

**LOOK
AT
ME**

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I DON'T WANT TO DIE and I don't want to walk through this door. School doors are the entrance to hell. But there's nothing for it—my daughter needs me.

The door is heavy and opens outwards. I'm immediately met by that particular school smell—a smell common to all the schools I know, except the music school where I work, which smells of dust mites and rosin. It's always made me feel sick, that smell, and it doesn't seem to get any better with age. I've come to collect Helli countless times, but my stomach continues to rebel.

The corridor, which is decorated with students' artwork, leads straight ahead, then around one corner, and another, until there you are at the glass door dividing the smelly, linoleum-floored part of the school from the more comfortable carpeted part, which smells of coffee. I spot Helli immediately. She's sitting on a chair outside the secretary's office with strange little horns sticking out of her nose. It's unusual to see

her sitting still. I quicken my pace.

When I was about as old as Helli is now, I suffered from symptoms nobody was able to explain. Every few weeks, without warning, I'd be struck by a vomiting attack at school. After a few mortifying scenes in class and at break, I learnt to read the subtle signals my body sent me, and from then on I made it to the toilets in time. Not until I was pregnant did I experience anything like it again—I'd throw up noiselessly, over and over, and even once I'd learnt to read the signs, I felt in those moments as if I were going to die. My brain told me it wasn't possible, but the feeling was there and never lost its horror—I'd be shaky for hours and even days afterwards, overwhelmed by the least stimulus—all light too bright, all voices too loud. I felt like a zombie, not quite alive but not properly dead. Carrying on with everyday life seemed more than I could cope with. It was as if a promise was broken with every attack—as if I'd only survived at a price I wasn't prepared to pay.

As I approach, the little horns in Helli's nose reveal themselves as ragged screws of tissue, stuck in her nostrils to serve as tampons. They are already soaked bright red and fall out when she jumps up to greet me.

'You took your time,' she says.

'I was doing the shopping. I couldn't get here any quicker.'

Helli's nose is dripping. She leans over and bleeds purposefully onto the carpet.

She's different from me. She doesn't mind puking or bleeding or causing any other kind of mess or inconvenience.

I hand her a packet of tissues I've brought from the car

and she fiddles about with it. Eventually she presses a scrunched-up wad of paper to her nose, and I turn my attention to the floor to gauge the damage. Helli's shoes have not escaped unscathed, and a bloody trail leads all along the carpet from the glass door to the school office. I follow this trail, knock and poke my head around the door to tell the secretary that I'm here and am taking my daughter home.

'Mrs Theodoroulakis,' calls the secretary, whose name is something so boring that I always forget it—Lehmann? Kaufmann? Neumann?

'Yes?'

'Would you come and have a look at this, please?'

I'd been fearing this. Leaving Helli waiting in the corridor, I step into the office, where Mrs Neumann is squatting on the floor with a cloth.

'I can't have your daughter bleeding all over the place like this, Mrs Theodoroulakis. I don't have time for this kind of thing. I don't see why I should have to spend all morning scrubbing stains out of the carpet. I'm not a cleaning lady, you know.'

Helli must have stood at Mrs Neumann's desk for quite some time—she's left an ornate pattern of drips on the floor in front of it. I have a vivid image of Helli standing there, leaning over and dripping away gleefully while Mrs Neumann frantically dialled my number, rummaging in the desk drawers for tissues with her free hand. On one patch of carpet I spot a small white heap. Mrs Neumann has evidently tried to get rid of the bloodstain with salt, as if it were red wine.

'You need cold water to get blood out,' I say.

I've become something of a stain pro since Helli's been around.

Mrs Neumann straightens herself and holds out the cloth to me.

'You do it, then, if you're such an expert. I've had enough of people like you. Full of bright ideas, but only ever stand and watch.'

Somewhat taken aback, I accept the cloth, which is no use at all because it's warm. Mrs Neumann has folded her arms and assumed a stern look. Although she's small and round, there's something menacing about her.

