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The Two Week Wait

Written by Sarah Rayner

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The
Two Week
Wait

SARAH RAYNER

PICADOR



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I

The water is getting cold; Lou has been in the bath a while. Whilst usually she prefers the swiftness of showers, very occasionally she likes to bathe, to linger and relax, surrounded by bubbles. She is shaping them into miniature mountain ranges, like she did as a girl. She laughs to herself as she sculpts two extra high peaks from her breasts, Everest and K2.

She slides forward to twist on the hot tap with her toe. It's a manoeuvre she's done countless times: this is the bathroom of her childhood home, though only her mum, Irene, lives here now. The foam – given a second burst of life by the running water – billows in candyfloss clouds at her feet. Lou closes her eyes, inhales. Even the scent is redolent of her past: Lily of the Valley, her mother's favourite.

It is late evening and, after a long drive down from the Lakes, the worn avocado suite beckoned like an old friend. Lou lies back, warmth easing up her body and loosening her muscles. She listens. The sounds of the house are familiar: the wind in the trees outside – she misses those, her Brighton

flat has none nearby; the plaintive hoot of an owl, so much less raucous than gulls. Through the faded pink shagpile carpet she can hear a deep male voice; her mother is watching television. Lou pictures Sofia sprawled on the counterpane in the next room, flicking through Sunday's supplement, having discarded the paper that Irene gets delivered with a huff, unable to endure its political leanings.

Lou would like Sofia to be in the bathroom with her, perched on the Lloyd Loom laundry basket, nattering. But it makes Irene edgy when she's confronted with physical intimacy of any kind – Lou doubts her mum ever allowed her father to sit there when he was alive. Lou and Sofia's displays of affection seem to make her mother especially tense, so they tend to avoid expressing any tenderness when she's around.

Lou shifts position; the bubbles float to the edge of the bath, revealing the slight dome of her belly. 'Your little pot', Sofia calls it. It galls Lou that her tummy is not as taut and flat as Sofia's, when she's the one who's into exercise. But whilst the rest of her body is reasonably toned, it seems that no matter how hard Lou works out, the pot remains. If anything, it seems to be getting bigger.

That's odd, Lou thinks, I'm uneven. One side doesn't match the other, close to my pubic bone.

Maybe she's not lying flat. She shifts again, carefully places one foot beside each tap to ensure she is symmetrical.

But if anything it's more marked. There, to her left, a bulge.

A flutter of anxiety.

Don't be silly, she tells herself, it's probably something

you've eaten. But her stomach is up towards her breastbone, and it's hardly as if she swallowed her roast potatoes whole at dinner.

Maybe I just need the loo? she wonders. But she's unconvinced, so she presses the area with her fingertips.

Hmm. She *can* feel something. She presses the other side. It seems softer, less resistant. Perhaps the angle is different; she's using her right hand. So she swaps to her left.

She can even detect the shape, rounded, like an orange.

Deep breaths. Don't panic.

She lies a moment longer, trying to take stock.

She jumps out of the bath, half-dries herself, and runs into the bedroom with a towel clutched round her, not caring that her mother might catch her undressed in the hall.

Sofia is lying on the bed, listening to her iPod. Dark curls scooped in a makeshift topknot, lace-ups discarded on the floor, hoodie slipping off one shoulder.

Lou gestures at her to turn down the music.

'I think I've found a lump,' she declares. No point in softening it.

Sofia sits up, unhooks her earphones. 'Si?'

Lou repeats it. 'Here,' she indicates.

'Your pot?'

Lou nods. She hopes her girlfriend will be able to provide a rational explanation. Though why she would have more insight than Lou Lord knows: she's a web designer, not a doctor.

'Can you see?' Lou turns, drops the towel.

Sofia inspects her belly. 'Er . . . no.'

'It's bigger on one side than the other.' Lou stands there,

shifting from foot to foot. Even though they've been naked together countless times, the worry makes her self-conscious.

Sofia squats down, twisting her head to examine fully. 'It looks the same to me.'

'Here.' She takes Sofia's hand, guides her to the spot. 'No . . . Not like that, you won't be able to feel anything. Prod harder.'

'It will hurt.'

'OK, I'll lie down.' Lou stretches out on the fleecy counterpane. She's still wet from the bath, but no matter. 'Now, look from here,' she instructs, yanking Sofia down by her sleeve to her own eye level. 'As if you're me.'

Sofia crouches down, rests her chin on Lou's shoulder. A wave of her hair brushes against Lou's cheek.

