student, to study languages. She had a gift, I think.

I feel better for writing it all down. I am sorry that we could not talk about this together. It was so hard to tell you about my Polish family, Marek, Tomasz and Piotr; it almost killed me to speak their names aloud. I just cannot say any more about my past.

Be clear about this though; you have always been loved. From the moment you were born in a hut in Auschwitz, your mother adored you and you gave hope to the other women. For me in the end it was more. You gave me a reason to live.

With all my love,

Ewa.

Agitated, Hannah springs up from the sofa; she needs to do something physical to blot out her thoughts. The day her father died, she cleaned all the windows in her house and scrubbed the kitchen floor. As she remembers this, she realises he was not her father. Not her father. Dear God. Her father was a soldier in a concentration camp, a bully and a rapist. She can't take it in; what it means. For several minutes she strides back and forth across the sitting room. A photo in a

pewter frame catches her eye. It is one of Hannah's favourites, a black and white picture of her and her mother (not her mother, she must learn to think of her as Ewa), taken in the early fifties when she was about six or seven. From a distance, the people in the photograph look very happy; Ewa has a hand on Hannah's shoulder and Hannah is gazing up at her, laughing. Ewa's smile is insubstantial, elusive and now that Hannah looks at it closely, it is tainted by sadness or is that her imagination? She picks it up. No wonder there is no resemblance between them. Hannah thinks of her friends who have spent the last few years moaning about how when they look in the mirror they see their mothers. Who do I take after, she thinks. Do I really look like Anna, or did Ewa write that to protect her? With a horrible lurch it comes to her why Ewa shouted at Ben that day. Dear God. What can she say to him, to David and Sam? Hannah stares again at the photo, looking for answers. Ewa's face gazes back and, overtaken by a terrible surge of rage and grief, Hannah hurls the picture into the fireplace. The glass catches on the edge of the grate and shatters. She feels no better. She wants to tear the room apart and her pacing becomes more urgent as she makes herself resist this impulse. In the end she resorts to a childish pummelling of cushions, taking her back to tantrums of infancy, except now of course, there are no mother's arms to restrain and calm her.

At last, her anger is spent. She lies down on the sofa and closes her eyes, exhausted. When she awakens an hour later she is more composed. Hannah has often heard people say that their world was turned upside down by something that happened to them. Until today she didn't really know what this meant. Everything has to be looked at differently. She tries to grasp the meaning of what she has read but all she can think is – I am not who I thought I was. She is

intelligent, logical, knows that not every child is a wanted child, but to be conceived in such a way? She retches, puts her hand over her mouth and runs to the bathroom. Luckily she has not eaten since breakfast. When Jim comes in, she is still there.

‘What on earth ...’ Jim helps her up from the cold tiled floor. She stumbles as Jim helps her to the bedroom. Once she is in bed, he offers her a cup of tea. She half sobs, half laughs. Tea is his answer to every problem.

Two hours later and she has told him. He is shocked, pours them both a large Bowmore. This isn’t like him; Jim drinks only wine and beer. His whisky disappears and he pours another. Hannah puts her hand over her glass. She doesn’t want another hangover. Not two days running. It is tempting though. She wavers.

‘What are you going to tell the boys?’

‘What?’ She wrenches her attention away from the whisky bottle. ‘Christ, Jim ... I can hardly take it in myself. I ... I don’t know. Nothing at the moment.’ She finishes her drink and gets up to get some water. At least she can dilute the damn stuff if nothing else.

‘Have you forgotten they’re all coming for a meal tonight?’

She closes her eyes. Six people expecting dinner and not a scrap of food in the house. The doorbell rings, loud and insistent.

‘Shit!’ she says. ‘Shall we pretend to be out?’ She giggles, near to hysteria. Jim puts his arm round her and says, ‘Go and freshen yourself up, I’ll book a table at the bistro.’ Hannah hesitates and he pushes her, ‘Go on.’ She goes into the ensuite bathroom and washes her face. She looks dreadful and doesn’t

want to face the scrutiny of anyone, least of all her sons. Her footsteps drag on the stairs and she pauses to control herself before entering the living room. The boys are settled with their beers and the partners have mineral water. No surprises about who's driving. She pours herself another whisky and ignores the catcalls. 'I've had a difficult day,' she says. Her tone says more than words can and they make no further comment though she catches Emma, David's wife, making a face at Jim and sees him shake his head in warning.

She asks Jim if he managed to book a table and apologises to the others for not having had the time to cook. It's a farce. The women know at once that she's forgotten they were coming but Hannah doesn't care. Her mood is dark.

The meal is a disaster. Hannah can't stop thinking about Ewa's letter. Several times one or other of her family tries to draw her into conversation but it is hopeless. She sits at the table, present in body only. At nine o'clock Sam, exasperated, puts his glass down on the table and says, 'What is going on here? Are you two having a fight or what?'

This is so far from the truth that Hannah bursts out laughing, louder as she takes in the mystified looks.

Jim says, 'Mum's having a hard time dealing with your grandmother's death. Remember it's only been a week since she died.'

They all nod and suddenly it's all not so bad after all. There are people to care for her. Then she remembers the letter. Ewa is not their grandmother. This doesn't affect just her. It's all of them. Hannah wants to tell them but she catches sight of Jim who shakes his head a fraction and she stops herself. He's right. This is not the best place to reveal significant family secrets.

Jim signals to the waiter for the bill and fifteen minutes later they are home. Sam makes coffee for everyone. Hannah drinks hers quickly and pours another. It's foolish to drink so much caffeine at this time of night but she wants to sober up before showing them the letter. But her plans are ruined when Emma announces that the baby needs fed in twenty minutes so they have to get back.

Later, in bed, Hannah is pleased that she hasn't said anything. She should speak to the boys alone. This won't be easy. David's wife, in particular has taken the old Roman marriage vow, 'wherever you go, I go too', literally. Hannah can't think of the last time she saw him without Emma. She'll let Jim deal with it she decides. She cannot imagine telling them and thinks perhaps she should photocopy the letter so that they all have a copy. Yes this is probably the best thing to do. Tell them to come round, give them a warning that what they'll read is not good and then give them the letters.

The next day is warm and sunny. One for the garden. Thank goodness she doesn't have to go to work, face her colleagues, their well-meaning condolences. She loses herself in weeding, pulling out great clumps of rose bay willow herb from a patch near the back door. It is mindless work, and she gets into the swing easily, feels a sense of achievement as the garden bed is cleared. But after an hour or so, thoughts encroach on her peace. Little episodes she had forgotten come back to her. She remembers how Ewa would leave the room every time the war was mentioned. One incident is very vivid. Her father (Jack, she must call him Jack) was a sociable man who liked to meet with other people. Ewa kept herself to herself mostly, saying that she found it hard to meet with friends, couldn't keep up with their conversation. Hannah was nine, maybe ten and her father - Jack, came in from work one day, said he'd invited a colleague for

dinner. His wife was Polish; she'd be company for Ewa. Ewa said nothing. Jack persisted, saying won't that be nice, Katerina says she will introduce you to other Poles, there's a group of women meet every Monday night. On and on he went, ignoring the signals. Hannah sensed her mother's discomfort but was surprised by the outburst when it came – I don't want to meet any bloody Poles – her mother never swore; the incident stayed with her. Understandable now. She wanted to forget her past. Other memories come back to her: Ewa holding the children for the briefest possible time, Ewa being curt to the point of impolite with a German family they met on holiday, Ewa never wasting even the tiniest amount of food. It all makes sense now she knows the truth.

It's hard to accept that Ewa is not her mother but finding out that Jack isn't her father is even harder. He was such a gentle man and she had loved him so much. And now to find out that her real father was a Nazi soldier, brutal, cruel. She can't stand it. She doesn't mind so much about her mother. No that's a lie. How can she pretend it's all right, not to have known her birth mother? What makes a parent? Surely when it comes down to it, Ewa and Jack are her parents. They were the ones who were there when she needed them, not this unknown Polish girl and a German soldier. She thinks over the letter that Ewa left. She hasn't re-read it but it is as if the words were engraved straight onto her brain. Then the baby was born and she wanted to live. Her birth had given both despair and hope to an eighteen-year-old girl. Eighteen. Hannah shudders at the thought of her child mother, alone and frightened in one of the worst places on earth. Yet not alone, for Ewa talks of her 'family', of how the women supported each other. She holds on to that. Ewa's letter makes it clear that there were supports there for Anna. Her mother. She yearns to know more about her. Rages that Ewa chose

not to tell her sooner; there were so many unanswered questions. Yet could she have done anything else? It was a difficult story to have to tell. It is all too confusing. Hannah doesn't know what to think; she is exhausted, puts down her spade and stumbles into the house. All she can think of is that she wants to sleep. She needs to escape her thoughts. Upstairs in her room, she takes off her outer clothes and slips into bed wearing only her underwear. The sheets are cool against her fevered skin. She closes her eyes and drifts off.

It is strange. Hannah knows she is dreaming. She must be, for she is holding Ben and he is a baby. Yet although she dreams, his body is solid, heavy on her lap. He grasps her fingers and she puts her hands over his. As she holds his hands in hers, she thinks how odd it is that she can feel the outline of each tiny finger. They are short and stubby, not like the long slender ones he has now. What kind of dream is this? It is wonderful to have this opportunity to hold your tiny child once again, and she hugs him closer. Closer until she is squeezing him. He wriggles and she holds on to him, realises what she is doing and tries to let go. But she can't. She has to wake up. She must wake up and in her dream she shouts at herself, wake up, wake up. Yet she sleeps on. More effort is needed. She shakes herself, is there outside her body, pummelling with all her strength. Her clothes are lying in a heap on the floor where she left them. With a huge effort she struggles out of the doom-laden sleep and wakes, stupefied. Blinking, she looks round for the child she so nearly smothered. There is no one there. A dream she tells herself. Nothing more. For a minute or two she is relieved then she thinks of Ewa and it all comes back to her.

Tomasz.

She is wide-awake now. For three weeks she has kept Ewa's revelations at the back of her mind. But now they are demanding her full attention. Somewhere in Poland lies a body, the remains of a small child. Hannah wonders where he is. Ewa said they buried him that evening. It must have been near to the farmhouse where they were hiding. Perhaps he lies there to this day, too deep to be disturbed by a plough or maybe his bones were dispersed sixty years ago by scavenging animals. Hannah hits her head with the palm of her hand to get rid of these thoughts; they are too disturbing. Underneath them lie ones that are darker: her mother, dead in the snow. What happened to her body? Hannah read somewhere that there are wolves in Poland. An image flashes in front of her: snow-covered fields that stretch unchallenged into the sky. The image changes as night falls and with it arrives a myriad of stars. A peaceful scene until the silence is broken by the hungry howl of wolves coming ever nearer. Hannah sobs. This is unbearable. She gets up from the bed and goes downstairs to phone Jim at work. She has done this only once before; twenty-seven years ago, when she thought Ben had meningitis.

