

Copyrighted Material

Half a Heart

Zelda

‘Has someone come with you for support today?’

Zelda doesn’t hear the question. She is distracted by a shaft of light coming through the window that shines a perfect square on the blue rubber floor. Dust dances in the stale office air.

The nurse looks up from her clipboard. ‘Is there someone waiting outside? A friend, a family member?’

‘No,’ Zelda says, folding her arms. ‘That’s okay, right? I’m only seven weeks, so thought I could just pop the pill and go.’

The nurse smiles, flicking the biro between her fingers. ‘So I’m assuming the answer to the question of whether this is your first termination is “no”?’

She says it kindly, and Zelda wants to laugh. She remembers this woman from the last time, and, when she walked in and saw a familiar face, she felt a twinge of comfort. But the nurse has no memory of her. Zelda wonders how many women with electric-red hair dressed in men’s clothes come to the clinic and whether she is really that easy to forget.

‘Third time a charm,’ says Zelda.

The nurse writes on the clipboard, her face free of judgement. She wears half a heart on a chain around her neck, and Zelda remembers her own, which her friend Leila gave to her at the turn of the millennium, soon after they left school. Zelda wonders who possesses the other half of the nurse’s heart. She can hardly remember Leila now.

Outside, there is early-morning traffic, the sound of a truck reversing, people chatting in the street. The trees that line the pavement have yet to bloom, but the buds are there, waiting. Zelda lets the

door swing shut and pauses to light a cigarette. She pulls up her jacket collar against the breeze as she leans against a wall to smoke. A nearby radio talks of an impending snowstorm. *The Beast from the East*. Zelda turns her face towards the sun.

The pills are tucked into her pocket to take when she gets home. She hopes she still has enough whisky left to help knock them back. The cramps feel better when the edges are fuzzy, whatever the nurses say.

A passing woman gives her a filthy look. Maybe it's the cigarette, or the abortion-clinic backdrop. Zelda stares the woman out.

The sweet scent of cinnamon hangs in the air as she starts down the street. The reason for her heightened sense of smell does not escape her, and she decides to buy the thickest, flakiest pastry in an attempt to forget that, right now, her body is not entirely her own. She can hardly remember a time when it was.

Zelda is taking a bite when she turns the corner and sees them. She stops. There they are, up ahead, a trolley stand of brochures on the pavement, two women standing nearby with regulation smiles and knee-length skirts. She doesn't recognize them – she usually goes to a clinic in a different town – but they look like all the others. The banner on the trolley screams LIFE WITHOUT END – WHEN?

She starts to choke and steps back around the corner, pressing herself to the wall. She is too dizzy to notice her velvet jacket snagging on the brickwork.

A nearby alley gives shelter. Zelda has an overwhelming urge to be sick, and so she is, all down the side of a bright blue dumpster. Her vomit seeps on to the ground.

'Fuck's sake,' she says to the floor. 'All these years on and you still let them get to you.'

Blank Page

Jen

Jen dashes into the department store to escape the driving rain. Running is beyond her. She forgot to say goodbye to her feet before they disappeared, before new parts of her took over. Her cheeks, her thighs, her chest, her stomach. All blooming with water and life.

She picks up a leaflet to fan her face. Winter is cold inside the store, but sweat still creeps from her pores. She strips her layers as she walks to the back.

She has spent hours here. Wandering between aisles of cots and baths, and clothing that looks miniature. The volume of paraphernalia is overwhelming. Pete nearly gave up after an hour spent trying to collapse the buggy. What clichés we are, Jen had thought as she watched him. He loses his temper with inanimate objects, and I just want someone to massage my feet.

Jen often lingers, waiting for another mum-to-be. She pretends to smell lotions as she studies the women who look and move just like her. How they rest their hand on their stomach. How Breton stripes stretch over skin. She feels a kinship with these women. All her friends have had their babies, and have forgotten the feel of Braxton Hicks, the acidic twinge of midnight heartburn, how it feels to climb into bed with thighs and torso slick with oil. Here, in these aisles, the women are living the same things as her.

She waits a while, and eventually two young women turn down the aisle in her direction, holding hands and stopping every now and again to pick something up. A pot, a picture frame, a pair of nail scissors. Jen tries not to watch. But she cannot look away from their hands, the way their fingers tangle. The sight is equal parts foreign and familiar.