I don't know what to do. All I know is that out in the corridor, Helli is waiting, still dripping away impatiently—and that the bloody trail doesn't stop at the glass door, but leads all the way to one of the classrooms, deep in the entrails of the school, where it smells of vomiting attacks. I know that the bell's about to ring and that the teachers are about to emerge, and I certainly don't want to be mopping up blood under *their* feet. Just now I can imagine little worse.

Mrs Neumann is standing in front of me, clicking her tongue in annoyance because I still haven't got started. She's right, of course. She isn't a cleaning lady and maybe she's no keener than I am on crawling about on the floor in front of the entire staff. I feel sorry for her, but it isn't my job to clean the carpet either. My job is to look after my daughter. I thrust the cloth back into Mrs Neumann's hand and make a rapid exit. Outside I snatch up Helli's schoolbag and jacket, grab her arm and pull her along behind me.

'Hey,' Mrs Neumann calls out after us. 'Come back here,

please, and get rid of this mess. I'm not a cleaning lady!

Helli and I begin to run, around one corner, then the next, down the long corridor and through the heavy door, until we reach the car, which, in spite of all the no parking signs, I've left directly outside the school. We bundle ourselves in.

'Quick, drive!' Helli shouts, laughing. 'Otherwise the stupid bitch will chuck cloths at us out of the window.'

She's sitting in the front passenger seat. I look at her with raised eyebrows. Her nose has stopped bleeding—it probably stopped the moment we left the building.

'Into the back with you,' I say.

'No.'

I can't tell for certain whether the movement I see out of the corner of my eye is the school secretary climbing out the window to remind me, again, that she's not a cleaning lady, but I decide I don't have the time to argue with my daughter. I step on the accelerator.

Though the windscreen is steamed up and it won't be long before I can't see out at all, I drive away from the school as quickly as I can, only feeling safe when we reach the bus stop down the road. I park in the bus bay, leaving the engine running and the heater on. The fan is blowing at full tilt. It seems to be fighting a losing battle, but the hot air always wins out in the end.

'What was the matter with Mrs Neumann?' I ask. 'She isn't usually like that.'

'Her husband's gone. She's been a bit mad ever since,' says Helli.

'What do you mean, *gone*?'

‘Run off or died—one or the other.’

‘It’s not quite the same.’

‘Well, at any rate, he’s gone. Her name’s Mrs Kaufmann, by the way.’

‘I suppose it doesn’t make much difference in the end whether someone’s died or run off,’ I say, but the moment I speak the words I know they’re wrong. It makes a huge difference. Run off but still alive is, generally speaking, the better alternative.

Helli nods, as if she understands what I’m saying. It’s even possible that she does.

I get out my phone and find the kindergarten number. My music class, which is only half an hour long, is due to start in three minutes.

Kirsten picks up.

‘It’s Katharina,’ I say. ‘I can’t come today. My daughter’s hurt herself—I have to pick her up from school. An emergency.’

‘Not much notice, is it?’

‘I may have to take her to hospital. I’ll make the class up later if the parents want. But not until after Christmas.’

‘I’ll pass that on,’ says Kirsten and hangs up. She’s only nice to our boss and the children’s parents.

Two clear patches have formed on the windscreen, large enough for me to see the road if I lean forward. I flick the indicator on and pull out of the bus bay. Helli has discovered the ice scraper I threw into the footwell of the passenger seat this morning. It’s in a kind of beaver-shaped glove that’s supposed to keep your hand warm while you scrape. Helli

thrusts her hand into the beaver, making it dance like a puppet and talk in a nasal voice: 'I'm afraid we have to go to hospital, like, totally fast, Mrs Kindergarten. My daughter's brain is bleeding out of her nose and she's getting stupider by the minute. I'm *so* sorry. Honest.'

Helli looks like something out of a low-budget horror film. There's dried blood on her pale, round face—blood on her chin, blood on her nose. The top she's wearing has splodges of blood the size of coins just over the place where little hillocks of breasts are beginning to form—whether first signs of puberty or leftover puppy fat, I find it hard to tell. There are splashes of blood on her trousers too, or whatever you call them these days—jeggings or treggings or sausage skin. Her hair is lank and could desperately do with a wash—it's even more colourless than usual.