She cannot speak when he answers the phone. His voice, business like at first, grows more impatient with each hello. He puts the phone down and she is left at the other end of the line, feeling as if the umbilical cord has been severed once more. She stares at the hand piece of the phone, thinks it needs a wipe; it is dusty. There is no cloth so she wipes it with her hand. As she does so, she notices she is wearing only her underwear. No wonder she is cold. She unwinds the phone cord, which is tangled and replaces the phone on the receiver. Immediately it rings with a shrill, insistent dissonance. She looks at it startled. Who could be phoning her? Hannah picks it up and Jim's voice comes through the air, asking

her if she is all right. Another voice says no she isn't all right, she doesn't feel right, nothing will ever be all right again. He tells her he'll come home at once. She holds on to the phone. She can't think what she is meant to do.

More ringing. The doorbell this time. Someone has their finger on it, ding dong, ding dong. Stop it. She drops the phone, shouts, puts her hands over her ears. Stop it. Glass smashes.

A voice cries out - No, I can't stand this. No, no, no. Ben is beside her with a dressing gown. Dressing gown? She is wearing only her underwear. When she looks at him, he is all wavy, blurred, out of focus. 'My baby,' she says and laughs.

Chapter Seventeen

Her mouth is dry; tongue sticking to the roof, throat arid and sore. A stale taste in her mouth. She runs her tongue round her teeth, testing. There is a furry coat on them, host to billions of bacteria. She must get up and brush her teeth. Hannah tries to sit up but her head swims and she slips back down on to the mattress. No one beside her. Where is Jim? She checks out the room, in case they've taken her away. White ceiling, green walls the colour of sage. She reaches out behind her and touches the headboard, carved wood as it should be. This is her bed. White cotton sheets and duvet cover. In the corner is a Lloyd loom chair with a jade green velvet cushion on it. The only other furniture is an ancient pine wardrobe and dressing table. It is all familiar, peaceful. If it weren't for her dry mouth she could be calm. She tries again. This time she manages to sit up. She takes a deep breath and pulls back the covers, swings her legs out of bed. When she stands up they barely support her. Somehow she reaches the bathroom, finds her toothbrush and cleans her teeth. She likes the way her tongue slides over them. It feels good. The door to the bedroom opens and in the mirror she sees Jim behind her.

'How are you feeling?'

'A bit wobbly.'

'We called the doctor and she gave you a tranquilliser,' he says. 'Thought it was best.'

So that's why she feels so odd, so far away, as if she is somewhere else. She tries thinking of the terrible things she found out yesterday. Sure enough, it doesn't hurt. It ought to but it doesn't. Good.

‘Do you want to talk?’ Jim says.

‘What about?’ she laughs.

‘Perhaps I gave you one too many tablets. About your mother.’

‘Which one?’ Her laughter edges on hysteria. Perhaps the pills aren’t as effective as she thought. What’s the name of that song that Sam played endlessly, one summer when he was home from university? The drugs don’t work. That’s it. She hums it. A good tune. Wasn’t it written about someone suffering from cancer, someone who dies? Her throat tightens.

Jim holds her while she weeps. ‘I don’t know what to do. I don’t know who I am anymore.’

‘I think you have to go there.’

‘Do you? Really?’

Jim releases her and sits on the bed. ‘Yes, you should go to Auschwitz, get a sense of the place.’

She sits down beside him. ‘You know, I think you’re right. I don’t know why, but I think it would help.’ She looks up at him. ‘Would you come with me?’

‘Of course I will.’

She falls silent, wondering if she is brave enough to face up to the past. But she feels more at peace than she has for some time. She lies back on the bed, feeling she could sleep ...

‘Don’t go to sleep,’ says Jim. ‘You’ll never sleep tonight if you do. And I want to talk to you about the boys.’

She stiffens. ‘What about the boys?’

He hesitates for a fraction of a second, 'I've told them.'

'Oh. I see. What did they say?'

He sighs, 'Much as you'd expect. They're shocked of course and really upset for you. But they're young. They'll cope with it.' He doesn't look at her as he says this.

'You're not telling me everything,' says Hannah.

Another sigh. 'No. I didn't want to worry you but I suppose you'll have to know eventually. Ben's taken it badly, much worse than the others. '

'He's worried about what mum shouted at him, isn't he?'

Jim nods. His eyes are sad. 'It was the first thing he said: "I look like the bastard don't I? That's why gran shouted at me." I didn't know what to say.'

'Oh Christ. Poor Ben.' Hannah can't imagine what Ben must feel. His looks have been a family joke for so long. David used to call him the changeling. They laughed about it, but now it doesn't seem funny at all. She pummels her pillows into shape and rests her head on them. 'Should I phone him, do you think?'

'Leave it for now.'

'What did Sam say?'

'He was interested in Tomasz, about how he was probably autistic.'

'Yes, he would be. But of course there can be no link.'

'Sorry, I'm not following you.'

'You know, between Tomasz' autism and Gabriella.'

Jim nods, 'Yes, I see. It's a coincidence, that's all.'

'Do they have an appointment for the CAT team yet? I feel as though I'm totally out of touch.'

‘First one’s tomorrow.’

‘That means they’ll get feedback in a month maybe more.’ Hannah’s stomach lurches at the thought. Not long now and they’ll know for sure. In some ways this is a good thing but in others she feels it’s too soon. She’s always had concerns about diagnosing too early.

‘What did the klingons say?’ Their private nickname for the boys’ partners.

‘They weren’t there. I thought it best to tell the boys on their own. I’m sure they’ll know by now though.’

Hannah sighs. Her sons must be devastated to think that their grandfather is not the kind old gentleman they barely remember but an unknown German rapist. She hopes they don’t set too much store on genetics. There is so much in the news these days about genes. Over simplified science. She faces it in her work all the time. Distraught mothers of out of control boys – his father was violent, do you think it’s in his blood? She wants to shake them out of this stupidity but patiently explains that ‘blood’ doesn’t work that way. They never believe her. It’s much easier to blame the absent man than look at how they handle their children.

‘What are you thinking about?’ asks Jim.

‘Genetics.’

‘You’re not worried that the soldier might have passed anything on? Some unknown disease?’

Hannah shakes her head. ‘Not diseases, no. It’s more about how Ben must be feeling. I hope he doesn’t think that because he looks like ...’ she can’t think how to finish this, stumbles, avoids. ‘I mean nothing like that can be passed

on.'

'You mean an inherited taste for rape and violence.'

'Christ. Say what you mean, why don't you?' Hannah manages a feeble smile. 'Yes, I suppose that is what I was trying to say.'

She falls silent again. Jim says he's going to make some tea and wanders off downstairs. Hannah feels a little better now she has voiced her fears. She thinks about the trip she knows she must make. She has to see Auschwitz and try to imagine what Ewa and her mother endured. Hannah is ignorant about so many things. Her father used to watch every documentary about the war that came on, but she sided with her mother and ignored them. Once she started to read a book about a concentration camp, found it upsetting, couldn't finish it. The casual brutality of camp life was too much to bear. Even as she laid it aside, she thought what a coward she was. Now she has to face up to it.

They plan the trip for October, two months away. By that time, the CAT team will have seen Gabriella and they will know whether or not she is autistic. She won't go to any of the assessment meetings, feels it is important to stay away from these but she does want to be around to offer support to Sam and Celia even if, as she suspects, Celia will spurn her.

Chapter Eighteen

Three weeks later Hannah returns to work. Her pigeonhole is stuffed with mail. It will take her ages to get through it all. Thank goodness she has no clients to see.

She sits at her desk with the mail piled high in front of her. She looks at her diary, which her secretary has started to fill with appointments for the next few weeks. How did she ever manage this job? There is so much to be done. She scans her diary. Damn. She is giving a lecture at a one day conference on autism the day after tomorrow. Usually she welcomes this break from her medical practice because she loves teaching. But it means preparation, going over notes, making sure she's bang up to date. She looks at her watch. It isn't nine o'clock yet. Mentally she fragments the day. An hour to read the mail, an hour for phone calls. The weekly allocation meeting takes over an hour. No time for lunch. Or coffee breaks. If she refuses to take incoming calls she might manage to look over her notes this afternoon. There will be no time tomorrow; Marian, her secretary, has filled every available slot. She has even double booked one appointment. God knows what will happen if both families turn up. Hannah buzzes through and asks for coffee. She hasn't the energy to tackle Marian about the double booking or the huge pile of filing and typing that has yet to be done.

Two fifteen. Hannah's head aches and she presses her fingers into her forehead to massage the pain away. It doesn't work and for the second time today, she takes two aspirins. In front of her is a file of lecture notes. The conference is open to parents as well as professionals. The morning session will be an overview of Autism Spectrum Disorders covering the history of autism,

incidence and diagnosis while the afternoon will look at services after diagnosis. Hannah takes out her notes on the history of autism and begins to read. She scans through the pages until she comes to what she is looking for.

Although there are documented case histories of people who were clearly autistic, it wasn't until the 1940s that autism was written about and discussed in any rigorous way. Bleuler (1911) had been the first to use the term but he used it to describe childhood schizophrenia. Kanner and Asperger produced their papers on autism just a year apart. From that time onwards there were clear diagnostic criteria for autism. Briefly, in autism there is a triad of impairments. The child's ability to communicate, to play and their imagination are all impaired. This will be discussed in detail later. Of course, it's not enough simply to describe a condition or syndrome; we want to know what caused it. In some conditions, the cause is very clear. Down Syndrome, for example, is caused by an additional chromosome, Spina Bifida is linked to a lack of folic acid. Other conditions such as Cerebral Palsy may be due to birth trauma or foetal distress during pregnancy. At this stage, it is not clear what causes autism. It may be that we are looking for a whole raft of causes and not one single culprit.

Naturally, there have been many theories about its cause. You will all be aware that many people blame the MMR triple vaccination. Others have linked it to an excess of mercury. Some think there may be some sort of genetic basis.

One particular theory that was very influential during the 1960s and 1970s was that of the refrigerator mother. I am going to go over this in some detail to show, firstly how important rigorous scientific research is and also to show how damaging theories can be, if they are not properly backed up by research.

In his 1943 paper, Kanner remarked that some of the mothers of the autistic children he was treating struck him as rather cold individuals. Later he admitted that he was wrong to attach so much importance to their so-called coldness. The damage had been done however. One of the people who latched on to his comments was Bruno Bettelheim. Bettelheim was a psychoanalyst who became famous for his work with disturbed children. His so-called orthogenic schools have been written about, been the subject of documentaries and latterly have been discredited by a number of writers. Before the war, Bettelheim was imprisoned in two concentration camps, Dachau and Buchenwald. During his incarceration he studied the prisoners and highlighted the phenomenon of the 'musselmanner', prisoners who were like the walking dead, who had lost all trace of humanity. He claimed that many of them were like autistic children. He saw this withdrawal as a disintegration of the personality and claimed that in both cases, the prisoners and the autistic children had withdrawn because they lacked hope. In many cases he insisted on the parents being kept from their children for months at a time as part of the 'treatment'. Bettelheim also made the outrageous claim that the parents wanted their children dead. The pain that this must have caused the families of autistic children is untold. Furthermore, this

concept of 'refrigerator mothers' led to a therapy – 'holding therapy', where the child was held tightly by his or her parents in an attempt to make them feel loved and wanted. We now know that autistic people are highly sensitive to touch. This so called therapy must have seemed like a torture.

The phone rings, Hannah puts the paper aside and picks up the receiver. 'Yes?'

'It's your son, doctor. Shall I put him through?'

'Yes,' Hannah waits for Sam's voice, her heart beating fast.

