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Septembers

Carolyn Jess-Cooke

September: month of blackberry stigmata, a livid ink scripting his palms. Bramble bloodwork. He'd tell himself that he was not a boy picking fruit for his mother's jam but a surgeon curing thrombosis, thumbing the cobbles in a trug. On the cusp of twenty he left home one cold September fourth, shunting his train models and smalls into soggy dorms overlooking the college where he'd spend the next five years running his mind's soft scarf over the thorns of Kierkegaard, Hegel. Long stints at the library pouring more of himself into an essay. Some nights he swore his pen was filled with blood.

As an older man it the month he proposed, the month he and Deena wed and fled to Bremen for those first honeyed years of each other, each morning cleansed by September light, citrine halo, an etiological balm. She was never lovelier and he never more alive.

Many years later it was the month that Isabel arrived, their much-wanted daughter, squawking, red as a ruby. Bracketed by late summer and early autumn, she was smeared in what he first thought was blackberry juice. The knotting of her fists and the bluish undulations of the rope that tied her so fiercely to Deena lifting the old days of collecting blackberries to his mind like a silt. Deena loved their daughter, as did he, but Deena's love was cellular and ancient, as if she and the baby had known each other before, and for centuries.

Decades like that, rinsed clean by contentment. Deena in the glasshouse at the bottom of their garden in St Albans painting oversized canvases of landscapes

that resembled quilts. Isabel's childhood, her moody puberty, her many worrisome infatuations. In her twenties she began falling in love with countries, their letterbox transformed to a waterfall of postcards.

Both Deena and Issy died within fifteen months of each other.

Issy had gone diving in the Caribbean and drowned. She had lived like a well-nourished flame, branding her presence into every texture, surface, and memory he could think of. But her absence was weightier. It seemed to blast through time, rupturing everything strung to it: seasons, the smell of late afternoon passing into evening, the nag of sleep, movement of light. He went to the beach on the morning after her funeral and found that the tide had ceased its dance.

Deena was razed by her daughter's loss. Grief picked at her the way crows might pluck jewels and gold leaf from a crown. He couldn't remember if she had been ill before Issy's death. The oncologist insisted the shadows had taken residence in the corners of her many years before. *This might well have been cured if we'd spotted them earlier.* He tipped out every thought he'd ever had and ransacked it, a mothy attic of suitcases and lamps, to find the signs of sickness he'd overlooked. Portent is rarely visible in the present, a flaming planet detected only through the lens of hindsight. The moment at which he should have risen and instructed his wife to go ask the doctors to search for shadows. Shadow-hunters. Brambles. Bloodwork of fate.

1st September. They had said she was on the upturn. Miracles happen. William held her hand and said *you see? You see?*, as though she might yet be well, though she thought he had said *you stay? Stay?* She shook her head and he did not

know why. Although her hands had always been warm the bird-claw he gripped on to that day was cold, her wedding band spun. And of course, nothing stays, for all energy is in motion, en route between its endless shapes.

William had not planned to do anything remarkable on the anniversary of Deena's death. He was retired by then, though still making the occasional trip to Oxford as a Professor Emeritus to lecture on Leibniz's papers or Mach's Principle. He found that his interest in such things was waning. He wondered if it would be considered avant-garde, rude, or indicative of dementia to take to the podium and speak about vegetables that can be regrown from the stumps of themselves. Ontology was only useful insofar as it depicted green shoots peeping in the aftermath of a tsunami.

He went to bed on the last night of August with a plan for the day after: he would visit the grave of his wife and daughter. He would take a bouquet of white roses for Deena and a pot of bluebells for Issy. He would bring a flask of tea and sit for a while nearby. He had always found visiting the graves of his parents to be an abstract activity, spending time with a slab and memories that refused to harness presence. But Deena would have insisted on keeping the grave of their daughter in an orderly state, with a weedless patch of soil and a spotless tombstone, and so he found solace in duty.

When he woke the next morning he was lying on wet sand. He was cold and reached out for the bedclothes, but his hands met long strands of seaweed. He sat up, foggy-headed, and looked all around him. A horseshoe of bronze sand bookended by purple cliffs. The sun was a lantern over the ocean. A desperate

urge to pee tugged him painfully to his feet. He found he was naked save a pair of tatty cotton boxer shorts that clung damply to his buttocks.

He urinated at the grass bank. Then he walked up and down the beach, noting the way his feet sank into the sand and the sky broke with the arrival of birds. He must have got drunk last night and drove to the beach.