I suppose it would be easier for Helli to be unattractive if we hadn't called her Helena, like the beautiful Helen of Troy, with her 'face that launch'd a thousand ships'.

Costas is an olive-skinned, black-haired Greek, and our son, Alex, takes after him—in personality too. He'd certainly be too dignified to give himself a minor haemorrhage just to get off school a few hours early. But unlike her brother, Helli has a magic blood vessel in her nose that responds to vigorous poking. When she gets bored in school, she prods at it until the blood begins to flow. And flow it does—it wells up and drips and runs, and within minutes she has half the school running around like headless chickens.

It's the fourth time in two weeks I've had to pick her up because of a nosebleed. Lately she's been fabricating dizzy

spells and headaches as well, making the terrified secretary more anxious than ever that I hurry. I could simply turn the car around now and drive Helli back to school so that she doesn't miss this afternoon's lessons, but her nose would probably start to bleed again immediately. Besides, I'm afraid of mad Mrs Kaufmann.

Maybe I should take Helli straight to emergency, just to teach her a lesson. I could even put paid to the whole business once and for all by having the trained blood vessel cauterised. But the thought of Helli's screams when she saw the doctor bearing down on her with a soldering iron is enough to make me reject the plan. Helli and doctors is a tale in itself and one reason that I don't go to the doctor anymore. Over the past eleven years, Helli has more than exhausted my capacity for medical encounters. Still, I can't resist getting a bit of revenge for the ice-scraper beaver's silly remark.

'We really are going to the hospital,' I announce. 'It's time we sorted out this thing with your nose. There might really be something the matter.'

She bursts into tears. I didn't want that, of course. I reach out to stroke her, but she dodges my hand, gives a dramatic sob and flails out at me.

'All right, no hospital,' I mumble.

She gives another couple of sobs, then suddenly shouts: 'Look what a stupid hat that man's wearing,' and I know the crisis is over. Helli's moods, Costas always says, are like the weather. If you don't like the look of things, just hang on in there.

We're working our way through the suburbs and along the

tree-lined stretch of road that takes you across the countryside, past wind turbines and farms and through villages. I'm deliberately driving the long way round because there's less traffic here. We come to the outskirts of town—red-brick houses with gardens, the same as everywhere. The sky is bright and open, and at the edge, where it looks paler, is the sea—the end of the land.

My phone rings. It's Costas, so I don't bother pulling over but pass the phone to Helli. She's pleased—she loves talking on the phone.

'Hello, Dad!' she shouts. Then she listens for a while. Then: 'No, we're in the car—she's just picked me up. Nosebleed.' Then: 'Yes, *again*. But it's stopped now.' Then: 'Yeah, of course, everything's fine. What about you?' Then: 'Okay. See you.'

She begins to fiddle around with the buttons on my phone and seems to have forgotten all about me.

'Helli?' I say. 'What did Dad want?'

'He was, like, worried. Because you hadn't got in touch or something. Anyway, I told him everything's fine here.'

I'm almost touched that she thinks it fine that I've cancelled my music class because her nose has ruined a carpet, and that we've had to run away from a school secretary who's gone mad with grief.



If it's fine you're after, it's not a good idea to have a husband who's almost impossible to get hold of except by phone. Since Costas started working in Berlin, we've been fighting a lot.

Fights are the price you pay for a weekend relationship. A fight makes it easier to say goodbye—even after a relatively harmonious weekend, he and I will dredge up a few last-minute things guaranteed to start a fight. Then we spend the following week making it up by text and email and Skype and phone, until we're so desperately looking forward to seeing each other again on Friday that it can only be a disappointment, and we have one almighty argument when Costas gets home. This is followed by a lull—Saturday is generally peaceful and we don't fight again until Sunday evening, when Costas is about to leave to catch his train—just in time to give ourselves something to make up in the days to come.

This time, though, we have longer than usual—until the weekend after next—which means that our reconciliation is also more drawn-out. Right now, we're somewhere in the middle, which means that I don't immediately reply to Costas's texts and keep our phone calls brief and strictly informative. Not that there isn't plenty we could discuss—what's going on with Helli, for one thing. There's also the Christmas shopping list I gave him—a long list of things I assume it will be easier for him to get hold of in Berlin.