'Mum? It's me. We're just back from the clinic. You were right, she's autistic.'

Cautious, 'How do you feel about it?'

Silence.

'Sam?'

'What?'

'Christ, mum. Why did this happen to us?'

It's the question Hannah always dreads. 'Oh, Sam,' she says. 'I don't know. No one knows yet what the cause is. But it's nothing that you did.'

'I wish I was so sure.' His voice is bitter. 'I mean, how do you know it's not MMR? Celia's convinced it was that.'

'We've been through all this, Sam. There's absolutely no evidence.'

'But it all fits. She was fine until she was eighteen months old. Nothing was wrong until she had that blasted immunisation.'

Hannah closes her eyes, wishes she were anywhere but here. They've had

this conversation twice already. She knows Sam doesn't really believe it but Celia's nagging him all the time, sure there must be some external cause. As patiently as she can she goes through the facts: the study on which much of this belief is based was deeply flawed, a small number of cases studied, parents asked whether they believed MMR was to blame, the researcher in the pay of a company with an interest in promoting single vaccines.

'You're a scientist, Sam. You've read that paper. Surely you can see its flaws? In any case there's been loads of research, properly controlled studies and epidemiological studies. None of them have ever suggested that MMR is the cause.'

'I know. But Celia keeps on and on at me. She wanted to go for the single vaccines and I said no. Now, she's blaming me and I don't know what to say to her.'

'Is everything all right between you?'

'Not really. To tell the truth it hasn't been for some time and I don't know how we'll cope with this. It could break us.'

'I'm so sorry, Sam.' Hannah falls silent, not knowing what to say.

'If only we knew why she's autistic. It would help, I know it would.'

'Gabriella's your daughter. It's only natural that you want an explanation but the horrible truth is, at the moment we don't know for sure why it happens.'

'There's thought to be some genetic factor isn't there?'

'Yes ... I even thought we'd found it when your grandmother told me about Tomasz. He was so very obviously autistic. But of course ...'

There's no reply. Both of them thinking the same thing, no one knows

what lies in Hannah's background. And they never will.

'Are you there, Sam?'

A sigh, 'I'll have to go, get back to work.'

Hannah feels she's failed him in so many ways. She wishes ... she doesn't know what she wishes for. She looks down at her papers but her concentration has gone. She pushes them aside; they'll have to wait until tomorrow.

Chapter Nineteen

Hannah wants to know more about her birth mother. She reads Ewa's last letter over and over again and searches through the notebooks for clues but there is precious little there. One of the notebooks is in Polish and Hannah feels sure this holds the key. She spends a day deciphering Ewa's handwriting and looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary; her Polish is very rusty. But there is nothing about Anna in there. It is almost all about Ewa's first husband Marek, with some memories of Tomasz and Piotr. Hannah weeps as she reads about how her own babies reminded Ewa of Piotr. She tries to imagine how she would feel if any of her children had died so young but her mind shies away from it in terror. She can't bear it, can't bear to think how Ewa must have suffered.

There are sketches in the notebook: of babies and one of a man who must be Marek. Hannah stares at it, taking in his dark hair, his high cheekbones. He was very handsome. There are rambling sentences in the notebook, poignant references to the first years of their marriage. It's clear that Ewa loved him very much. Hannah wonders if Ewa ever loved Jack. He certainly loved her; his letters make that obvious. He risked a lot for her. One of the letters mentions getting forged papers for Ewa and Hannah – *I hope you don't mind but I said Hannah was my child. It makes things easier and in any case I love her like my own.*

In one of the other notebooks there is a reference to a psychiatrist's report written by a man called Broadside. Hannah has a memory of a breakdown Ewa had round about her fiftieth birthday. With shame, she remembers how she dismissed it as the neurosis of the menopausal woman. At the time she was not long qualified as a doctor, thought she knew it all. A conversation she had with

friends comes back to her. They were all carping about their mothers. Hannah had outbitched them all. *My mother is so jealous of me. She can't stand the fact that her childbearing years are over and mine have yet to come. She moans all the time about how she never sees me. Christ, I'm sick of it. I wish I had brothers and sisters to take some of the strain.* On and on she talked, bitterness about the relationship with her mother spilling out into a long dark night. The others joined in with little stories about their own mothers but Hannah barely heard them. *I mean, if she wanted more children why didn't she just get on with it and have them. Why all the weeping and wailing now?* How naïve she must have been. Secure with the confidence of a twenty five year old, thinking the worst that could happen is you might fail an exam. How wrong she was.

Ewa's words about Dr Broadside are bitter, making Hannah wonder what he said to her. She seems to have really hated him. Hannah searches through Ewa's papers again, looking for the report but there is nothing. She googles Dr. Broadside but nothing comes up. Eventually she recollects a trunk full of her father's things, up in their attic. Jim brings it down for her.

'Shall I leave you alone to go through it?'

'Do you mind?'

'Of course not. I'll be upstairs in the study if you need me.'

The trunk is a metal one, small. Probably issued to Jack in the army. Hannah doesn't remember. She is pleased they have kept it, thinks with a shudder of how she almost threw it out after his funeral and how Ewa urged her to keep it – *you have plenty of room in your house, who knows, one day you might want something from it.* As Hannah thinks about this she shivers and looks round. Imagination but she could swear she heard Ewa's voice saying – *I told*

you, didn't I? Ridiculous. She runs through to the hall and turns up the thermostat. It is uncommonly cold for June.

There is no lock on the trunk but the lid is a little warped and she has to tug hard at it. After a few seconds, it springs open. It is full of papers. Old bills, hundreds of them: electricity, gas, rates. She rummages through them and pushes them aside. They date back to 1947. What did Jack think he was doing? Hannah clears out the filing cabinet where her bills are stored every year. She keeps them for a maximum of two years except where they are for a guaranteed piece of work. These she keeps until the guarantee runs out. Clearly not everyone is as systematic as she is. Despite herself she slows down when she comes to the receipts he's kept. One, from a second hand furniture shop, is for the old pine furniture she has in her bedroom – One pine Victorian wardrobe and one dressing table, received with thanks the sum of Five pounds, three and sixpence. The last time she saw anything of similar quality it was priced at over a thousand pounds. The papers mount up in a pile around her. There are old school reports, drawings from an art class she attended, postcards she sent from France, Germany, Austria. He seems to have kept everything she ever produced as a child. She resists the impulse to read through it all. Near the bottom of the trunk is a brown envelope, A5 size. It has Ewa's name on it in her father's handwriting. She takes it out, feels the weight in her hand. It is sealed shut with sellotape. Hannah rips it open and shakes the papers out on to the floor: letters from Ewa to Jack, a letter from the Home Office granting Ewa British Citizenship, a photocopy of Hannah's birth certificate – she has the original somewhere. Hannah picks this up and wonders how much Jack had to pay in bribes to get this piece of paper with not a word of truth on it. There is another envelope, also

sealed. Hannah opens it. There are several sheets of A4 paper inside, with one smaller piece attached. The A4 sheets are typewritten but the scrap, which looks as if it was torn out of a notebook, has her father's handwriting on it. She puts on her glasses.

Dear Ewa,

You tried to hide this from me but I found it of course. I am sorry that you didn't feel you could confide in me but I fear that you never really loved me and that I was nothing but a way out of continental Europe for you. I don't regret our marriage. Although she is not my child, Hannah has brought me a great deal of joy and for that I thank you. I do think you should tell her about her background. We all have a right to know the truth.

Jack

Hannah's hands are shaking as she reads it. It is as if all the emotion suppressed in that little piece of paper is channelled through her. She puts it down and blinks back tears. There is more to read. The A4 sheets are creased as if someone had crumpled them up to throw away and then thought better of it. Hannah smooths them and starts to read.

Glasgow Institute of Psychotherapy

Report - 19th June 1969

Re: Ewa Connor (13/4/19)

27 Pollokshields Ave

Glasgow

Assessment carried out by Dr J Broadside

Introduction

Ewa was referred to the Institute by her GP in April 1969 as a private patient. She was seen in the Institute on three separate occasions for the purposes of assessment. The primary reason for referral was depression. This is an assessment report based on interviews with the patient.

Background

Ewa is a small, dark haired woman who is quiet and reserved in her demeanour. Ewa was born in Warsaw, Poland. Her father was a clerical worker, mother a housewife and she was the oldest of four children. She described her childhood as happy. In 1936 the family moved to Krakow and she began training as a nurse. Ewa claims she was an intelligent girl and wanted to study medicine but family finances didn't allow this. Almost immediately she met her future husband, Marek. They married in 1938. Their life together was reportedly happy until Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Ewa's husband was a communist and fought in the resistance until a bullet wound meant he was put out of action. According to Ewa, there was some anti resistance feeling in Krakow because the Nazis took such terrible acts of revenge if any of their soldiers were killed or even injured by the resistance. As they felt so unsafe, they fled to the countryside and went into hiding. Marek's sister gave them shelter in the cellar of her farmhouse. By this time in late 1943, they had two children: Tomasz aged three and Piotr, who was two months old when they went into

hiding. Ewa described Tomasz as a difficult child who ran up and down the confined space without cease and who obsessively built up towers of bricks. During their period of captivity, the Nazis searched the cellar. The family hid in a gap behind a false wall. Ewa was terrified Tomasz might start to scream and she held her hand over his mouth while the cellar was being searched. Unhappily this action led to the child's death. Shortly after, they were betrayed by a neighbouring farmer and transported to Auschwitz. Ewa was separated from her husband and remaining child during the transport and on arrival at Auschwitz had a miscarriage. It is likely, though not certain, that the infant Piotr was immediately gassed. Ewa knows her husband survived for at least a month after they arrived at Auschwitz for he tried to contact her through another prisoner. She never saw him again.

During her time at Auschwitz, Ewa made friends with a young woman called Anna who was also from Warsaw. She had been captured during one of the periodic roundups carried out as a means of terrorising the population. Ewa described her as a beautiful young woman who helped bring meaning back into her (Ewa's) life. Anna and another woman, Karla, were relentlessly optimistic in the face of death and despair. They managed to help two young Italian Jewish girls and for a time their 'family' of five was as happy as anyone could be in such terrible circumstances. Unfortunately three things happened to disturb their equilibrium.

Anna had been on the same transport to Auschwitz as Ewa. During this journey she was sexually assaulted and almost raped by a German soldier. A month after arrival, he recognised her during a roll call and this time succeeded in raping her. Anna was naturally deeply disturbed by this but with the help of the others she transcended the experience. Then a further tragedy. The Italian sisters were late for roll call one evening and as an example to the other prisoners they were severely beaten and left out all night in heavy snow. Not surprisingly, they died. Shortly after, Anna discovered she was pregnant as a result of the brutal rape. Anna went into a decline at this news, in spite of Ewa and Karla's efforts to encourage her to remain optimistic. Ewa describes her as a 'musselman', which is what prisoners called those who had given up hope and become resigned to their fate. It was as if all her spirit had gone from her. Ewa and Karla continued to support her. They made plans to hide the child. Karla was part of the camp resistance. Like Ewa, she had been a communist. She was able to organize many things and recruited Ewa also into the resistance. Together they were able to procure items of food to help build up their own and Anna's strength. Anna gave birth to the child, a girl, a few days before Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army. With the birth of the child, Anna rallied and Ewa claims that Anna regained the will to live. All the women in their block helped keep the child hidden. They seemed to have seen her as some sort of totem or mascot. As is well

documented, the SS chose not to allow the prisoners to stay at Auschwitz. Instead they took them on the infamous death march. Both Anna and Karla died on the death march from Auschwitz. Ewa was not clear about what had happened to Karla but thought she probably died of hypothermia. Anna had been shot through the head, presumably for going to her friend's aid. Ewa escaped and found her friends' bodies. Miraculously the baby was still alive. Ewa took the child, found a barn and hid there for three days until soldiers from the Red Army found her. During this time Ewa claims she managed to breast-feed the baby. Ewa was sent to Germany where she said she had relatives and ended up in the British sector where she met and married a Scottish soldier, moving to Glasgow not long after. She claimed the child was her own and her husband accepted this story without demur. When they came to register the child she somehow managed to persuade her husband to say the child was his.