They give her a brief glance as they pass. Blonde and brunette.

Jen tries to get a look at their stomachs, but the blonde wears a loose dress and the brunette's oversized denim jacket is done up. She cannot work out which is the mother, if indeed either is, and she frowns. Make it obvious, she thinks. I want to know. But their stomachs give no clue, and neither do their faces. She cannot tell if their cheeks are fuller than normal, because she doesn't know what their normal is.

Jen follows them as they move out of the aisle. They walk down the middle towards the door, before stopping by Make-up to embrace. The blonde kisses the brunette. It is a goodbye kiss. Anyone can tell. She strokes her girlfriend's cheek, whispers, then walks out. The brunette watches her go, and, after a long moment, she climbs the stairs to the café.

The queue at the till takes forever. Jen taps her feet. She gives her armpits a discreet sniff then steals quick sprays of bottled scent. When she has paid, she finds her feet moving towards the stairs and taking them two at a time. So much for not being able to run. She pauses at the top, fighting for breath, feeling the writhing weight inside.

'Are you okay, dear?' an old lady asks, touching her shoulder.

Jen nods, putting her energy into convincing the woman she is fine. She pulls away with a sweet smile and goes towards the café.

The brunette sits in the corner with a full cup of coffee. She looks out of the window, and Jen stares as she waits in line. The woman is a little younger than her, late twenties perhaps. Dark curls frame her face, and she looks lost as she stares out across the street.

Jen sits down at the adjacent table, taking out a pen and the baby journal she bought. The brunette looks at her briefly, then sighs and turns away.

Jen takes her time with her herbal tea, stirring the bag in the pot, drawing comfort from the steam. Nothing like a hot drink, she thinks, and is reminded of her mother.

She spills the first sip on her stomach. Her sigh catches the attention of the woman, who looks down at Jen's bump and smiles. 'Oops.'

'You'd think I'd have learnt,' says Jen. 'The number of tops I've ruined. I'm too far away from the cup.'

The woman smiles again but with sadness. She turns away, and in this moment, Jen wants nothing more than to know her story. ‘Not long until I can have caffeine again,’ Jen says, pointing to the coffee.

The woman gives a polite nod. ‘Any day now?’

‘Ten weeks. I can’t wait to meet him.’

‘Congratulations.’

Jen touches her belly in response, and the woman glances at the rhythm of her strokes. She watches Jen’s hand for a moment, then her eyes drift up to Jen’s face. Oh, Jen thinks. There is a stab of recognition, perhaps even yearning, in the woman’s face, and Jen wonders if it’s also in her own. All she knows for sure is blushing skin.

‘I have to go,’ says the brunette, rising.

‘But your coffee?’ Jen feels a rising panic, not wanting her to leave.

The woman looks down at the untouched cup, as if surprised by its presence. ‘Never mind,’ she says. ‘I didn’t want it anyway.’

Jen opens her mouth, but no words come out. Instead, she gulps her tea and watches the woman move away. When she disappears completely, Jen sighs and turns to the first page of the journal. *Final Days of Pregnancy*.

She looks towards the staircase, then down at the blank page.

Newer Model

Isobel

26th March

Took the car for its first MOT. It passed (obviously) but perhaps now is the time to trade it in for a newer model. Spoke to Steven about going to the forecourt at the weekend, but he didn't reply. In strange mood so I made his favourite chicken pie. Tried ordering groceries online, but the red peppers they delivered were green! Never again. Sunny and warm today.

27th March

Toni came for coffee. She didn't comment on the new sofa, even though I saw her eyeing it. Her new haircut is much too short – she looks like a springer spaniel. I'm glad I don't have curly hair, as it always looks so manic. Must be hell for upkeep. Went to the meeting. Cloudy and cool.

28th March

Spoke to Patrick and tried Cassandra, but no answer as usual. More time for her friends than her own mother. The trees we planted still look small and sickly. It must be several years now. Steven says the soil is likely full of rubble left from the original build. I said we should have it excavated and returfed, but he isn't keen. I suppose the lawn itself is fine. Doesn't so much matter what's underneath. Steven took the youngsters from the congregation bowling. More cloud.