Still, at least Costas has noticed that I'm being short with him and seen it as cause for concern—he wouldn't have rung midmorning if he hadn't. All I'd really wanted, though, was that he realise I was annoyed—I didn't want him worrying. No one need worry about me.

Helli has tired of the phone. She tosses it in my lap and it slides off into the footwell. But her fingers never stop. They turn up the heating, adjust the air vent, flick on the warning

lights—and all the time she’s watching what they’re doing, the way a mother watches her children scurry around in a sandpit. Finally she switches on the stereo. The CD that starts up is Josef Protschka and Helmut Deutsch’s recording of Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, which I slid into the player earlier this morning. I have to be careful to keep my eyes open when the music begins—I usually close them, sucking in the air through my nose with an audible hiss. Protschka is singing the third song: ‘The rose and the lily, the dove and the sun...’

When I first realised—years ago, as a student—that this song was a reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, it was like a revelation. I probed every word, every chord, and saw that whatever scholars and critics might want me to believe, this little poem clearly wasn’t about flowers and birds. It was about Christian imagery and the possibility of loving somebody so much that you’re prepared to let go of everything that has sustained you in the past. In those days I had the time to read difficult texts—now I count myself lucky if I get to skim the newspaper at some point during the day and fall asleep over a second-rate novel at night.

When I really began to listen, the connection between Heine and Schumann and Dante became clear to me. Things which had been drifting about in my head, unconnected, were in fact related to one another, and this realisation kept me in a state of excitement for days on end. These days I can’t decide whether everything’s connected, or whether it’s quite the reverse and all connections are a mere figment of my imagination—a longing for a kind of logical order to objects and events, or at least for some sort of meaningful relationship

between them. Schumann certainly tried to interweave his life and work so closely that one is inconceivable without the other—it can hardly be coincidence that the motifs are so similar. This has always impressed me, and I'd love to have done the same, but in my case there's nothing to connect. There's no work—only life. Now the fifth song is starting, the one about the lily's cup. It's a wonderful opening—tender, rich, intense. Costas thinks I talk about music the way other people talk about food.

'Fuck, Mum!' Helli shouts.

There's a bang and an ugly grinding noise on her side of the car. I brake and open my eyes. The car has mounted the pavement and Helli is screaming at me.

'What are you doing? We could have died!'

She points accusingly at a street lamp that we must have grazed with the wing mirror.



I've always thought it would be useful if we knew how we were going to die. It would be an unbeatable way to treat phobias. At this moment, for instance, I know I ought to be upset and at the same time deeply relieved—after all, something terrible could have happened—but instead I just sit here and feel myself shrug inwardly, because I know what my own end will look like and it has nothing to do with a car accident. I've known for two weeks. That's when I discovered the something. Since then, all has been clear to me. The something is in my left breast and isn't behaving the way I'd like it to: it isn't getting any smaller, isn't moving and doesn't

hurt. It is what it is. But then it isn't its job to give me hope.

I suppose your average woman in her early forties has a gynaecologist she can trust. Not me—as I said, I don't do doctors. That will change now—I'll have to learn to be like Helli, because I'm going to make a mess and cause people trouble. I'll gradually fade away, becoming fainter and fainter, until the person I am now has almost disappeared, and everyone else will finally begin to understand what I already know. Things have been heading this way for a while, after all—heading towards death.

I know that, but I'm not ready to deal with it yet. On Monday I'll be sensible and make an appointment with a gynaecologist. On Monday I'll set the machinery in motion. Mondays are days of transition. Today's Friday, though, and Friday's job is to let the week wind down gently. It has to be kept free of trouble. Thoughts have to be squashed before they start hopping about like fleas, jumping from tests to diagnoses and from diagnoses to operations, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and other ideas that have no business ruining the weekend.