Ewa claims she integrated well into Scottish society. She chose not to mix with other Polish exiles but devoted herself to learning English (which she speaks extremely well) and bringing up her 'daughter', Hannah. Unfortunately the relationship between Hannah and Ewa is not always easy. Ewa says she was a difficult child and continues to be a difficult adult.

Current situation

Ewa had a breakdown on the night of her fiftieth birthday.

A surprise birthday party where friends jumped out at her from the dark seems to have precipitated a flashback to her capture by the Nazis. In turn, this brought the death of her child to the forefront of her memory. Ewa's personality, which she had taken care to build up over the course of the twenty-five years since the war, started to disintegrate. It is my opinion that she needs intensive psychotherapy in order to reintegrate her personality and to help reconcile her to several traumatic events in her life. One of these in particular needs to be urgently addressed. This is the death of Tomasz, which I have analysed below.

Analysis

From Ewa's description of Tomasz, it is clear he was autistic. He had all the classic signs: lack of imaginative play, no desire to communicate, no empathy. Although Ewa claims she loved this child, I would hypothesize that she saw him as a rival for Marek's love. During my interviews with her, she reiterated several times how much she loved her (first) husband. I asked her if Tomasz was a planned child and she looked at me with little comprehension. At that time in Poland, a Catholic country, there was little in the way of contraception. Ewa, in spite of her proclaimed intelligence, told me she did not practise birth control. This was presumably the case for many young women in this rather backward country. She claimed that she was delighted to have a child, and that Marek was too. However, given that they had no choice in the matter, it is more

likely that they were ambivalent towards the pregnancy. There is much evidence from numerous case studies that autism is caused by the cold attitude of the parents towards the child. The child at a very early age senses this coldness and chooses to withdraw from the world. Bettelheim himself suggested that the parents in such cases wanted the child dead. This particular case needs urgent treatment because this wish has been acted out. At such a distance, it is not possible to determine whether Ewa's suffocation of her son was deliberate or accidental. Therapy might uncover this. It was most likely an accidental act although Ewa herself has doubts about this and quoted Freud to me saying there is no such thing as an accident. Certainly her fears have hindered her relationship with her daughter and she admitted that she hardly ever cuddled Hannah, leaving this to her husband. Even today, Ewa presents as a cold person with little natural warmth.

Conclusion

I would recommend that Ewa undertake a course of psychotherapy to enable her to come to terms with her past. Until she does this, she is unlikely ever to be able to have full, loving relationships with her family.

Joseph Broadside, Consultant Psychotherapist

Hannah looks at the report in disbelief when she finishes reading. A surge of rage overwhelms her. She wants to rip it into tiny pieces and throw it away. No wonder it is crumpled, anyone who had half a brain would want to destroy it. Poor Ewa. To go for help and then to be told nonsense such as this. How she wishes Ewa had spoken to her so that she could have reassured her. She could have told her how Bettelheim was discredited and that no one believed this theory about refrigerator mothers any more. She thinks with regret of the time Ewa asked her about it and how dismissive she was – it's a lot of nonsense. No serious attempt to explain, too impatient, the busy professional. All those years of training and she didn't pick up that Ewa wanted to talk about it.

She tidies away her father's papers, exhausted. This report must have been a terrible thing for him to read. Poor man, she is sure he loved Ewa and has no doubt that she herself was adored by him. A good man. A phrase used about him at his funeral comes into her mind – one of nature's gentlemen. It was true.

Despite the horrible nature of the report, one good thing has come from it; she feels more understanding towards Ewa. Ewa must have been devastated at this report, and Jack too. How must he have felt reading this analysis of his wife? Not to mention Ewa's revelation that she'd never stopped loving her first husband. What a mess.

Jim pokes his head round the door. 'Drink?'

'Yes, I'd love a drink, whisky please.'

'I've opened some wine.'

'That's fine.' It isn't. She desperately needs the sting of whisky to help numb her but she'll make do with what's there.

Hannah tells Jim about the report, watches carefully for his reaction.

‘I have to say I did wonder about Ewa’s feelings for Jack. She always seemed to be keeping something back. I thought he was keener than she was.’

‘I know. I thought she could be a bit distant at times. With me too.’

‘You don’t think –’

‘No, I don’t think she was a refrigerator mother.’ Hannah’s voice is tight with rage, not at Jim but at the writer of the report. ‘I think she was traumatised from her time in Auschwitz and also from what happened to Tomasz, to her whole family. I’m sure she did love both dad and me but she had difficulty in showing it. I certainly don’t think she subconsciously wished for Tomasz to be dead. Christ, what rubbish.’ She drains her glass in one gulp and reaches for the bottle.

‘I know and when you think of Gabriella, how loved she is, by Celia, Sam, all of us. It’s such obvious nonsense.’

‘Will you show the report to anyone?’

‘I don’t know. At the moment I want to throw it in the fire.’

‘I wouldn’t do that. You might regret it.’

Hannah shrugs, ‘Mmm, maybe.’ She thinks for a moment. ‘No, you’re right. I can’t destroy it. It’s a reminder of the damage that psychiatry can do. I’ll keep it.’

Jim stares at her with suspicion. ‘You’re going to use it in your work, aren’t you? For that chapter you’re working on, about the refrigerator mother.’

Hannah looks guilty. ‘Would it be so awful?’

‘Yes.’

Hannah purses her lips. He’s right, as he always is and she’s horrified that she could ever have thought of it.

Chapter Twenty

With only four weeks to go until their trip to Krakow, Hannah starts to research Auschwitz. There are books, survivors' accounts, which Jim has bought but she doesn't read them, fearing she will find them too harrowing. Instead she uses the web. There is an official site for Auschwitz, which gives her basic information: opening times, the layout of the camp, its history. Every evening for a week she spends hours going through this and other similar sites. One claims that twenty five million people have visited the Auschwitz complex. The vastness of the number gives her hope, makes her think that there is a will for this not to happen again. This hope is dashed when by accident she finds a site denying the Holocaust. She reads a few paragraphs in disbelief before shutting it down. It leaves her feeling contaminated.

The official site has a section for those wishing to try to find names of those who may have been held there. In stilted Polish she writes to the museum with her mother's name and the approximate dates of her time in Auschwitz. The reply is surprisingly quick. Her hands tremble as she tears open the envelope. As she expected there is no trace of Anna. The letter informs her that the Nazis destroyed vast numbers of records in their attempt to cover up their crimes. Hannah stares at the print willing it to say something different, tell her that they have found details, a photograph taken of Anna on entry to the camp, a small pile of personal belongings. But of course it doesn't.

Later that day she has another idea; she'll try to find out more about her mother's family. It shouldn't be difficult; she knows the family name and that her grandfather was a philosophy professor. She says nothing to Jim. It's foolish she

knows, to think she might find out something after all these years. For a day or two she swithers, then thinks – what the hell – and sends an email to the university asking for information on Professor Mickiewicz. Every day for a week, she checks her inbox, hoping for a reply. When it comes, it is brief – no information, all files were destroyed during the war. She is surprised by how devastated, how angry she is. Sits in front of the computer with tears streaming down her face until she can no longer read the words. Her anger at the terse message is unreasonable, worse than her response to the Auschwitz letter. She had no idea that she was relying so much on there being something tangible, a personnel file with a date of birth perhaps, to give her a sense of belonging. It is not to be.

The flight to Krakow is full. Hannah has a window seat near the front of the plane, her favourite position where she can see all that's going on. In the end, only Jim is with her. The boys would have come but Hannah did not press them. This is a journey she needs to do on her own, or as near to that as she can bear. The stewards check everyone to see they are belted in, then mime the safety routine to a tape recording. Hannah doesn't watch or listen; she's heard it a hundred times before. The voice of the captain comes on the tannoy to warn the cabin crew to take their seats for takeoff. Hannah settles back in her seat. This is the best part of the journey. She loves the exhilaration of the rush along the runway followed by the gentle rise into air. In the aisle seat, next to Jim, a woman sits with her hands gripping the armrests. Scared to death, what a shame. The aeroplane reaches the runway, stops for a few seconds and then it's off. Hannah thinks it's like a schoolboy racing to leap over a large gap. There is that

sort of brash confidence about it. As the plane banks she looks down at the countryside below. It is unfamiliar; the flight leaves from Gatwick and she has never flown from there before. She tries unsuccessfully to make out landmarks but the landscape is flat, bland suburbs, a contrast to the hills and lochs you see on a clear day setting off from Glasgow. Within seconds she turns to her book. Beside her, Jim reads too. He is reading yet another book about Auschwitz, has tried to get her to read it too but she is not ready for such things yet.

They have rented a car from Krakow airport. When they get to the stand, it is closed and there is no sign of anyone around. A notice on the window of the kiosk says 'Back, ten minutes.' It is tattered; for all they know it could have been there for ten years. Hannah feels her patience slipping away. She is spoiling for a fight. 'Damn Poles,' she mutters every few seconds. 'Mum was right not to want to get involved with them.' Jim shakes his head when he hears her.

'For heaven's sake,' he says, 'calm down.' This infuriates her more and she stomps off to explore the airport. There is not much to see. This is not Heathrow or even Glasgow. Just a small provincial airport with a small bookshop, a cafeteria and endless car hire stalls, all of them open, except the one that matters of course. She goes to the lavatory and washes her face, takes her time. She tells herself to get a grip; the car will be ready when she returns.

It is; she can see Jim talking to someone at the kiosk. Her bad mood lifts as she strides towards them.

The mood returns when she hears what Jim has to say. 'There's only one car left,' he says as she joins him. 'It's tiny. What do you want to do?'

Her jaw hurts from clenching her teeth so tightly. 'Get another?' She

indicates the other car hire offices.

‘Not possible. You have paid for this already.’ The young man tries a placatory smile.

‘We paid for a normal sized car, not a toy,’ Jim’s face flushes. ‘And there’s no radio and no air conditioning. We specified both when we booked.’

Still smiling, the young man points to the clause that says cars can be changed at the company’s discretion. Jim’s face is scarlet. Hannah places a hand on his arm. ‘It’ll be fine. We can write to complain when we get home. Let’s get to the hotel.’

Jim is not pleased. This is most unlike him and Hannah thinks he too must be finding this trip hard. They sign the necessary papers, take the keys and follow the man to the car park. The car is indeed small. Their cases don’t fit in the boot. Hannah puts on her sweetest smile for the young man. She suspects some sort of fiddle. ‘We will of course be sending a full letter of complaint to your company.’ He smiles back and shrugs.