'There,' says Lou. 'See?'

* * *

Cath is trapped in another world, lost in a vast public building, desperate to get somewhere, fast. Time is short – it's a race against the clock – but there are hordes of people in her way, moving frustratingly slowly.

'I've got to get through,' she tries to explain to those around her, struggling to push past the throng, but no one acknowledges her pleas. Instead people leer at her, pale-faced and ghoulish, or turn their backs, unyielding. Eventually she reaches a barrier, guarded by a man in a white coat. Perhaps he can help her. He's carrying a clipboard; he appears to be some kind of doctor – he has a stethoscope round his neck.

'I must catch it,' she begs. 'It's terribly important. It's—'

She wants to tell him it's a matter of life and death, yet can't seem to get the words out.

He blocks her path. 'I'm afraid it's too late,' he says.

She jerks awake with a gasp. Her heart is pounding; it takes a moment to ground herself, realize she is safe here in her room. The cat is wedged behind her on the pillow, as she often is; the gap in the curtains is at the end of the bed, as usual. Cath snuggles in tight to her husband, feeling her breasts and tummy against the smoothness of his back, easing her knees into the parallel Vs of his larger ones to calm herself, careful not to disturb him. Outside the warmth of the duvet the air is chilly; her arm is cold. She slides it under the covers too, inhales the comforting scent of his naked flesh as she does so; slightly honeyed, lemony. Beneath her palm she can sense the hairs on his chest, soft and curled. His breathing is deep and slow, it feels solid, just as he is. Gradually she feels her panic subside. It must be worry about the journey ahead, that's all.

Just then, Rich's mobile goes off beside him, a frenzy of buzzing and vibrating. He stirs beneath her touch.

'Bloody hell, that's a bit much.' She is jangled again.

'Sorry.' He reaches to switch it off. 'I was worried we'd sleep through.' He's bleary. 'I was having the weirdest dream . . .'

'Me too,' says Cath.

She's just about to tell him about her nightmare when he says, 'Amy Winehouse was in our kitchen, loading the dishwasher.'

'Really?'

'Yeah . . . There she was, in one of those tight little dresses

she used to wear, with her beehive piled high . . . Stacking plates. Very odd.'

'Mad,' says Cath.

'Mind you . . . ' he chuckles. 'When did anyone ever have a dream that *wasn't* strange?'

'Yeah, it's not like you wake up and say, "Ooh, last night I had a very *conventional* dream."' She laughs. Bless Rich for lightening her mood. She flings back the bedclothes. 'Come on then, let's get up.'

Normally they emerge from sleep gradually. Cath wears earplugs to block Rich's occasional snoring; he wakes to the muted talk of the radio, nudges her, and they both snooze a while before getting up for work. But not today. Their plane leaves in three hours; before that, they must drive from Meanwood in Leeds to Manchester Airport, over fifty miles away. They pull on clothes left out the night before, Rich gulps down coffee, Cath tea, and Cath puts down food for the cat.

'No sign of sunrise yet,' she says, as they lug their suitcases down the front steps. It's mid-December; in a few days it will be the longest night of the year. Rich heaves the cases into the boot of the car and Cath gets into the passenger seat. The windscreen is icy. Rich removes the worst with a gloved hand while she waits for him inside, breath steaming white and cold.

'Right,' he exhales, getting in. He starts the ignition, turns to her and grins. 'Ready to roll.'

Cath waves goodbye to their red-brick terrace as Rich edges the car with a *bump bump* over the potholes that have been deepened by a succession of freezing winters, and out

onto Grove Lane. They've barely gone half a mile past their local shops on the Otley Road when he suddenly brakes. Luckily, there's no vehicle behind. He swivels to face her. 'Did you feed Bessie?'

'Yes. *And* I left the keys out for your sister. Now, come on. We'll be late.'

The ring road, frequently nose-to-tail with traffic, is ghostly quiet as they head past warehouses and budget hotel chains out of town. Presently they're speeding across the Pennines. The M62 never sleeps, it seems; even though it's not yet 6 a.m., lorries thunder down the inside lane, spewing spray from overnight sleet. Alongside, their hatchback feels small and vulnerable; Cath can feel the wind buffeting the side of the car. She rubs mist from the window so she can see: spies a cottage on a remote hillside, whitewashed and pale against the dark heather. She wonders who lives there, on the moor, whether they're lonely with no one nearby. She tries to imagine her own life away from the city, their little house, the shops and park, far from anyone. It might be good for her artistically – she imagines she'd be so bored she'd have to occupy herself somehow – but she would crave company, miss her friends.