29th March

Booked night away for our anniversary in October. Haven't told Steven. Tried a new cookbook that Jude recommended, and the recipe called for ten spices! Honestly, the carrots tasted *foreign*. I wonder if she cooks it for Patrick. He liked his food plain as a child. Can't imagine he's changed that much. Warm today.

30th March

Steven left. Rain.

Ballad

Jen

A couple of years ago, on their fifteenth wedding anniversary, Jen and Pete went to Margate for the day. They asked some friends if they wanted to come along, but everyone had kids by then and was tied up. Jen was secretly glad. She wanted to celebrate with beers on the beach, perhaps dinner at an oyster bar, not by being lifeguard for other people's children or eating at a family-friendly chain. She wouldn't have felt like that if she and Pete had had kids. But they didn't, and so she did.

They went to the beach first, before it was busy. The air was thick, the sky cloudless, and they read magazines and lay in the sun. Pete bought cans from the craft-beer shop, and they drank and listened to the conversations of other people. Occasionally Pete read something aloud, not bothering to notice that she was deep into reading herself. Jen was glad of the sunglasses hiding her face. She wondered if there was anyone on that beach as lonely as her.

They took a walk around the shops. There was a vintage-furniture place at the top of town, and Jen peered through the glass at the Scandinavian wood. She pointed to an armchair, and Pete cocked his head to one side as he strained to read the price. He snorted. I'd like to buy something, though, she said. To remember the day. He shrugged. On the way back down, she stopped and bought a new oven-glove.

At dinnertime, they were turned away from the oyster bar. They should have booked, said the huffy waitress. It was Saturday, after all.

On the drive home, Pete said between mouthfuls of French fries, 'Do you think we should get you tested?'

'For what?' she said, although she already knew.

‘All I’m saying is it’s been two years and nothing.’

Jen looked out at the flat, barren landscape. Telegraph poles flew by, blurring into one. ‘How are you so sure it’s me that’s the problem?’

Pete sighed. ‘Don’t take it that way. I just assume they start with the woman.’

She didn’t answer.

‘I heard female fertility drops off a cliff at thirty-five, so maybe we shouldn’t leave it much longer.’ He reached across and put a hand on her leg. ‘What do you think? Shall we just get things checked out?’

Jen turned on the stereo and scrolled through her music. She pressed ‘play’, and the synths and drums of an eighties ballad started up around them. Lyrics of silence and heartbreak. Pete took his hand away.

‘What are you trying to do?’ he said. ‘Make me cry?’

The stench of fast food turned her stomach. ‘I put music on because you always want music on when driving. Not the right choice, then? Did I still get it wrong?’

He pursed his lips. ‘I was only making a joke.’

Jen slid her palms between her bare legs and the cheap upholstery. ‘So was I.’

Still driving, Pete took out his phone and changed the song to the croon of an old country singer, exactly the music he knows she hates. An old man sitting round a campfire, singing of a woman he once saw get on a bus. His honky-tonk voice crackled with regret.

When did this happen, Jen thought, as the world passed by her window. When did we stop listening to songs about what we’d do, and start listening to songs about what we never did?

When it ended, he played it again.

Skin to Skin

Jen

You can do it, a voice says inside, and then her body screams to push. One hour, two hours, three hours. Nobody counts. But still, the minutes pass.

For the rest of her life, Jen could describe in perfect detail the room in which she birthed Jacob into the world. Not that she would. In a story like this, nobody wants to hear about the run of clerestory windows along one wall, the dry squeak of the door whenever a midwife entered, the swing-arm wall lights without any bulbs, the other empty beds. But she'd have the detail ready in case. How it felt like a funeral. Pete by her side, crying. A midwife rubbing her back. In fact, all the midwives with their sympathy, their sucked-in lips, their *come on, Jens* dripping with softness, not urgency.

There is no urgency.

They know how this will go, just as she has known for days that the spare room would stay one. Days that passed as years. But she is a liar if she denies there is a part of her that hopes.