The hotel, on the outskirts of Krakow, is more sophisticated than they expected. It is modern, very clean and comfortable but with none of the anonymity of the large corporate hotels. Hannah’s mood lifts as she looks round the large bedroom with its white-emulsioned walls, pretty patterned bed cover and curtains. There are two comfortable armchairs and a television. A door leads to the ensuite shower room, sparkling clean, and roomy.

Hannah bounces on the bed, testing the springs. ‘How much did this cost?’

‘Virtually nothing. A third of what it would cost in western Europe.’

‘Really? What a bargain. Maybe we should have come here before.’

‘Have you forgotten what we’re here for?’ Jim is not in a good mood. Hannah leans over and kisses his cheek; it rasps on her lips, he needs to shave. ‘Of course not, but before we start on the really difficult things I’d like us to relax. Let’s go into the city centre, stroll around. I’d like to get a feel for the place.’

The city centre is another pleasant surprise. A large square, the Rynek, dominates. Jim looks at his guidebook and pronounces it the largest mediaeval square in Europe. Most of the buildings are well preserved; some are being renovated, covered with scaffolding and plastic sheets.

All round the outer edges of the Rynek are café-bars and restaurants. Hannah and Jim stroll across the square stopping now and then to look at menus. They choose a restaurant on the southern side. It is in a building that looks very old. It may once have been painted bright yellow but this has faded now to dusty ochre. In several places the paint is blistered, peeling back to show the shabby grey stone beneath. There are tables outside and they sit down for a few seconds before a sudden shower pushes them inside. For a moment they stand in the doorway, blinking at the sudden gloom. Gradually they make out the interior, wood panelled walls hung with what looks like original artwork, an assortment of tables and chairs, none of them matching, a stone flagged floor. A few people are sitting around the tables, not many for it is past the tourist season. Hannah falls in love with it at once. It is exactly the sort of place she tries to find whenever she goes abroad. Somewhere that is different from what she already knows. It is becoming more difficult to find anything original as every city centre

fills up with copies of restaurants and shops that are established all over the world. This place reminds her of a restaurant in Prague that she visited with Jim nearly thirty years ago. There is a smell of spice in the air, paprika perhaps, mingled with other cooking smells.

She pushes through to find a table. There is one in the corner with a mirror behind. When they sit down she says, 'This is exactly like that -'

' - restaurant in Prague. The one where you insisted on ordering Steak Tartare because you thought it looked delicious.' Jim laughs at the memory.

'Mm. And I made you give me your ordinary steak instead. I still don't believe it's legal to serve up raw meat to humans.'

A waiter brings them a menu. They laugh as they spot Steak Tartare on the first page. 'I will if you will,' says Jim.

'I'll give it a miss, thanks. What I'd really like is a salad.'

As they eat, they talk about their plans for the next day. In the morning they'll drive to Auschwitz and probably spend most of the day there. They haven't thought about what to do after. Jim knows a lot about the camp now that he's read so many memoirs. He starts to tell her about the one he is reading now, *Five Chimneys*, by a Romanian woman doctor but Hannah can't take it in. She knows she should concentrate but her mind won't focus. Part of her thinks she is trying to protect herself.

'Isn't that terrible?' he says when he finishes the story.

Hannah has no idea what he has said. But she nods anyway. 'Terrible,' she repeats. 'Just terrible.' She puts down her knife and fork even though she is only half way through her meal. Her appetite has gone. 'Please, can we talk

about something else?’

They try various topics: the city, the flight, Jim’s work, but the visit to Auschwitz hangs over them and after half an hour they fall into silence. Jim signals to the waiter and pays up. Outside as they start on the walk back to the hotel, Hannah says, ‘Do you think I’m a good mother?’

Jim stops and peers down at her. ‘Of course. What brings this on?’

She shrugs, ‘Nothing.’

‘Come on. You can’t ask a question like that without a reason.’

Hannah says nothing. She isn’t sure why she suddenly came out with such a loaded question. Naturally Jim would say she’d been a good mother but she has her doubts. ‘Sometimes I wonder...’

‘What?’

‘Well, other people are more openly affectionate than me. I was never one for cuddling the boys. It was always you they went to for comfort.’

‘Mm.’ It could mean anything. They walk on in silence. Hannah tries again. ‘I mean, even now, they don’t hug me or even give me a peck on the cheek. And I was like that with Ewa.’

‘Why have you stopped calling her ‘mum’?’

‘She wasn’t my mother.’ Hannah’s voice trembles.

‘Oh come on, Hannah. What do you mean by mother? Do you really think that only a blood parent is the real thing?’

‘Of course not.’ Hannah feels the tightness in her voice. Why is he persisting with this?

‘Ewa was your mother. She saved you from a certain death. She brought

you up to be a good, kind, decent person. She wasn't perfect, but so what? No one is.'

They arrive at the hotel and Jim stops talking as they collect their key. As soon as they are in the room he goes into his suitcase and brings out a bottle of malt whisky. Glenmorangie. He must have bought it at Gatwick. There are no glasses, only plastic cups in the bathroom. He pours them both a generous measure and adds a little water to his before draining it in one.

'You weren't the perfect mother, Hannah. And I wasn't the perfect father. We did our best though. Made mistakes, tried to put them right. And they're fine boys.'

'Ben is drinking again.' Damn, where did that come from? That's supposed to be kept firmly at the back of her mind, not brought out and aired. Ever.

'No. He's not.' Jim holds up a hand as she starts to interrupt. 'He was for a while but it's under control again. Has been for the past few weeks.'

'How do you know?'

'We talked about it. Several times. It was when you were ill, so don't go beating yourself up about it.'

'Why?'

'Work. He had several contracts on the go at once. He wasn't sleeping well, so he started having a whisky before going to bed. Before he knew it, he was drinking half a bottle.'

Hannah sits down on the bed. 'Are you sure he's ok?'

'Yes.' Jim hesitates. 'Actually, he's thinking of leaving the job and

retraining.'

'As what?'

'A teacher. He thinks it'll be less stressful and he wants to do something socially useful.'

'A teacher?' Hannah closes her eyes and yawns. 'Yes, I can see him as a teacher. But I don't think it'll be any less stressful. And the pay's rotten. Still there are all those holidays.' She looks up at Jim. 'Why do they never talk to me?'

'They're boys. They find it hard.'

'I find it hard, you mean. You know, we did a silly quiz at work a few months ago. One of the speech therapists brought it in. It was one of these things that tells you how masculine or feminine your brain is. Mine was the most masculine.'

Jim shrugs, 'So?'

Hannah drains her whisky. 'There were at least five men there. None of them got anywhere near my score. I had little empathy, could read maps, wanted to list things... all masculine traits.'

'Are you telling me you're really a man and I'm gay?' Jim makes a face of mock horror.

Hannah isn't in the mood. 'I'm serious. Sometimes I think I'm on the spectrum.'

'What spectrum?'

'The autistic spectrum. Mild, obviously. But on the spectrum. Perhaps Gabriella got it from me.'

Jim loosens his tie. 'Well, you're the expert.' Silence. 'You don't really

think you're on the spectrum, do you?'

Hannah hesitates, 'No, of course not. It's just ... well with Gabriella's diagnosis and everything, I've been wondering where she got it from.'

'Does she have to have got it from someone?'

'No. But I wish I knew what caused it.'

Jim takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. 'I'm sure we'll find out one day.'

'You know, sometimes I get a tiny insight into autism through my own behaviour.'

'Do you?' Jim sounds surprised. 'In what way?'

Hannah yawns again. 'I don't know. Too tired to think it through. I'm going to bed. You coming?'

Jim shakes his head. 'No, I'll go for a quick walk I think.'

Hannah lies in bed trying to sort her thoughts. It was too difficult to try to explain to Jim but it is true what she said. Sometimes she gets an insight through her behaviour of what it must be like to be autistic. The way she organises her kitchen cupboards, all the tins of one type together. Not unusual unless of course you do as she does, get up in the middle of the night to check they're all in their place. Unable to sleep until she knows for sure that the four tins of tomatoes are at the back of the cupboard, all with their name facing out. It's anxiety, of course, not autism. It's not as if she screams out of control if things are not as they should be. But it's enough to give her a sense of what the panic must be like for a child trying to make sense of their world. Out of the corner of her eye she sees that the wardrobe door is not quite shut and gets out of bed to fix it. Impossible to

sleep if she doesn't and she needs her sleep to face up to the next day.

Chapter Twenty-one

It is about thirty miles to Auschwitz. The road is terrible. Twice they have near misses when cars overtake them on blind bends. One cuts in so close Hannah shuts her eyes and braces herself for the collision. She is relieved when they reach the town but their journey isn't over. The concentration camp is not well signposted and they drive around for another fifteen minutes before they find it.

Jim parks the car and gets out. Hannah sits on in the car. She wishes she could have a drink or a cigarette, even though she doesn't smoke – something to take her mind off this place.

'Are you coming?' Jim knocks on her window.

'You go on, I'll be with you in a minute.' Hannah watches as he walks through the gates. When he's out of sight she gets out of the car. It could be a car park for anywhere. She takes a deep breath; the air tastes no different here. Over by a tree, a couple sit eating sandwiches. The day is gloomy, overcast and it starts to rain. It's soft rain as they say at home; rain that hovers in a mist around you. Hannah runs to catch up with Jim. He has signed them up for a tour. Entry is free but you have to pay for a guide. As they wait for the tour to begin, Hannah tries to read the notices on the wall but she takes nothing in.

The Polish guide struggles with her English. 'Here we have the suitcases of the selected. All the cases have names on them. Everyone was told they must have their names on the front.'

They are in a room with a huge display case taking up half the space, in which suitcases are scattered in huge piles from floor to ceiling, some open, some closed. Hannah looks away. A few minutes ago they saw a roomful of hair, black, brown, faded yellow; the cabinets there held examples of the cloth that was made from it. It didn't look particularly soft or warm, a thin grey weave. Not much protection against the cold winds from the east. There were spectacles too; that world famous image of piles of twisted half melted frames. Somehow though, names make it all too personal.

The guide begins to speak again, draws their attention to the names and the dates of birth on some of the cases nearer the front.

'Here we have the suitcase of a young girl. Her date of birth was 17 December 1921, so she was twenty three, maybe twenty four when she died.'

In silence the group stares at it. The suitcase beside it, battered brown leather, has a boy's name written on it in white paint. Piotr. Her heart gives an uncomfortable thump; she ignores it, it is too much of a coincidence, many Piotrs will have died here. As she tries to decipher the surname, the man beside her exclaims, 'Look, this boy here! He was born in 1943. Same as me!' He smiles. No one acknowledges him. The group moves on to the next building. On a notice next to the entrance Hannah reads 'evidence of the crime against humanity.' She loiters at the door,

'I don't think I can take much more.'

Jim hugs her. 'I know. Do you want to go?'

Hannah shakes her head. She has to see this through. They join the others and slip into line to gape at the piles of shoes, the heaps of enamel plates, the crutches and prosthetics taken from the disabled.