Doubtless he'd find a car park beyond the grass bank, his silver Volvo parked there, an empty bottle of vodka on the back seat. He would take a slug from the water bottle he kept in the floor compartment and refresh his senses. He would change into the clothes he still kept in the boot from his days visiting Deena at the hospital. He would drive home, and he would pledge to stop drinking, and the matter would be forgotten.

But there was no car park, no houses. No signs of civilization. A mile of fields leading to a narrow country road. The sun had grown strong overhead and he feared that his pale skin would blister and burn. He found a large oak tree by the roadside, its branches reducing the sun to pools of honeycomb-shapes light on the ground, and waited.

An hour passed. A distant rumbling announced the arrival of a battered Ute with wooden furniture in the back. He was half-asleep, his head pounding from dehydration and hunger, and so his efforts to signal the driver were reduced to constipated grunts and an arm held limply in the air. But thirty yards or so up the road, close to the bend, the vehicle stopped and reversed.

'You alright, mate?' the driver said, looking him over. It took a long moment for William to realize that the driver was speaking in German.

‘I got, uh, stranded,’ he said, his own German coming back to him as though through a thick mist. ‘Any chance of a lift?’

‘Where you headed?’

‘I live in St Albans. Are you going there?’

‘Where?’

William felt a stab of panic. ‘Where are *you* headed?’

‘Bremen. About an hour’s drive. That OK with you?’

He wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. The driver seemed friendly enough and William was sure he could ask to be dropped off as soon as he came near a place he recognized close to home. He got into the passenger side – curiously on the wrong side of the truck – and they pulled off.

The driver made small talk about the delivery he was making, how the order was placed last minute and he hadn’t yet had breakfast. William felt conspicuous and silly, holding his arms across himself and his knees tight together, though he enjoyed the conversation about Bremen University. It reminded him of the years he taught there, a young postdoc soaking up the lessons that would steer his approach to research, teaching, and indeed life for many years thereafter. He had no clothes, but he also had no mobile phone, no car or house keys, and no money. He had obviously been robbed in the night. Perhaps the robbers had knocked him unconscious and dumped him at the beach, leaving him for dead. But then, there was no one left to worry about him being gone.

The city that emerged on the crest of a hill was indeed Bremen, as the driver had said. William was so astonished that the question of how he had come

to be here seemed unimportant. The driver had by now assumed William to be a tourist, and so he gave him some handy tips for exploring the city. William was by now hanging out the window, oblivious to the cold wind, taking in the boats docked in the port and the sight of many cyclists. The cars, he noticed, were well-maintained classics, and he was surprised to see the clock tower at which he and Deena had often met for lunch was as new as he remembered it.

He instructed the driver to drop him off close to the town square, though the driver made a fuss about how William would likely be arrested for indecency the minute he stepped out of the van. William insisted. He was mesmerized to the point of forgetting that he was virtually naked. 'Fine,' the driver said finally, a little angry, though he relented and pulled a handful of coins from his pocket to give to the man. 'Get a black coffee,' he ordered. 'It may help you remember which hotel you're staying at.'

William staggered out into the market square. It was already bristling with people, a number of white stalls filled with chocolate, clocks, clothes, and toys. The cold grit of paving stones met the soles of his feet. He could smell the warm chocolate on the back of the wind, and the chatter of the people all around him was overwhelming. For the first time in over a year he laughed aloud, clapping his hands to his face. He saw a woman grip her young daughter by the wrist and pull her sharply to one side as he approached. He looked like a desert prophet, pale and white-haired, excitement causing him to stoop forward slightly and shuffle like a Neanderthal. He made for the clock. The old craving for Deena burned in him. He would phone her and say, *you'll never guess where I am! Remember our clock? I'm there!*

He only made it as far as a public bench at the corner of the cathedral before his emotions overcame him. He sank down on the bench, confused and stung by a sudden guilt. He remembered that there had been times during her illness that he had wanted to run away, not to another place but to another time. Perhaps that wish had been fulfilled, but it was a terribly bitter feeling. What was the point of being here without her? What did any of it matter – the chocolate, the exquisite restaurants, the way the riverboats left a long white feather in the water – without her?

Just then, a voice calling his name. A high voice, and at a distance. *William?* *William!* He kept his face covered in his hands, certain that if he stayed there long enough he would fall asleep and perhaps wake in his own bed, in the stillness and afterwardness of his own home.