Helli gets out of the car, shouting that we could have died, or at the very least got whiplash. You have to give it to her—she knows how to milk a situation for maximum dramatic effect. She lays into me, telling me that I'm irresponsible, that I don't drive half as well as Dad, that we might have to pay for the lamppost, and that she's never getting in a car with me again—ever. She puffs little clouds into the cold air—a small, chubby, pancake-faced dragon.

I remain in my seat, clutching the steering wheel. Behind us, a four-wheel drive with Bamberg number plates stops and

disgorges an entire family. Probably holiday-makers come to see the Baltic in winter, or on their way to catch one of the giant ferries to Scandinavia. A shaggy dog barks furiously as Helli is surrounded by a flock of eager children. The young mother appears, swathed in an oversized scarf and wringing her hands. She tries to wipe Helli's bloody face clean with a tissue but doesn't get anywhere, because my daughter isn't through with raging and won't stay still. The father, who looks far too young to have so many children, peers through the window at me and asks, 'Are you all right? What happened?'

'Schumann,' I say, 'and maybe a bit of black ice.'

'Ah, of course,' he says, and laughs.

In the end, I too get out. I forge a path through the thronging children to Helli, who is waving her arms about, her face as red as a beetroot. I take her in my arms. She squirms and struggles but eventually calms down. The young mother is still holding out the tissue. I take it, smiling thanks.

'She had a nosebleed earlier,' I say, by way of explanation, but the woman only gives me a sceptical look.

Her husband, meanwhile, is inspecting the damage. He stoops down and hands me the wing mirror that was sheared off by the lamppost.

'On the newer models, the mirrors fold in automatically,' he says. 'Yours is one of the last where things break off.'

While his wife herds the children and the dog back into the four-wheel drive, he comes over to Helli and me and gives us both a hug. Perhaps that's what they do down south.

'You should drive straight back home and have a rest,' he

murmurs into my hair. ‘Car accidents are like visits to the dentist—they weaken your immune system. You mustn’t be surprised if you feel a cold coming on tomorrow.’

‘Thanks,’ I say faintly.

The kids wave out of the windows as the four-wheel drive goes on its way. Helli too waves cheerfully and laughs.



Back in the car I hand her the sheared-off mirror. She frowns and turns it over, then has a good look at herself. I half expect her to ask who is the fairest of them all.

‘Can you even drive with only one wing mirror?’ she asks.

‘Of course,’ I say, starting up the car again.

You can do all kinds of things if you have to.

When Helli’s had enough of her reflection, she notices the music.

‘What is this crap you’re listening to?’ she asks. She pushes a button and the music stops dead. My heart lurches, the way it always does at such times—after all these years, it still hasn’t got used to the constant chopping and changing, the way nothing is allowed to run its course before giving way to something new. My heart likes to hear a song play out, wants to hear its final chords.

Helli’s fingers find the radio dial, twiddle it until she’s found a station, twiddle it some more until she’s found another and then turn up the volume. I stare at the road and concentrate on driving—I’m not going to let myself be distracted by those scurrying fingers, and even less by the music blaring out of the speakers. Helli is clearly enjoying it—at least enough to

abandon her twiddling and let her fingers drift to the window crank.

The song is one even I have heard often enough to recognise, though I couldn't tell you who sings it. Helli's body jerks almost imperceptibly to the beat. I can see her mouthing the words to the chorus: 'You're so hot, it makes me wanna cry/ Nothing can ever stop you and I.'

In my notebook I have a list that I'd like to add to now. It's headed *Grammatical errors in pop songs that could be avoided if someone in the studio understood enough to put the songwriters straight.*

The list is a whole page long.

The last bars of music segue straight into 'Last Christmas'. I'm glad when our house comes into view shortly afterwards.

Helli rattles at the glove box, then leans over to adjust the digital displays behind the steering wheel. I glance at the clock as I turn into our drive: 10:32. I see the time vanish and the temperature appear in its place because Helli has found the button that makes it do just that: -3° . After that, I'm informed that my average fuel consumption is 5.4 litres. Then at last I can cut the engine and silence George Michael. I pick up my phone from under my seat and put it in my coat pocket. Helli gets out, leaving behind her on the passenger seat the ice-scraper beaver, a bloody, scrunched-up tissue and the wing mirror.



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