

THINGS THAT GO
UNSPOKEN



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Antonella Lattanzi

*Translated from the Italian by
Jamie Richards*

akoya

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'Le bombe delle sei non fanno male,
è solo il giorno che muore.'

Antonello Venditti, 'Notte prima degli esami'

One

We went up to Circeo, even though it was the most absurd thing to do. The most dangerous.

We've been out of our minds for a while. Months. We've been out of our minds, and it feels as if the world is out of its mind along with us. The doctors, the few friends who know, and the others – most of the people we know and love – who have no idea what's going on.

We went up to Circeo, where our phones don't get reception, where there's no wi-fi, where terrible things happened not so long ago, up there on the cape. The rocks jut out at you, tall and raw, as you climb or descend the hairpin bends, and you know you're all alone. If there's an emergency, you're alone. If you die, you're alone.

I lie down on the bed, next to Andrea, but I'm terrified. The bed is pushed into the corner of the seaside cottage we picked out back in March when everything had just happened, and we didn't know it could get any worse. This corner where the bed is wedged looms over me, just like the cape where we're hiding out, unable to communicate with anyone. The terror I feel is bigger and blacker than the cliffs.

Andrea picks up a book. I listen to what's happening to my body. I can feel the blood flowing out of me, as it has since February. Now it's June. Blood in drops, gobs, spurts, buckets. Now it comes out of me liquid and infinite as I lie outstretched and try not to

breathe. Maybe, I tell myself, if you hold your breath the bleeding will stop.

I can't admit to Andrea how scared I am or he'll say, let's go back to Rome.

And I can't do that. I can't give in. I don't want to give in to all this pain. I want my June in Circeo, I have a right to try to put my life back together, a right to sit on the smooth-worn rocks and stare out at the sea without feeling pain in every part of my body. I have a right to say, I reject everything that happened, I reject reality, I reject that this could happen to me. That it is happening to me. I don't want to come to terms with what happened. I want it not to have happened at all.

I'm lying on the bed. A bigger, longer gush soaks my pad. I turn towards Andrea. 'How's it going?' he asks.

But he already knows. If I'm turning to look at him, he knows.

'Blood,' I say.

I want to cry and tell him how scared I am. I want to tell him, take me to Rome, take me to the hospital. But I can't. If you pretend there isn't blood everywhere, there won't be. I say 'blood' as if I were saying 'sorry.'

'How much?' he says.

This responsibility I have, that only I can have, to know how much blood I'm losing, whether it's *too much*, is driving me crazy. No one can help me to tell how much blood this is.

'Maybe not that much.' I lie. 'Can't we go to sleep?'

It's June and I haven't slept in months, night or day. Months after this, I still won't be able to sleep. I'll wake up at one, two, three, four, every night. I'll never nap during the day. Is it possible to bleed to death without realising?

'I don't know,' he says. 'Only you can tell.'

He searches my face. Only I can tell *how much* blood it is. Whether it's too much. ('Bleeding is serious,' my gynaecologist said. 'Try to manage if you can. But if it doesn't stop, get yourself to A&E'). But how much is *too much*? If someone cuts themselves by accident, and the bleeding doesn't stop, they consider going to hospital. If I think of it this way, the bleeding has been too much for months. February, March, April, May, June. All that time popping haemostatics. Six 500 mg tablets of Tranex a day. The maximum dose. Sometimes, I secretly take three or four more. Vials are better, I know, the drug works faster: it starts circulating right after you drink it. But vials are glass and they shatter in my hands because I'm always trembling when I open them. My whole body is trembling, head to toe, as if I were epileptic, as if I couldn't stop dancing. At the hospital they tell me Tranex shouldn't be taken for months on end, it's very dangerous.

Dictionary. Word: *danger*. Antonym: *safety*. But that's not the case for me. In these past months, the word 'danger' has taken on another opposite: survival. Between danger and survival, I have no choice but survival. Day by day, hour by hour. I don't stop to think about all the dangers. I can't. Blood doesn't care what medications I take. My blood doesn't care about anything. It flows.

'How much blood?' he asks.

'I don't know,' I reply.

'What do you want to do? Should we go back to Rome?'

I'm the one who has to decide. No one can decide for me, and it's not because they don't want to. It's that no one else is inside my body. We're on Circeo because I

wanted to go. Because I demanded to go. I wish I had some way of measuring how many millilitres of blood I'm losing, or litres, to tell me whether it's OK. That this much is acceptable.

But if Andrea asks me should we go back to Rome, the only answer is no. Rome means admitting what's going on. Rome means A&E and an inevitable operation with even more risk.

'No,' I say.

'You sure?'

'I'm sure.'

My pounding heart is breaking my sternum. Everything hurts. My legs, my arms, my back, my belly, my head. And I feel weak, so very weak. My haemoglobin keeps falling, and despite the iron, folic acid, vitamin B, and vitamin D, despite the transfusions, despite the haemostatics, it continues to drop. I can't go up an incline. Or take a walk. I'm winded just going from the bedroom to the bathroom. My heart races if I so much as pick up a pair of shoes.

'Could you stay awake for a little while?' I ask.

My head is telling me, you're crazy, get back to Rome, go to A&E, you can't even take a breath without bleeding. I lift the sheet and in terror pull down my underwear. I don't want to look, but I have to. No one can do it for me. I look down. Red. Bright red. Even with a stack of four incontinence pads, the sheets end up stained. I have to sleep in pants, with a towel wrapped around my body. Not that I'll sleep.

'Of course,' he says. 'But are you sure we don't have to go?'