But the calling continued, insistent, the voice drawing closer until he heard laughter in its margins. He heard footsteps approaching, the light changing as a figure neared him.

‘William? What on earth are you doing?’

He looked up. A silhouetted figure, her back to the sun. She moved into the light and he saw her red hair pinned up off her shoulders, a flash of red gloss on her lips. She was wearing that dress he always loved, the one with a navy A-line skirt and a white silk bodice with a plunging neckline. He felt as though an earthquake had happened inside his chest.

‘What happened? Where are all your clothes?’

She was stooped over him, oblivious to the wild look on his face. The basket she was carrying tipped, a dozen gleaming red apples toppling to the

ground. She scrambled after them and some men and women nearby stopped to help gather them up. He remained on the seat as though fastened there, violently shaking from head to toe. Obviously he was drunk, or she was an imposter, he was dreaming, he was having a heart attack. The last of these was the most likely, given the physical sensations that besieged him. His heart pummeled his chest so wildly that he had to grip the edge of the bench and force himself not to black out, and despite the wind cast up by crowds sweeping to and fro he was filmed thickly in sweat.

Danke! she called to the people who had assisted with the tumbling apples, her voice a glass bell, and when she turned she could see he was not himself. Quickly she set aside the basket and knelt on the ground.

‘William, are you alright? Have you been robbed?’

She reached out and pressed a hand against his cheek in concern, and he felt that familiar, aching warmth with notes of lavender dancing from her wrist. He began to cry, deep, swollen howls that unfurled from him freely. She sat on the bench beside him, alarmed, and put her arms around him, and he had to bite his teeth into his lip to stop himself from sobbing into her ear. She was here, every part of her, and all the empty hours swamped about him in a sudden storm. He wanted to tell her this but there was no language for it, neither English nor German nor his smattering of Dutch and Latin, but she had already moved on, telling concerned passersby that her husband was quite all right, though clearly he was the victim of a mugging and could they direct them both to the nearest police station?

After a few moments he managed to pull himself together and tell her that he wanted to go home. It took much persuasion but finally they walked from the square to their small apartment overlooking the River Wesser, her arm around his waist as she half-carried him there.

The apartment hummed with the kind of luminous September afternoon that made jewels of everything, even cobwebbed corners, the windowbox of purple pansies transformed to sapphires. He caught a glimpse of his desk strewn with papers and an essay on he recalled working on for months. She made him lie on the bed as she ran a bath, bringing a folded towel robe from the closet and pulling out clothes from the wardrobe for him to wear afterwards.

‘When you feel up to it you can tell me what your attacker looked like,’ she said, bending over the bottom drawer at the foot of the bed. ‘And we’ll tell the police.’ She paused, growing upset. A hand lifted to her chest, the other on her hips. A tremble in her voice.

‘What’s wrong, Deena?’

She tutted, annoyed with herself for growing upset. ‘I just...when you left so early this morning I thought you were just going for a run. I didn’t expect...’ She had a habit of blaming herself when things became out of order, as though she should have foreseen it and put it right.

He rose, and that pain that often lodged deep in his solar plexus when he got out of bed was not there. He moved from the bed swiftly, his limbs surprisingly light and strong.

‘Deena, it’s OK.’

The rest of his words were replaced by a gasp. When he glanced up at the long mirror against the wall he saw not his own dough-white, liver-spotted body with a ripe belly and skinny arms but the black-haired, square-jawed Adonis of a much younger man – he would almost call him a boy – with lean, sculpted arms and no belly to speak of. He checked his reflection in a variety of surfaces, just to be sure, but the same man looked back in the bathroom mirror, in the windows opening out on to the Schlachte, in the curve of a spoon.

‘Will,’ Deena said, placing a hand on his arm as he sat down on a chaise. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather we take you to see a doctor, just to be on the safe side?’

He looked up, his hands moving to her waist. He wrapped his arms around her tightly and in one quick movement lifted her on to the bed, holding her tight.

*

And each day the same: waking to the scene of the river, the fluttering of pansies in the windowbox, Deena’s smooth face and red hair splayed on the pillow next to him. He fell into step with memory, cycling to the University to give lectures, and although he recalled feeling embarrassed at delivering his work to hundreds of yawning students, he now attracted their full attention. The lecture notes he found in his own handwriting were a bricolage of naïveté and misinterpretations of Zenos’ paradoxes, and so he delivered his classes in the form of a bemused dialogue between his younger deluded self and the self who had grown cynical, intolerant, who had buried a child and a wife and who had, it seemed, travelled backwards in time.