Walking slowly, they move on to the block where there is 'evidence of the final solution'. The guide stops and points to a pile of canisters. 'In these cans there was pellets of Zyklon B and when these hit the air, poison gas was released. It take about twenty minutes to kill the prisoners, less on a hot, damp day like this. The Nazis kept the room closed for half an hour or so. To make sure all were dead.'

One elderly man wipes his eyes. No one says a word. The guide walks away and subdued, the group follow. When she stops at the next display, Mr. Same-as-me has a question. 'Did it hurt?'

The elderly man gasps, someone else mutters, 'For God's sake.' Hannah is stunned at his naivety, if it is naivety for he is still smiling. The guide shakes her head, unable to answer and moves on. The man isn't particularly worried that he doesn't get an answer.

Jim whispers to Hannah, 'What's with him, do you think?'

She shrugs. 'Don't know. Bit simple maybe?'

Outside, the walls of the corridor are lined with photos of people who were prisoners at Auschwitz. The photos are three deep, on either side of the corridor and stretched as far as you can see. All hung in an identical way. All those eyes, watching. Hannah walks along, studying the faces. The photos were taken when the prisoners had arrived. Each photo has a name, date of birth, occupation, date of arrest and date of death, usually only a few months after arrival. At first, Hannah thinks they've only put up photos of men, then she registers the Kasias, Marias, Katerinas; women desexed by shaven heads and shapeless prison clothes. She comes to an Anna and stops. No, she is too old to be her mother. A notice tells her that there is a roll book of prisoners' names.

Perhaps she will look there later, then she remembers that someone has already checked and found nothing. How can there be nothing to show that someone existed? It's inconceivable.

She takes in the diversity of people represented here. A few of the photographs have flowers tucked behind their frames. The odd rose, carnation, purple hydrangea head. Some fresh, some with petals drooping towards the ground.

Hannah turns to speak to Jim. 'Did you ever read *Huis Clos*?'

'I don't think so. What is it?'

'A play by Jean-Paul Sartre. I read it at university when I was going through an existentialist phase but I only remember one quote from it ... "L'enfer, c'est les autres." Hell is other people.'

'Yes, that's very appropriate for here.'

'What?' Hannah frowns, 'Oh, I see. No I wasn't thinking about that. It's set in the afterlife, in a waiting room. At first when people arrive they can see back down to earth. Because people still remember them. But later, as they're forgotten, they can't see anything on earth.'

Jim bends down to pick up a flower that has fallen. 'You've lost me.'

'Well, all these people here.' She gestures towards the photos. 'Who remembers them, except in a general sense? Are they all stuck in a faceless waiting room, hoping to see out, but unable to because there's no one left to think about them? And then, every so often, a distant relative comes along and puts a flower behind a photo and one of them gets a glimpse of the real world.'

'Mmn, I see what you mean.' Jim sounds doubtful nonetheless. He walks on ahead of her.

Hannah has an idea. It won't go away. She'll read every single name to let them know that they are remembered even if only for a brief second. She walks back to the doorway and starts to read. All along the corridor. One side done. She looks at her watch. It has taken fifteen minutes; that makes half an hour for each building and who knows how many buildings. It's futile. She can't do it, not in one day anyway. A face on the opposite wall catches her eye. Maybe it's better to try to remember one person in detail. She took out her notebook, wishing she could draw, but unable to, contents herself with writing down the details.

Hubert Paczkowski ur. 11/9/1911. artysta malarz,
projyblje 24/4/1942, rostrivzlany 27/5/1942.

He was a good looking man. Dark haired, even features, a well-formed upper lip. She tries to read his expression. Defiance, definitely. She wonders why he was shot. Had he tried to escape? There is no way of knowing. She shivers, feeling something stir beside her. A man is standing next to her, much too close. She moves away. It is him again, Mr. Same-as-me.

'What are you doing?' He looks at her sidelong.

'I want to remember someone so I'm writing down their name.'

'Is it your father?'

'No.'

'Why do you want to remember him, if he's not your father? Is he your boyfriend?'

Hannah gives him a gentle smile and says, 'No, he's not my boyfriend. I don't know him. He died long before I was born.'

'Do you love him?' His face is turned away from her.

'No. I don't suppose I do.'

'That's good. My mother says you should love your mother and father and if you have a boyfriend or girlfriend or children then you can love them too.'

'Well I think you can love more people than that,' says Hannah, half to herself.

The man flicks the cord on his cagoule between his thumb and forefinger. 'No, I don't think so. My mother taught me the rules for that sort of thing.' He walks off, stiffly as if he doesn't quite fit in his body, still spinning the cord. Hannah watches as he leaves the building. Slowly she walks to join the rest of the group in the next block.

They are down in the basement of the block. It appears to be a prison of sorts. Jim comes towards her. 'I don't think you should go there.'

'Why not?'

'I think it may be the punishment cell that Ewa talked about. The one where she met Anna and Karla. It's ...' He stops, unable to continue.

Hannah doesn't know what to do. Jim seems to be very upset by what he has seen. Perhaps she should follow his advice, but then she would be left with her imagination and that might be worse. She takes a deep breath.

It's hard to believe that three people were crammed together in here. A notice on the wall says that up to six people were put in the cell at the same time. Impossible. The guide calls to the group to move on. Hannah stays put. She

wants to be alone in this place. Jim comes over to her and she shakes her head, tells him to leave her. He goes at once. There seem to have been two cells side by side. One has been cut open, like a dissection so that the inside can be seen. The other has been left as it was, still with the wooden door at the bottom. Anyone going in there would have to crawl. Hannah pulls at the door and it opens. She pauses then gets down on her hands and knees and crawls through the opening. She stands up as soon as she gets in. Even with the door open it is very dark and her heart races. Hannah has always hated enclosed spaces. She tells herself she has a choice whereas the many prisoners who had been incarcerated here had none; at any moment she could leave and return to the room outside. She turns round in the space; it feels airless, suffocating, as if the walls, already so close, are moving in on her. Her fingers touch rough stone and she traces the bumpy surface with her fingertips almost as if she were trying to read Braille. But of course there is no message for her. She leans her head against the wall and weeps silent tears then kneels down and makes her way out again. Another group is in the room and the guide frowns as she emerges. Most probably it is not allowed to enter the cell. Hannah stands up and brushes the dirt from her trousers. She must look terrible. To her surprise the guide lays a hand on her arm and whispers something in Polish. Hannah is not sure but she thinks she said 'peace be with you'. As she leaves the block she wonders if she will ever find peace.

Later, over a cup of lukewarm tea and a sweaty cheese roll in the cafeteria Jim asks Hannah about the cell.

'Some other time,' she says. Instead she tells Jim about Mr Same-as-me.

‘It’s weird, but I think he might be autistic. He didn’t look at me when he was speaking and he had this really literal interpretation of what I was saying.’

‘I wonder why he came here,’ says Jim.

‘Why does anyone come? To remember, to hope it never happens again.’

Hannah is certain of this.

‘But do you think he will remember?’ Jim says.

She doesn’t want to think about this, about the possibility of viewing Auschwitz without fully understanding what it is. ‘I don’t know. Maybe.’ After a short pause she adds, ‘I’m glad it was raining.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it wouldn’t seem appropriate for a visit, if it were sunny I mean.’

Hannah takes another bite from her roll, chews it a little and then gets up from the table. She crosses the room to where there is a metal bin and drops the roll in it. ‘That was one of the worst rolls I’ve ever tasted.’

Jim holds on to his bad mood of the day before. Usually he indulges her whimsies but today he shakes his head. ‘You have such stupid ideas at times. What difference does the weather make?’

Hannah feels the blush creeping up over her chest on to her neck and face. She tries to explain. ‘It’s like a funeral; it always seems better if it’s raining. As if even God is mourning.’

‘I thought you were an atheist.’ Jim fiddles with the clingfilm that covered his roll.

‘I am... I think. It’s a symbolic God I’m talking about.’ Good heavens, she’s cracking up.

Jim flicks the clingfilm at her and sighs 'A symbolic God. What next? No... don't tell me. Come on, we have to get to Birkenau.' He gets up from his seat.

The famous landmark of the gateway with Arbeit Macht Frei arching across it, is much smaller than Hannah thought, dwarfed by a massive birch tree; at least she thinks it is a birch. If she could be bothered she would ask Jim, but he is grumpy. It is not often that he has such moods but when he does, it is best not to talk to him. Nearby, some tourists are attempting to photograph the gateway, moving this way and that, trying for the best shot. Tourists; they are all tourists here. That is the paradox. A terrible notion comes into her mind. How will this place look in a hundred years? Will it still be as understated? Will a theme park be developed ... the Auschwitz experience, complete with death rides. Take the train to Birkenau and experience the selection process for yourself. She shakes her head, trying to escape these thoughts.

Birkenau is three kilometres away. It is far more desolate than Auschwitz I. The place where the trains stopped to unload their human cargo, looks only too familiar; the long low building with a gaping arch in the centre. The railway lines are as they were, except they are unused now. Huts stand at regular intervals in the camp. The Nazis destroyed much of Birkenau when they knew the Allies were coming. But they couldn't hide everything. Jim wanders off up the railway line. Hannah watches him as he walks off, a stocky figure against the landscape. His shoulders are rigid; Hannah can tell he is tense, even from a distance. This visit is hard for them both. The rain comes on, harder this time and Hannah walks quickly over to one of the huts. The door is open and she goes in. There is no one else around.

Inside it is bleak. It is a hot day in spite of the rain but there is no warmth in here in the concrete walls and floors. The beds are still there, except they aren't like any Hannah has seen before. They are more like bunks, pallets three high and wide enough to take three people. The guide told them that between six and eight people slept in each. She walks all round the hut, feeling more and more miserable with each step she takes. She realises that she is not sure whether Ewa and her mother were in Birkenau or Auschwitz I. Probably the latter, though she can't know for certain. But probably as they were not Jewish, they would have been sent to the work camp. Hannah looks around the hut. It is horrific. She cannot believe people had to live in such conditions. By the door there is a painted slogan in Germanic writing 'Verhalte sich ruhig'. Be quiet. And by another room – it must have been the washroom – another slogan, 'Wassertrinken verboten'. She stands on tiptoe to look at it closer, trying to imagine the person who painted it, someone's son. In the stone adjacent to it, someone has scratched a message - fucking Nazis, we hate you. She hears a noise and spins round, her heart thumping. A large black dog is standing in the doorway, panting. Its tongue hangs loosely from its mouth, pink and wet looking. It seems to be on its own, no one to control it. When it sees Hannah, it growls, a low rumble that terrifies her.

'Good dog,' says Hannah, keeping her voice steady. In the back of her mind she remembers reading that in such a situation, you mustn't show fear. She walks towards it. It doesn't move. What are you supposed to do? Stare it down or look away. Her mind is blank; she can't remember. She doesn't know what to do. Perhaps there is another way out, another door to the block but she doesn't recall seeing one and in any case she is reluctant to turn her back on the dog. She

moves slowly, not taking her eyes from it. It is lighter now outside, the sun trying to push through clouds. A shape appears behind the dog. Mr. Same-as-me. Again.

‘Can you help me?’ Hannah tries to get eye contact but his eyes slide away, elusive.

‘I don’t know.’

Shit. She thinks hard. If he is autistic, he will take things very literally. She’ll have to think of a different way to ask for help. The dog barks. Her mind closes down in panic.