It's an insane question. No one would hole themselves up in Circeo without wi-fi, without reception, without any means of communication, an hour and a

half from Rome, the unpaved, unlit Pontina the only way back to the city. No one. Except us. Except me.

We're crazy. I've always been crazy, Andrea never. But now my madness has infected him.

'Yes,' I say.

'All right.'

We're crazy together, and I eventually close my eyes, he closes his and turns off the light. I've always had monsters in my head. But now they're not monsters. They're living tissue of jellylike blood, globs I can feel coming out of me. And I don't want what's coming out of me to be blood. It can't be real. It's not real.

We close our eyes, we're crazy together, and it's pure luck that I keep nodding off and waking up again, over and over, that night in Circeo, as the sound of the sea, which I've always loved, crescendos ominously. It's pure luck that I don't sleep a moment too long. It's pure luck that in all those months, February, March, April, May, June of 2021, I don't sleep a moment too long. That would be the moment I die in a pool of my own bright red blood.

Two

The story begins when I finally decide.

I never thought about the two babies I aborted.

Now that I keep going back over it – five, I can’t not think that it’s *five* children I don’t have – even now, every time I’m alone with my partner I want to tell him that I should have protected them, taken care of them, loved them; that’s what a parent does, that’s what a mother does; I should have protected them from scraped knees, from the pain of their first tooth, from colic, from their first conflicts with other kids; I should have protected them from the cold, I should have protected them from the heat, taking them to the beach in the early morning or late afternoon, slathering them with sunblock so they don’t burn, teaching them that the sea is good, it’s a friend, that dogs are good, they’re friends (but I should have protected them from dogs too, explained that they’re not toys, that when a dog comes up to you, first you should put your hand under its chin, palm open, to show that you won’t hurt it, let it sniff you, watch its face, see whether it wags its tail or if it stiffens, since not all dogs are the same and not all dogs like being petted); I should have introduced them to the place I’m from and hoped they loved it, I should have shown them, this is Grandpa, this is Grandma (too painful to imagine my parents’ overjoyed faces if I’d told them: I’m pregnant, I’m pregnant, I’m pregnant,

I'm pregnant, I'm pregnant, five times – whereas I didn't tell them even once). I should have protected them from fear of the dark, fear of death, fear of my death, fear of their parents dying; I should have explained to them what my father explained to me, when I felt scared of eternal life as we'd been taught about it in church (I would never have taken them to church, so maybe they would only have been scared of death, but eternal life and death are the same thing), I should have told them, as my father had me, that as long as someone is there to remember us, we don't die, and how those words so consoled me that I remember them still. His words, from my mouth, would have consoled my children as I, like a good mum, tucked them into bed. Even now that I think I'm a terrible mother because instead of protecting my children I had a part in what killed them, I never think of the two babies I aborted.

Or rather, I never used to.

I didn't think about them because the thought was too big. I didn't want to be, in the present, the product of every harm I had suffered or caused in the past. I didn't think about them because I didn't want to give a name to these children I didn't have. Because I don't want to think about how old they would be now, and now. Because I don't want a place to go to remember them. I didn't think about them because when other people – friends, acquaintances, colleagues – revealed their own abortion, it brought back my own story. I wanted to say, I know, I understand. I decided to have an abortion. Not once, but twice. It was on the tip of my tongue and always so close to coming out. But I couldn't let it. If you give such a big part of yourself to someone else, how can you protect yourself? If you give

away the deepest parts of yourself, they hurt more. Because from that moment on, they exist.

I never thought about them.

I never thought I was the kind of person who doesn't talk about themselves. I didn't think of myself that way. Now I know that I am. That I have a dam in my mind holding back all the things that are too painful. I don't want to tell anybody about those things. I don't want to think about them. I don't want them ever to have existed. And if I don't talk about them, they don't exist.

And then, even on the rare occasions that I do want to talk, how could I? My closest friends, the ones I call family, have no idea. How could I, after knowing them for decades, come out and say, by the way, here's this important thing I never told you?

How would they look at me? Would they think: why wouldn't you tell me something like that?

And how could I explain?

Revealing painful secrets ruins the mood of an evening spent chatting with a close friend over a bottle of wine.

How can the conversation get back to work, love life, sex, fears, joys, if I throw pain like that at someone?

Being sad bores me. I hate it.

I never told anyone. The only ones who know are the fathers of those children.

All this was a factor, it's true. But there was also the shame. When I went to the gynaecologist for a check-up they would ask: any previous pregnancies?

No.

Miscarriages or abortions?

Me, confidently: No.

When I went to other doctors, they would ask: previous surgeries?

No.

Ever undergone general anaesthesia?

No.

You shouldn't lie to doctors, Andrea always tells me. Why go to the doctor, what do you pay them for if you're going to tell them lies?

I always lie to doctors.

What your reason clearly tells you, what you believe in and defend – that getting an abortion doesn't make you a monster – is loudly contradicted by a voice shouting inside you.

You're a monster and you don't want anybody else to know it.

Voluntary interruption of pregnancy is a right; my mother taught me that. But the fact that I've exercised that right is something I can't tell my same mother.

I know that it's a right and I believe in it. And yet when everything that happened happened, and even before, when I finally decided that I wanted to start trying for a child, and for years when that child never came, the thought of those two babies became constant. I couldn't help but conclude that I had brought this tragedy on myself.

In times of suffering we always look for a reason. Why did what happened happen? Because life isn't to be messed with, answered an ancestral voice, the voice of magical thinking. You rejected two lives. And so you have been punished. Another three lives have