The midwives are tender. They are. Still, Jen wants them rushing. She wants contingency plans, the best doctors, a code red. When she feels Jacob finally leave her body, a midwife takes his sparrow form in her hands and walks carefully to the table behind the curtain, where the rest gather round as if to observe a lesson.

'Is he breathing?' she hears herself say into the coolness of the pillow.

The silence is deafening.

Pete is stuck beside her, his hand clamping shut his mouth. I should've had Mum here, thinks Jen.

When Jacob is placed in her arms, the midwife peels back Jen's

top so he can rest against her heart. Skin to skin. There will be no talk of trying to get him to feed. When the midwives speak, their words are thick with finality.

‘Are you sure he is dead, though? Are you absolutely sure?’ Her voice is drugged and slow.

Fight for him.

Pete sobs, and Jen looks down at her son.

A shock of red hair gives way to a forehead, eyebrows and a nose that morphs perfectly into his cheeks. She is struck by the beauty of his fingers. The delicate nature of his toes. Here is a face that was woven in secret. She wonders about the colour of his eyes, and her urge splits in two. She doesn’t want to disturb him, for look, he is clearly at peace, and yet. Shake him. Wake him. Peel back those lids. How could something be wrong, when the appearance is so perfect, so right?

He is beautiful, but still, and now she sees he has no hope.

She is jealous at first and does not want to hand him over. She is convinced their hearts are in rhythm. Jacob’s fingers curl around her thumb, and Jen is sure he is tensing his grip, as if his brain knows she is someone to hold tight to. Pete talks, but she doesn’t hear. Her eyes are paparazzi cameras, taking shots with every blink. She doesn’t want to think of time, or the lack of it, and yet it is all she can do.

‘Can I hold him?’ Pete’s voice cuts in.

Without a word, she passes him over. They are alone now, the midwives having left to tend to babies who will not leave the ward in a box. The ones who will gurgle, punch-drunk on milk, whose mothers feast sleepily on tea and toast. Jen wonders if they’re the only couple who entered the ward today without a car seat.

The midwife who rubbed her back comes in. She shuffles her feet a while, then opens the squeaking door to leave. Funny how the world is still going on out there, thinks Jen.

Jacob looks tiny in Pete’s skinny arms, cradled like a bag of carrots. Pete is jiggling him, and she says *Stop, you’ll hurt him* without realizing. She looks up at Pete’s face to see he is crying. The rocking

is his body losing control. A seething hatred shoots through her core. It is sudden, this feeling, irrational even. If she examined the emotion, it would frighten her, but how dare he be the first to break.

‘No,’ Jen says. She cannot look at another person’s sadness. ‘Give him back. He needs my heart.’

He is returned to her, and there he will stay. She strokes his red, matted curls. The fold of his ear is soft against her lips. He is wrapped in a hospital blanket, scratchy from overwashing, its texture that of a sun-bleached towel. I’m sorry, my darling, she thinks. I should have brought you cashmere.

The door opens again. Another check. Pete waves and then a stranger’s hand on her shoulder.

Jen’s mind is filled with violence. Bright, raging televisions of emotion with her strapped to a chair, unable to look away. As his body cools, she sees now that her life will consist of two parts: the before, the after.

Is this really how the world ends? Without warning. Without knowledge of a final breath. We should know when it is coming, she thinks, that last drink of air, of amniotic fluid, so that we pay attention. And what would that do? She pulls the blanket tight. What good is attention? He would still be dead.

The midwife checks her watch and gently squeezes Jen’s shoulder. ‘I’ll let you be for a while.’ Another squeak of the door.

They don’t know what to do with themselves. Pete is still standing, but now his hands are on his hips and he looks about as if searching for a lost shoe. He would make a good village idiot, thinks Jen. She wants him gone, out of the room, so it’s just her and Jacob. She had him all to herself for nine months. His kicks were hers. She is not ready to share him, or give him away.

What seems like minutes later, the midwife returns with a colleague. *Already?*

‘Should we pass him to you?’ Pete says.

We.

In another life, Jen has loved Pete’s politeness. The way he chats

with baristas and shop assistants, how he thanks the waiter each time a piece of cutlery is placed on the table, so that within the space of ten seconds he has expressed his gratitude multiple times. It is a quality she has always found adorable. But now, a few moments after their dead son is born, she knows he is thinking of how to endear himself to the midwives, so that they will leave the room and think *What a nice man*. He wants to hurry this along for the midwives' sake. So they'll like him. Their time is what matters to him right now.