‘What’s your name?’

‘My name is Jerry. I am sixty one years old. I live at ...’

Hannah interrupts him. This is no time for his life story. ‘Hi Jerry. My name is Hannah and I want you to do something.’

He steps forward into the doorway. The dog raises its haunches and Hannah holds her breath. She looks around for something to use as a weapon. Nothing. The dog bares its teeth. It is slavering. Hannah feels sick. And then, as suddenly as it started it is over. A call from outside and the dog turns and lopez back into the open. Hannah slips out while she can, desperate to escape from the dark hut. With Jerry by her side she watches as a woman clips on its lead. Jerry hits Hannah on the shoulder. Hard.

‘What do you want me to do, Hannah?’ He says her name in a rhythmic singsong way - Han –nah.

‘It’s fine, nothing.’ She rubs her arm.

He is agitated, the cagoule cord whirling tight round his index finger.

‘No, no. You said you wanted me to do something.’

‘I wanted you to take the dog away.’

The whirling stops. Jerry twists his hands, ‘Oh, no I couldn’t do that. It doesn’t belong to me.’

Hannah nods, ‘I know. I’m sorry I asked. Thank you.’

She watches as he ambles off and then looks to see if Jim is around. He is nowhere to be seen. Hannah looks at the little plan of Birkenau that is stuck on a post nearby and starts to make her way to the ruins of the gas chambers. As she suspected, she finds Jim there, studying the memorial.

‘Look at this,’ he says, ‘have you ever seen anything more hideous?’

Hannah looks at the blocks of dark stone jutting up at odd angles. ‘No,’ she agrees, ‘but in a strange way it seems appropriate.’

They walk back in silence to the car. Overheard snatches of conversation drift towards them – ‘the Russians were only a few miles away and they did nothing’ – ‘of course the Poles knew all about it’ – ‘it seems such a small place’. Hannah lets them wash over her. They reach their car and as Jim is opening the door, she tells him about her attempt to read all the names. Jim gives her a sharp look.

‘Why? Isn’t that rather a pointless thing to do?’

Hannah gets into the car, ‘Is it? I don’t know. I just feel that someone ought to try to think of them. After all, who remembered Anna before now?’

Jim sighs, ‘Well, your mother for one.’

Hannah looks out of the window. Jerry is standing in line for a tour bus nearby. She waves but although he is looking her way, he doesn’t wave back. She shrugs and turns back to Jim. ‘But if she hadn’t told me, there would be no one to remember her.’

Chapter Twenty-two

Back at the hotel, they shower and get ready to go out. Jim has booked a table at a restaurant nearby. Hannah waits as Jim puts on his shoes. He stands up and says, 'I have something to tell you.' His voice is very grave. Hannah's heart lurches – he's ill, something's wrong with one of the boys, he's having an affair. Dear God, no. She needs his support. She sits down on one of the armchairs. 'Sounds serious.'

'You know back at Birkenau, when you said that Anna had no one to remember her?'

'Yes.'

'Well, it's not quite true.'

'What do you mean?'

'Her brother, Stefan. He's still alive.'

Hannah stares at him. Her first feeling is one of relief that it isn't bad news but she cannot quite take in this information.

'Say something,' he sounds anxious.

'I don't know what to say. How do you know?'

He smiles, 'A bit of research – in the Mitchell Library of all places. They have telephone directories from all over the world. I looked up the family name in the Warsaw telephone directory. There were several with the initial S. I rang them in turn, never expecting to get anywhere and on the third attempt it was him.'

Hannah shakes her head and frowns. 'But you don't speak Polish.'

'I cheated. You know how the office is being rewired? One of the

electricians is Polish and I learned a few phrases from him – can I speak to Stefan, do you speak English – that sort of thing. To be honest I didn't think for a minute I'd have any success so I didn't say anything to you. I didn't want to raise your hopes.'

Hannah sits on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. She cannot imagine why she did not think of doing such a thing herself but then it didn't really register with her that Anna had a brother. When she had thought of him, she thought of him as dead, killed in a concentration camp with her grandparents. All she expected when she contacted the university was some information about her grandfather. She feels Jim looking at her, waiting for a reaction. 'I ... what did he say?'

'Well, at first he was very suspicious. Not surprisingly. But I spoke to him several times and ... well, he's delighted. His English is excellent. Apparently, their father, your grandfather, was a bit of a linguist as well as a philosopher and encouraged both his children to learn languages. Well, we knew that from Ewa's letter, didn't we?'

'My grandfather.' Hannah can't take it in. 'My uncle.' She shakes her head in bewilderment. The thought of meeting someone who knew her mother is too much for her and she bursts into tears.

'Did I do the right thing?' Jim hands her a tissue.

'I don't know, to tell you the truth. I don't know.' Hannah wipes her eyes and ponders the last few weeks of her life. So many things have happened. She is worn out. 'I think I want to go to bed,' she says. 'I'm not hungry.'

Jim's mouth drops open, 'But you can't. You must come to the restaurant.'

Suspicion. She stares at him, he won't meet her look. 'He's waiting in the restaurant for us, isn't he?'

A slow nod.

'Christ, Jim. I don't know if I can do this.'

'He'll be devastated if you don't come.'

Reluctantly she rises from the chair. Her head is pounding. All this emotion, it can't be good for you. She likes things to be more controlled than this. Her hands are shaking. It is years since she has been this nervous.

The restaurant is a few streets away. They walk there in silence. When they reach it, Hannah stops, her hand on the doorknob. 'How will we recognise him?'

Jim makes a face; he has not considered this. 'It won't be a problem. There's hardly likely to be lots of old men dining on their own. Anyway I told him I booked it in my name.'

Hannah pushes the door open. It is heavy. It is a modern restaurant and the lights are brighter than normal. Jim says their name to the waiter and they are ushered to a table in the corner. An elderly man is sitting there, reading a book. He looks up and Hannah laughs out loud with delight. The family resemblance is striking. He has the same high cheekbones as she does and his eyes are deep set like hers. His nose is longer and his mouth wider but there can be no doubt. As he spots them, Hannah sees that he too, has noticed the resemblance. He stands up, stooped but tall and comes out from behind the table with his arms open.

'Hannah,' he murmurs as he gathers her in, 'home at last.'

It is as if they have always known each other. His Warsaw accent is a familiar one but when Hannah looks into his face she sees family features she rightly never noticed in Ewa or Jack. His face is narrow, like her own, and she can see how she will look in twenty or so years. Stefan notices her staring and says, 'You are wondering whether you look like Anna.'

'Yes, it's just, well you know the story and although Ewa told me I looked very like Anna, I did wonder whether she was lying to protect me.'

'She wasn't lying. Your husband sent me a photo of you when you were younger. See, I have it here.' He goes into his wallet and brings out a photograph that she has always liked. A springtime scene; she is sitting among bluebells in woods by the side of Loch Lomond. He puts the photo in front of her. 'When I saw this, I knew there could be no doubt. It was as if I was looking at my sister once more.'

Hannah pushes the photo back towards him. 'Please, keep it. Do you have any of Anna, or of your parents?'

His eyes brim with tears. 'No, I have nothing to remind me of them. My parents and I were arrested almost a year before Anna. My father was a target because he had written articles against Nazi philosophy before the invasion. It was a wonder he escaped for so long.' Stefan takes out a handkerchief and wipes his eyes. 'We were sent to Belsen. My mother died within a few weeks. She was ill even before our arrest. Father and I survived to the end of the war but the deprivation had weakened his heart and when we couldn't find Anna ...' Stefan brushes his hand across his eyes.

'I'm so sorry,' says Hannah. 'It must be dreadful to lose your whole family in such a way.'

family in such a way.'

'Many people suffered much greater losses than me. And now I have found you and your boys. A niece and great nephews when I expected to die alone.' Stefan reaches across the table and takes Hannah's hands in his.

Their meal comes and they eat, Stefan talks about Anna and his parents and Hannah and Jim listen. He tells them many stories: how he and Anna would spend hours acting out stories for their parents, how Anna wanted to be a train driver, then a geologist, then a linguist, how their father would tell them Polish folktales at bedtime when they were little, how their mother was beautiful but absent-minded and often forgot to buy anything for the evening meal so they would have odd things like beetroot and crackers instead of a proper meal. They never minded though, because the conversation was always stimulating. 'When you are sixteen and your parents treat you like adults, discuss important questions about the nature of mankind, about what history can teach us or whether there is a God, you don't mind what you eat. It was so different from what we were taught at school: unquestioning, unthinking religion.'

Hannah soaks it all up, thinks I must get this down on tape, there is so little time left. The evening stretches into night and he talks on. At midnight the waiters are sitting at a table nearby, keen for them to leave but they are engrossed, don't notice the impatient looks. One of them comes over and Stefan jumps up, 'Come, we must go. Back to your hotel and you can tell me about your ...' he pauses and smiles, 'about my family.'

The bar at their hotel is closed so they go up to their room. Jim and Hannah share a plastic mug of malt and Stefan gets one to himself. He raises it, 'To many years of happiness,' and drains it in one. 'No, no more for me,' he says

as Jim offers to fill his glass. 'Now I would like to see pictures of your sons, my great-nephews.'

Hannah is dismayed. She doesn't have any with her. She is not the sort of person to carry photos in her purse but Jim goes to his suitcase and brings out a bundle. 'I thought you might like these,' he says as he hands them to Stefan.

Stefan takes his time looking through them. Jim has brought along half a dozen pictures of each boy, from toddlerhood up to present day. When he reaches a recent one of Ben, he looks closely at it.

'What is it?' asks Hannah.

'Nothing. It's ... well, he looks like my father when he was young. Oh how I wish I had a picture of him. May I keep this please?'

'They're copies. They're all for you,' says Jim.

He continues to gaze at the photograph, 'Remarkable.'

Hannah follows his gaze as if seeing Ben for the first time. 'We used to joke that Ben was a changeling. He looked like no one in the family or so we thought.'

Stefan nods, 'It's strange how these things come through. Anna and I took after our mother. She was half Jewish, well, her father was Jewish. Strictly speaking she wasn't Jewish at all. Father on the other hand was tall and blond.'

Hannah takes a deep breath. 'I thought there might be a resemblance to the Nazi soldier. Ewa seemed to think so.' She tells him about the time in the nursing home when Ewa became confused and started shouting at Ben in Polish. 'It was horrible and now, of course, with what has come out, Ben is really upset.' Before she knows it, she is telling him of their worries about Ben and his drinking. 'Sometimes I think he feels as if he doesn't fit into the family. A

typical middle child.'

'I understand. You can tell him from me, he looks like his grandfather.' Stefan rubs his earlobe and continues, 'But you know Hannah, even if he did look like the Nazi, that doesn't make him the same type of person. You're a scientist. You know as well as I do that personality is a complex concept and whatever it is, it isn't a simple matter of inheritance. Fascism, brutality, cruelty, they're not inherited characteristics. You have to remember the importance of the environment. You're a good person, Hannah. His upbringing will have served him well.'

'Of course, you're right.' Hannah strokes his arm.