Three weeks passed. Newspapers heralded events that he could remember vividly, and often he caught himself commenting on things that had yet to be, much to Deena's confusion. He would bite his lip and talk about the weather or his research. Occasionally déjà vu provoked dizziness or nausea, but for the most part there was nothing particularly strange about inhabiting the past. He reasoned that, to a degree, he had done it all his life.

He woke before first light and watched Deena sleep. She lay on her left side, facing him, both hands curled up beneath her chin. Her lips a little puckered and her eyelids twitching. He wondered what she would say if he told her the truth. Already she had begun to drop hints about trying for a baby. The burden of knowing that they would face years of disappointment, month upon month of watching her emerge from the bathroom with sadness etched deeper into her face, was almost too heavy to bear.

And then one morning she was gone. The space beside him was cold. A soupy darkness. He reached out for the lamp but could not find it. A wall switch met his fingers, a slow yellow beam re-ordering the room. The French windows opening to the river replaced by a wall and a chest of drawers. The apartment's rustic wooden floor was grey carpet, and instead of the long mirror in which he had come to admire his form was a table mirror in which the face of an old man grimaced back.

His return to the present was worse than both his wife and daughter's death combined. Each night he climbed into bed and prayed fervently to wake up in Bremen. Mornings became torturous, offering nothing but absence and stillness. He went to his doctor and told her frankly about Bremen, that he'd time

travelled and spent a month with his dead wife. He came away with a leaflet for grief counseling and a box of sedatives that made him sleep most of the day.

Spring. Summer. He came to at odd moments and in places to which he had no recollection of venturing: the supermarket checkout. The dentist's chair. In a library, looking at art manuals. Under his bed.

On the first of September he was woken by a shout and a hard shove against his side.

'Will! Get up! Get up!'

He was met with blinding sun and a cacophony that drilled his head: children squealing and laughing, seagulls cawing, dogs barking, the lashing sound of a tide beating against rocks. He was on a towel wearing nothing but swimming trunks, his feet slipped by sand. Deena was beside him in a red bikini and a wide-brimmed sunhat, scouring the shoreline.

'I can't see her, Will. She was just here, right here. Can you see her?'

'Who?'

'Isabel, who do you think?' She pressed a hand to her brow like a salute, shielding her eyes. She pointed. 'Is that her?'

He straightened awkwardly, his chest tight and his hands shaking, and although he wanted to fall to his knees in front of his wife and wrap his arms around her legs he found himself padding towards a group of children playing with buckets and spades fifty yards away. Amongst them he could see the familiar form of a small child squatting over a pool of water in the wet sand, her copper curls tumbling from beneath a straw hat. She was bashing the surface with her spade and laughing loudly.

'Isabel?' he said, approaching her.

The girl looked up, her pudgy face scrunched up against the sunlight.

'Hi Daddy,' she said. 'I bang bang water.'

He sank into the sand, fractured by relief, and wept as she instructed him on how to make big splashes in the water with her spade. When he recovered he said, 'can I have a turn?'

Isabel thought about it. 'Alright.'

He knew not to take her spade so used his hand to splash the water. She shrieked with laughter and joined in, stamping the pool with both feet and drenching them both. Finally he picked her up and held her close.

'I have a ice-cream?'

'Of course you can.'

She planted a wet kiss on his cheek, then on his nose.

'Love you, Daddy.'

He wanted to clasp the moment like a butterfly and trap it in a jar.

*

Days like that, at the beach in Cornwall. He worked in the garden whilst Deena painted and Isabel rode her tricycle up and down the garden path. He told Deena he loved her over and over. When the blackberry bush at the bottom of their garden fattened with bulbs he pulled a pair of small gloves over Issy's hands and showed her how to pluck them, though she ate every one before it reached the basket.

When the month was out he refused to go to bed. Deena thought he had a stomach bug, or perhaps insomnia. Often she would visit the bathroom in the

small hours and find him downstairs, working on a paper or making blackberry jam. But whatever tide had swept him on to these shores insisted on carrying him back to his cold bed at home, and he woke up weeping.

*

Ten years passed. Each October was met with the sensation of returning from his youth to an older body more broken and wearied by living, to a house in which silence and stillness had formed a new climate. When he woke up once more to Deena and Isabel, he found it difficult not to beg his daughter – now a grown woman, though no less strong-willed – to put aside her wanderlust, and he almost blurted out what would happen to her if she did not. Deena looked pale and wan. He insisted that she go to the doctor for an examination, but nothing unusual was found.