Jen drops her hands as Jacob leaves her arms for the final time. She watches the midwife drift away and disappear behind the curtain. Perhaps they place him in a box, thinks Jen, and then she no longer wants to think.

The other midwife is talking, but the words are heavy and slow. She feels a pinpricking all over her skin and imagines the microscopic holes as craters filling with sweat. Now everything is on fast-forward, and she is falling. Her head is thrown back, and she is moving side to side, so that each cheek feels the coarseness of the pillow. As her vision starts to right itself, she sees a midwife in front of her, silently shouting. Pete is pulling at her hand. The other midwife comes out from behind the curtain, her arms now empty. Where is he, Jen wants to scream. She hears the words echo in her ears – perhaps she really did shout. Her eyes detach from her head and float up into the corner of the room, assuming the role of a surveillance camera. There she is, on the bed, her face a horror film. She watches a midwife throw back the cover and push up her gown, to reveal red paint all over her legs. The other runs to the door and pulls a long cord. Jen's eyes begin to lose interest. She looks towards the corner where Jacob is, the only section of the room screened off from view. She considers pushing herself over, then almost scoffs at the suggestion. She left her arms and legs down there on the bed. There is nothing to push. But I have to get him back, she says. I have to see him again. Is he in a box? Or has the woman left him on the bed? He might fall – why is nobody watching him? She wills herself to move from the corner, to float

above the action that is taking place on the hospital floor. If she wants it enough, it will happen.

She is so absorbed in what could be that she doesn't notice what is. The flood of people entering the room.

I am coming, my darling. I may be only a pair of eyes, but this means I can see. You wait there. I am coming for you. You'll wake up and this will all have been a bad dream.

That's when they start rushing.

This Ends Tonight

Zelda

Zelda pushes open the pub door and steps inside. The lighting is low and soft, perfect for first impressions. Faces turn to look, but they hardly register now.

She was the one to choose the pub, a sixteenth-century inn with panelled walls and taxidermied animal heads over the inglenook fireplace. Its acoustics are well-tuned for a first date.

This week's one is at the bar, shoulders slouched over a whisky. Zelda hangs back as she judges the reality. His hair is blonder than his picture, but that youthful glow is all his.

He jumps up as she walks over, a smile breaking across his cheeks, his eyes steady on her face. 'Zelda, right? Here, take my stool. I'll grab another.'

Zelda watches, amused, as he goes off in search of a seat. The bar is busy and the first woman says no, she isn't just resting her bag but saving it for someone, so he tries a guy who isn't even sitting on a stool but casually looping his foot around its leg. The man puts a protective hand on the seat, and Zelda's date walks back towards her, his hands up in surrender. 'No room at the inn.'

Zelda laughs, then realizes she can't remember his name. She takes out her phone and flicks through to their conversation.

'Better offer?' says Will.

'Not for tonight,' she says, slipping her phone into her bag.

Will laughs. His body faces forward, his elbows on the bar, but he turns his face towards her.

'Good choice on the drink,' says Zelda. 'Makes a change.'

'From . . .'

She shrugs. 'A pint of wife beater. Something that makes you belch a lot. No, wait' – she clicks her fingers – 'craft-beer man,

right? If it hasn't been fermented in some New England shack, it's too commercial for your palate.'

Will nods as he scratches his chin. 'Are we that easy to peg?'

'Oh, you know. Do this a while and you become a bit of an expert.'

He raises an eyebrow over his whisky. 'How long you been doing it?'

'Clearly longer than you.' She waves at the bartender.

'Sorry,' says Will, straightening up and patting his jacket in search of his wallet. 'What would you like?'

'It's okay, I'll get it.'

'No, I insist.'

'No. *I* insist.'

They widen their eyes at each other.

'Ah,' says Will. 'I see.'

'What?'

Will shakes his head, smiling, and Zelda notices his strong Roman nose. She is often attracted to the features most people see as flaws. Big noses make her giddy.

She orders a spiced rum and Coke.

'A Cuban for the lady?' The bartender winks.