It is two o'clock before they get to bed. Hannah thinks she will sleep at once but there is too much to think about. She feels happier than she has done since Ewa's death but even so, images from the day push through to the front of her consciousness: the ruined crematoria, the huts at Birkenau, the punishment cell at Auschwitz 1. She lies in the dark in her comfortable bed and the terror of being in such a confined space comes back to her. It is horrifying; she can hardly breathe thinking about it. How could someone, young girls like Anna, survive such a thing? "I would do things to get sent there." That's what Ewa said in her letter. She must have been desperate. Hannah turns on to her side to try to sleep but it will not come. The cell stands out in her mind. Hannah is mildly claustrophobic. She rarely takes lifts, preferring to walk. Once she walked up fifteen flights of stairs on a home visit to a tower block. It was not an experience she ever wishes to repeat. On one flight a group of youths loitered, hassled her as she squeezed past – *how's about a blow job*. She ran up the stairs cursing her

luck – terrorised by boys young enough to be her grandsons. Thankfully they were too stoned to register her doctor's bag. After that she tried taking lifts but the terror remains. She wonders if it has been passed down to her from her mother. Christ, she must be tired. Phobias aren't genetic. She doesn't even know how her mother reacted to the experience; she could have been completely stoical for all she knew. Anyway, it's all getting a bit much, this gene thing. Everyone wants to attribute everything to genes. It's gone full circle since she was a young psychiatrist when everything was down to the environment. She blames the popular press who want to reduce everything to its simplest form – autism for example. First of all it was blamed on poor parenting. Now it had to have an equally simple explanation – a cocktail of drugs, mercury in our food, a genetic blip. Simple causes. But the explanation will turn out to be much more complicated, she reckons: interactions between your genetic inheritance and factors in the environment. There's a word for it – a biological polysyllabic word – but it escapes her. Epistemology? No, that's the science of knowledge. Leave it; it'll come. She turns again in bed, stretches out to try to find a cool spot on the sheets. It is hot and stuffy in the room and she starts to imagine she cannot breathe, that she is in a small cell, a metre square. Panic strikes her and she flails out, kicking the sheets aside, sits up in bed, turns on the light. She is soaked in sweat. Jim sleeps on, stupefied by so much alcohol. Hannah goes to the bathroom and washes herself with lukewarm water. It cools her and she thinks maybe now she will sleep. The room is large, she sees that now in the light cast by her bedside lamp. She rinses out one of the plastic tumblers and drinks two glasses of water. That should help see off any hangover that might be threatening. She has no idea what they will do tomorrow but she doesn't want to be burdened with a

headache. She thinks perhaps she would like to walk along part of the road that took prisoners from Auschwitz to their death. The death march. She has no illusions that they will find any way of knowing where Anna died but it is something she feels a need to do. It will be emotionally exhausting, she thinks. Better try to get some sleep. She returns to her bed. As she tries to sleep, the word comes to her, *phlogenetic* - the interaction between genes and the environment.

Chapter Twenty-three

Seven thirty and the alarm goes off. Hannah is awake already. She never did get to sleep. Jim doesn't stir and she digs him in the ribs so that he awakens with a grunt.

'Dear God, my head,' he groans.

'It serves you right. I offered you water before going to bed last night and you were very rude to me.'

'Sorry,' he stretches his arms above his head. 'Any chance of a cup of tea?'

'There's nothing to make it with. I told you we should have brought the travel kettle.'

Jim swings his legs out of bed. 'You're a bit short this morning. Everything all right?'

Hannah sits down on the bed and puts her head in her hands, 'I didn't sleep and now that it's time to get up I could sleep for Britain. I'm pretty damn tired, Jim.'

'Why didn't you sleep? I'd have thought that the drink would have knocked you out if nothing else.'

Hannah says nothing for a moment. She is unsure whether to dampen his mood by dwelling on her thoughts during the night. Reluctantly she says, 'I couldn't stop thinking about the punishment cell. You know how I hate enclosed spaces. I did a stupid thing yesterday; I crawled into it.'

'What was it like?'

‘As you’d imagine. Terrifying, suffocating, I lasted about ten seconds before I had to get out. You know how claustrophobic I am. This sounds stupid I know, but I couldn’t help wondering whether I inherited the fear from my mother. I know - ’ as he started to speak, ‘It’s totally irrational and I’ve been through all the nature/nurture thing in my mind but - ’

‘ - it’s still niggling at you.’ Jim holds her close to him. ‘But you have to remember that you don’t know how either of your mothers reacted. Ewa chose to go there. I think she saw it as a punishment for what she had done to Tomasz, so she actively welcomed the dark. We know Anna helped to bring back some purpose into Ewa’s life so it’s unlikely that she was terrorised during that night. I think they were very tough and resilient.’

He is right. Hannah knows it. She doesn’t even make her customary objection to him calling Ewa her mother. Meeting Stefan has mellowed her attitude though she is still angry with Ewa. Underneath the anger though, she senses a growing understanding of why Ewa felt unable to tell her. She wriggles out of his arms and says she is going to take a shower. It’s a long shot but she hopes the water will wake her up a little.

After breakfast she asks Jim when they are meeting Stefan. He tells her that Stefan will be with them in half an hour.

‘I want to go back to Auschwitz. Not to go on another tour. I want to wander round on my own, maybe walk along part of the death march,’ she says. ‘I’m ok about going on my own so if you and Stefan want to do something else ...’ She breaks off and studies her face in the dressing table mirror. She looks tired, dark circles under her eyes like bruises.

Jim is brushing his teeth, speaks through a mouthful of toothpaste. 'Do you think that's a good idea? Why not take a break from it for a day? We could go into Krakow, see the castle.'

'I'm not here to see the sights.'

He rinses his mouth and spits it into the basin. 'I know that. But you had a hard day yesterday. The whole strain of the visit and then meeting Stefan.'

'That wasn't a strain. That was wonderful.'

'Even so, all those ups and downs in the one day. And you didn't sleep last night.'

Her mouth tightens, 'It's what I want to do. I have to do it.'

Jim comes through to the bedroom, tries one last objection. 'You don't know where the death march went.'

He is wrong. Hannah has done her homework: Internet searches and a good map of the area. She pulls out her suitcase and finds the map, laying it out on the bed. It takes a moment or two for her to find Auschwitz. She shows it to Jim and points to a road. 'I can't be certain, but I think this is probably the road taken by the women prisoners. It's what they suggest on various websites. They drove all the prisoners west, because of the Red Army coming in from the east.' Hannah traces the line of the road with her finger.

'Well, if it's what you want to do...' Jim is still doubtful.

'It is.' Hannah puts on her coat.

Twelve o'clock and they are at the gates of Auschwitz. Hannah has made up her mind. She turns to Jim and Stefan and tells them this is something she must do on her own. All the way there, she's been obsessed by this thought. Jim frowns.

He is not pleased but Stefan pats her arm and says it is the right thing to do. Nodding, she gives them a brief smile. 'I'll meet you back here at five o'clock.'

Although it is only early October, an icy wind blows from the east. Hannah shivers and shoves her hands into her pocket. In the town of Auschwitz there is a great deal of traffic; that, at least, is something the prisoners would not have had to endure. She trudges on, thankful that the wind is behind her and that it isn't raining. At the edge of the town she goes into a shop to buy some chocolate. Three teenage boys are in front of her. In stilted Polish, they ask the shopkeeper where they can fill up their water bottles. He points to the chiller cabinet stocked with bottled water. One of the boys shakes his head.

'No, please. I like you to fill up this bottle.'

The shopkeeper refuses and the boys turn away, disappointed. Hannah points to a Mars bar.

The shopkeeper sighs as he hands over the chocolate bar, 'Why does it not surprise me?'

Hannah is baffled. 'Excuse me?'

He indicates the boys with his head. 'They're all the same. Always wanting something for nothing.'

Hannah's heart beats a little faster. 'Who are all the same?'

'You know... the Jews.'

Hannah stares at him in disbelief. 'My great grandfather was Jewish.'

The shopkeeper stutters, 'No offence meant.'

Her childhood fluency returns, 'No offence meant? Oh I think you know perfectly well you were being offensive. And even if I wasn't part Jewish my

reaction would still be the same.’ Hannah slams the Mars bar onto the counter. ‘Take this and shove it up your arse.’

Outside she catches her breath. She loathes racism, always has and here within sight of Auschwitz, it is even more sinister than usual. No doubt his parents were among those that proclaimed they knew nothing of what went on. She walks on, almost at a run and it is not long before she reaches more open countryside. It is very flat with little in the way of landmarks. Hannah stops for a minute and sits down on a clump of grass by the side of the road. She closes her eyes and listens to the wind. The scene is easy to imagine: flat fields covered in snow, a raging blizzard, prisoners black specks against the snow. And she was there, only a few days old. A starving scrap of a baby, wrapped up in some lice infected blanket, kept warm by her mother’s body. She thinks of babies only a few days old, their vulnerability, and marvels that she survived. How she wishes that Anna too could have lived. What terrible chance brought her to be in the way of a soldier’s gun? Poor Anna, eighteen years old, weakened by depression, yet brought to life by the birth of her child. What would it have been like to labour through heavy snow only a few days after giving birth? Hannah cannot imagine the effort needed. She is too tired. This thought chastens her – how dare she complain of fatigue – she has no real knowledge of what it means. One thought gives her hope. Anna was shot. This was no hopeless withdrawal from life. She died wanting to live. She had not given up.

Hannah gets up. It’s much too cold to stay still for long. She carries on along the road, which has only a few buildings on it and passes a traditional wooden cottage that looks as if it hasn’t changed in sixty years. An old woman is by the window looking out. Hannah smiles but the woman ignores her. She

wonders what would happen if she went up and knocked on the door, asked to see inside. For a moment she considers doing it but then sees herself in front of the woman, demanding – did you see the death march, did you wonder what you could do to help or did you huddle inside pretending not to notice? – Better stay away from her. She looks at her watch; she has been walking for almost two hours. If she is to get back to Auschwitz in time she will have to turn back soon.

She carries on for another ten minutes. Above her, birds gather on a telephone wire ready to flee the coming winter. Hannah stares up at them frustrated by her lack of knowledge. They could be anything – starlings, swallows, thrushes – something small anyway. Her sons used to joke that she couldn't tell an albatross from a blue tit. She knows a crow though and watches as two fly towards the assembled flock, wondering whether the smaller birds will stand their ground. There is one bird on its own and the crows fly towards it, picking it off. To her amazement several others charge the crows and they back off, their squawks piercing the air.

Hannah decides to stop. There is a gate a few yards in front and she opens it. A field, bare of crops, is spread out in front of her. The soil is thick, sticks to the soles of her shoes. It is hard to walk on it. Hannah finds a spot under a birch tree. Although it is very cold, it is sunny and sunlight filters through the burnished leaves onto the ground beneath. Perhaps flowers bloom there in spring. Hannah hopes so. She feels a sense of peace as she stands there. An understanding of Ewa's actions. Ewa had been frightened of losing her. It saddened Hannah that Ewa had been unable to trust her. She would have forgiven her, how could she not forgive the person who had saved her life. Hannah opens her bag and takes out the red roses she bought at the hotel that

morning. She kneels down and lays them one by one on the dark earth. 'Thank you,' she whispers. For a few seconds she stays perfectly still, remembering, then rises to her feet. A swooshing sound makes her look up into the sky. The birds, in formation, are leaving. It is time to go.

THE END