

LBRIS

We know
books

VIOLETS

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GRANTA

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There was the enamel pail of blood. She couldn't think what she had done with it. She hated the thought of someone else emptying it.

Was that what it meant, lifeblood? Placental, uterine. She had seen the blood drop out of her into the pail. It came with the force of an ending.

And the pain. Her lower right side. The gush of the blood. Thinnish, not thick. Not like anything carrying life.

Violet opened her eyes.

She had been carried. Down the stairs.

Yes, Fred had been there.

She thought of her nightie, sopping wet. Someone had brought the motor car, must have borrowed it from Reg. She had been concerned about the blood but Fred had already thought about towels and blankets, that was good.

She was in a day-lit space. The large windows were criss-crossed with brown tape. Nurses passed and the floor shone under their shoes. The walls were thickly painted and white.

Bright.

Fred was there.

Violet, love?

He'd been holding her hand but now let go. He filled her field of vision, a thin smile on his lips. He looked tired.

You look tired.

Your mother's been round, he said. Everything was fine. At home, he meant.

Maybe her mother had emptied the pail. She must have moved it from the landing where Violet had crouched down. It must have clattered and slopped. All that blood.

She should have seen to it. She would have known. A dark reflection, a depth of loss.

Fred was talking about Reg and the Morris, and Father Lewis had dropped by.

He was meant to be on exercise, that was right.

Elizabeth had packed her some things, he said. He indicated the suitcase at his feet. Her sister would know what she'd need. A mirror, clean clothes, her bedjacket with the tie at the neck.

Had he collected their rations and told Mrs Oldman to save him some eggs?

Vi. You just need to rest.

He took her hand again in his. His hand was square, thick.

Violet? he said.

She thought that if she stared straight ahead, she could keep it all in.

Yes?

You know the baby's gone?

See?

See her, there?

Yes, you.

Pram Boy, pill-boy, you know who.

No flood for you,
no gush or release
of blood into water,
filaments and threads.

For it is you who will be carried
while the others are shed
(I'll take the one with the curls, your mother said).

~

Violet slept some more and when she awoke some of the others were up and about. She recognised it now, the same ward she'd been on before. Birmingham Women's Hospital. Nothing to do with the war.

It was later when the doctor came. Violet pushed herself up and tried not to wince. The pain was immense.

Just a few stitches, Mrs Hall.

He was clipped and matter-of-fact.

I've spoken to your husband. You were aware of the pregnancy, yes?

Violet nodded.

Ectopic, the doctor said.

An egg, fertilised, but attached to the wrong place.
Growing all the same and for weeks.

About fourteen, we think. That's quite a stretch.

Violet cast her mind back. Missed periods, skipped beats. October it was, Fred was on leave. And she could hardly believe it had happened straight away. She was one week late, then two, then three. Then time slowed right down. Like cocking your head to catch a very faint sound.

And she'd watched the nights draw in, the trees lose their leaves, thinking all the time about next July.

July 1945. A summer baby, bright blue skies.

There's one more thing.

The doctor coughed.

It seems that it was twins, Mrs Hall.

Violet felt the air hauled out of her lungs. She couldn't take it in. There had been two of them, holding on.

Two children at once?

What a handful! she thought, until she remembered they were gone.

Gone, Pram Boy, done for, through.

Not you though, Pram Boy, son of a Pole

So let's just say
(for you will always get your way)
it's for the best.

Oh yes.

Coo-ee cuckoo, find your nest.

Had they held on to her, or she to them? It didn't matter, in that wrong place. The enamel pail, its dark blue rim, and the thin metal handle with the wooden grip. She might have rolled up her sleeves and plunged her hands right in. Searching in the rust-tinged liquid.

For twins.

The doctor was looking through her notes. Saying something about her history of cysts, the removal of her left ovary a couple of years ago.

Perhaps her mother had been in. She would have known what to do. Cold water, not hot. She would have got down on her hands and knees and tamped the stains with a cloth. Then she would have carried the pail downstairs and rested it on the mat while she unlocked the back door then poured it out.

Into the drain in the yard, with the suds and the silt and the dirt.

The foetuses had been surgically removed, the doctor said. Along with her womb.

Violet blinked. One of the other patients shuffled slowly past her bed.

And so.

There was a pause.

You'll understand that you will not be able to bear children, Mrs Hall?

He looked suddenly small, like an awkward schoolboy in his collar and tie.

Thank you, Doctor.

Violet smiled politely. The doctor nodded and moved on.

No. Still nothing.

Violet pulled up her knickers and swilled out the pan.

Every time she would check. Every slight feeling of wet. She would go to the lavatory or somewhere she could pull up her skirt, hoping for a bleed. But no, there was only the pale slick smeared on her inner thighs, the glistening string like egg white.

She shut the lid and sat down again, lit a cigarette.

She didn't feel like going back to the house, across the yard. Back to her mother sitting there chewing each mouthful too many times. Sitting there silent, watching for signs.

Signs of what? She couldn't have known.

Usually, they had their periods at the same time. Since Violet was about fourteen, just after her father died. They never said anything but they would know, taking bowls of water with bicarb of soda upstairs, the rags

soaking under the beds, the water turning redder as they slept.

Violet sighed in the smoke that she had just exhaled. She stared at the back of the door. Torn-up squares of the *Rhondda Gazette* hung on a nail in the wood. News about farming and sport mixed up with the Western Front.

Best use for it, wiping your arse.

Violet stretched up her arms, rubbed her lower back. Her breasts had been sore, there was that. She was constipated, bloated. Though not in any way that showed.

No. Her mother couldn't possibly know.

Oh ho, Boyo!

But you are there,

pretty as a picture, coming down the stairs

Caught on a moon-edge, you came with the tide,

A boy all coy and evolving,

known only by what you are not.

Son of a bloodflow, stopped.

By the time Violet came in, her mother was clearing away.

I thought you'd finished, you took long enough.

Violet rinsed her hands, flicked the water off.

She took back her plate and ate the rest standing up.

She had always had an appetite. When her father was alive, he used to say that she had hollow legs. She was tall and lanky like him. Big feet, broad shoulders, flat chest.

Taller than her mother by the time she was ten.

Then he had died and her mother bought the shop. Then the war came and someone had suggested they take lodgers in. Wounded men, sent by the convalescent home, billeted with them for weeks, sometimes months.

Her mother's friends would all call in, coo and fuss, say it was good to have a man about the house again.

Until this last one. There'd been no one else since then.

No, because that was the end, Pram Boy,
 where you began

Clinging on,
 with your Papa seed, semen dried, long gone
 on the train to Aberdeen.

For you saw your moment,
 his seed barely spattered and his cock withdrawn,
 forming like you'd found a place