The leaves turned arterial. As usual he did not sleep more than several hours a night, each minute weighed in his palm like fine gold. Deena rose to use the bathroom and found him in the office.

‘Has Issy come home?’

He shook his head. ‘She said she was staying on in Paris until Friday.’

‘Come to bed, Will.’

‘OK. Can I bring you anything?’

‘Perhaps a cold glass of water.’

He walked quietly up the stairs, the squares of ice tapping the sides of the glass like bells. He found Deena fast asleep in bed and folded his body around hers, pressing his face against her hair. His mind brightened with purpose: he would kill himself on the last night of September.

It was two weeks away. He considered all angles of the proposal carefully and decided it to be highly reasonable. Dying in the arms of his wife – and timing his demise so that it occurred at the moment when he usually left her, so that she might be spared the pain of finding him dead – was the only way he wished to die.

Deena appeared on the threshold of the kitchen, right as he was reaching into the pill cabinet.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Indigestion. I don’t think the lamb agreed with me.’

She pursed her lips and swept past him, plucking a packet of pills from a shelf. ‘Here. Now come to bed.’

*

The next September, and the next. The present became a pilgrimage to the past. One month of happiness at a cost of eleven months’ sorrow. When he returned in his eighty-fifth year he woke on a beach amidst a storm. Lightning speared the ground. Chain-mail rain drilled heavily on his head, making it difficult to see or hear. The tide heaved in tremendous grey arcs. No sign of anyone, and nothing in his memory to indicate where he was. The cold was too much, too piercing. After an hour of slopping through mud and brambles he found a thick oak tree, some warmth still trapped in its bark, and curled up beside it.

He woke in a hospital bed surrounded by machines. Nurses sailed past. There were beds opposite occupied by sleeping men, their faces blanked out by masks and tubes. He turned his head and saw Deena beside him, her own face tight with concern.

‘How are you feeling?’ She brought a glass of water to his lips and helped him drink. Then she stroked his head and smiled.

‘How long have I been here?’

‘Three weeks. They say you were out in the storm for fourteen hours or more. I thought you’d gone to give your paper at Oxford.’ Her voice shrank to a whisper. ‘I don’t know what’s happening, Will. I really don’t. First Issy, then the phone call to say they’d found you half-dead from exposure. They say your organs failed and you’ll need pills for the rest of your life. It’s like we’re cursed.’

He reached out and took her hand. The machine beside him beeped angrily.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t remember much about anything.’

She forced herself to brighten. At least he was alive. ‘Well. Now that you’re awake, there’s a good chance you might be home in a couple of weeks.’

He calculated that this would mean the entirety of what precious time he had left with his wife would be spent in hospital. He sat upright, suddenly energized.

‘I want to speak to the doctor.’

Finally a nurse came, and when she reiterated Deena’s prognosis a doctor was found, who instructed him once again on the severity of his condition.

‘You have some significant damage to your liver and kidneys,’ said the doctor. ‘If you leave we have no way of monitoring you properly.’

But William kicked up such a fuss that the doctor was moved by irritation into sending him home with a box of drugs and a schedule of appointments.

He feigned wellness. The storm had long passed, diaphanous September skies blessing the cottage with its usual radiance and warm scent of roses. He obediently took to resting on a lounge in the garden, watching Deena paint. When blood pinked his urine he did not mention it.

September 30th: Deena sat on the end of the bed in her nightie, her eyes vacant and her collarbones sharp in her chest. Her hair had loosened its flame-red hue to a corn shade, and though she was still beautiful he knew that grief pressed upon her, an unseen yoke.

‘Time for your medicine,’ she said, brushing her hair.

‘Already taken it.’

‘Good.’ She gave a sigh and climbed into bed. She lay facing him, a small smile on her face.

‘Good night,’ she said.

‘Goodbye,’ he whispered.

They folded themselves around each other in the darkness. He had told her the truth, finally. He had taken his medicine, only he had taken all of it at once, and as his pulse slowed against her palms and his breaths thinned to stillness the light tiptoed elsewhere. The month bled out. The black leaves on the pavement silvered with first frosts.

The next day, a neighbor found William in his bed clutching a photograph of Deena, his body already stiff. In his garden blackberries nosed into the wind, restless to become stains on a boy’s hand, then a jam, a taste, journeying through the blood all the way back to earth.