'Please, my good sir. And he'll take another . . .' She gestures to Will.

'Scotch'll do it,' he says, holding up the empty tumbler.

Zelda pays, and they chink glasses, watching each other take a sip. 'So go on,' she says. 'You had me all figured out?'

Will shakes his head. 'I'm not going there. The night's only just begun.'

'You think it's going to be a long one? Interesting.'

A waitress comes over with a couple of menus and smiles at them both. 'Dinner? We've just had a cancellation, and there's a spare table out back.'

Zelda is about to say no when Will gestures for the menu. 'How about it?' he says. 'Can you hack my company for two hours?'

She looks down at her watch, bringing it closer to make out the

vintage dial. A first date is always a drink – that way there’s no pressure and they can leave at the end and need never see each other again, without having wasted much money or conversation. Is she up for the next step already? *Maybe if you’re paying*, she says in her head, but then she did just do her whole feminist bit.

‘We’ll take it,’ Will says to the waitress as he picks up Zelda’s jacket and their drinks. He glances over his shoulder and winks. ‘Come on. At least this way I get a seat!’

She sighs as she stands and flicks her hair. Big noses and cock-sure taking-charge are vices she can’t seem to kick. She’ll try to change tomorrow.

Ten minutes into their meal and Zelda wonders if she had him all wrong. He actually asks her questions – where she grew up, what’s her work, what’s her pleasure – and he isn’t content with the monosyllabic answers she throws back. ‘Wedding photographer?’ he says. ‘You must have some stories to tell.’ Zelda shrugs and takes a mouthful of food. Usually she spends the hour or so of a date sorting through to-do lists in her head, or trying to remember the name of the celebrity he reminds her of, anything to while away the time until they go back to his. But Will doesn’t seem interested in talking about how he sees the world. His eyes and attention are fixed on her. They are staring right now in anticipation of an answer to a question she forgot to hear.

‘I don’t know,’ she says, automatically.

‘You don’t know where you live?’

‘Oh . . .’ She coughs into her napkin and runs a hand through her hair. ‘Just outside of town. I’m a country girl.’

‘I can see you rolling around in a hayloft.’

Zelda licks her fork. ‘My turn now for questions.’

He pretends to bow as he shovels roast potatoes on to his plate.

‘How old are you, really?’

His spoon hovers, mid-air. ‘What do you mean?’ He clears his throat. ‘I’m twenty-nine?’

‘Bullshit.’

Will shuffles in his seat, one eyebrow rising in a frown as he tries not to laugh. ‘Why don’t you think I’m twenty-nine?’

‘It’s obvious,’ says Zelda, sipping wine as she takes in his face. ‘There’s a brightness to you. You’re not jaded.’

He stares at her.

She stares back.

‘I’m twenty-six,’ he says at last.

The waitress appears at their table to top up their glasses, and the trickling sound of wine amplifies their silence. She takes her cue and leaves without asking how they’re enjoying their food.

‘Twenty-four,’ Will says. ‘But that’s it. Promise.’

‘God’s sake.’

Will screws up his face. ‘Too young? How old are you, really?’

‘Thirty-four and I’ve got no problem with thirty-four.’

‘You think I’m a knob now, don’t you?’

Zelda pours the wine and doesn’t reply. She couldn’t care less about his lying – this ends tonight, whatever his birth certificate says – but there is something delicious in gaining the upper hand.

‘I thought if I put my real age, you wouldn’t be interested.’

Zelda picks up her wine. ‘Why are *you* interested?’

He frowns. ‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘I thought men wanted their females young.’ The tannins burn her tongue.

‘Maybe some do, but then maybe I’m not like anything you’ve had before.’

‘Oh, *please*.’

‘I’ve always liked older women. They know what they want.’

‘Do they?’ Zelda stares at his nose and imagines running her teeth over its tip, pressing herself into his flesh. ‘Yes, I suppose they do.’

She looks at her watch. Almost ten. She needs more wine if the buzz is to kick in when she needs it. ‘You’re not a virgin, are you?’ she says, pouring another glass.

Crimson floods his face. ‘No. Are you?’

She laughs into her drink. ‘We’re not telling each other our numbers. This is a first date, remember.’