She reaches for Rich, appreciating his presence, strokes the back of his neck where his hair is downy, going grey. He hates his neck, thinks it's too thick and makes him look stupid, no matter how often she tells him it's manly. 'It's almost fatter than my head,' he claims.

As if he can read her thoughts, he glances at her and smiles.

She smiles back affectionately, pulls down the mirror on the back of the sun visor to check her own appearance.

At last her hair is growing back properly. Initially it was a different texture entirely; still mousy, but curlier and thicker than it had been; a small consolation for everything she'd been through. But now it's returned to its familiar form: thin, wispy, infuriating. She has to wear it short and layered, it won't 'do' any other style. Nonetheless, she is pleased; at least she looks herself again. Though her skin remains grey and drawn and her eyes have lost some sparkle; she seems older, somehow. Worn.

She hopes this trip will help. After the tsunami of emotions they've experienced in the last two years, they both deserve a good time.

She thinks of the mountains that await them, dazzling whiter than white beneath bluer than blue. There will be dramatic peaks, there will be sun, there will be crystal-clear air . . .

At once, a burst of excitement. Soon it's Christmas, then New Year, and she can kiss goodbye to this vile twelve months forever.

'We're going on holiday!' she says, and claps her hands.

* * *

Lou resists an impulse to wake Sofia. It's 5 a.m., wouldn't be fair.

It's all very well telling me not to worry, she thinks. If only it were that easy to switch off my mind.

She rolls over onto her back, eases down her pyjama bottoms, checks her abdomen. Is it her imagination or does

it feel tender? Though she could just be bruised from all the prodding.

The previous evening they had scoured the Internet for possible diagnoses. Sofia homed in on less dramatic conditions (including, to Lou's irritation, constipation), but Lou is still convinced it's something worse. They'd wondered about calling a medical helpline, then decided it was too late and not really an emergency. 'Let's go to bed,' Sofia had urged. 'We can ring the doctor in the morning. We'll get you an appointment as soon possible.'

So Lou is here, in one of the twin divans her mother insists on giving them. These days Irene runs the family home as a B. & B., and this is the room they've been allocated, even though her mother doesn't take guests over the Christmas holidays, so there's a much larger double free next door. 'She is like a woman from the 1950s, your mum,' Sofia had moaned. 'Even in Spain, most mothers are not so strict. Does she believe it will stop us having sex?' 'It'll stop her having to admit we do,' Lou had replied. Her mother's propensity for denial would be laughable had not vast swathes of Lou's life gone painfully unacknowledged as a result.

Lou continues the exploration. She knows she's being obsessive, yet she's vaguely hoping it will ease her fear, and at least in the dark, in the silence, she can concentrate. With both hands she locates the lump again. It feels huge. How can she have missed it until today? She presses it; it makes her need to pee.

Sofia stirs and rolls over. Lou holds her breath – she could do with Sofia to murmur sleepy consolation, soothe her – but she doesn't wake.

Lou persists with her mission, fingertips slow, ominous, tarantula-like. If the lump were in the middle, she'd concede it was just the way her body is made. It's the alien asymmetry that most alarms her. She swallows her fear. She can't – she won't – allow *that* notion to gain hold.

She puts her counsellor head on, thinks what she would say if she were a client. She is better at giving advice than receiving it. Perhaps she should make a list of symptoms to report to the doctor.

1. *I need the loo quite a lot – more than Sofia.*

2. *My periods are heavier than they used to be.*

She's made allowances for her bladder – sitting on the end of a row in the cinema, snatching any opportunity to go to the toilet on protracted journeys lest she get caught short – for as long as she can remember. But she's hardly incontinent and her periods aren't that bad. Many women suffer from much worse.

Otherwise, she's pretty fit. She can do a hundred sit-ups in succession, easy, so there's nothing wrong with her muscles. She doesn't drink much; her diet is almost exemplary. So what on earth is it? If something major were wrong, wouldn't she be in some kind of pain?

None of this is helping. It's only raising more questions, sending her thoughts spinning. And whichever way she turns them, she ends up with the same answer, like a ball on a roulette wheel that lands on the same number, time and again.

* * *

The plane rumbles along the runway, gathering speed. Cath watches the airport blur past, grips the seat arms with clammy palms, waiting for the wheels to lift from the ground. In the seat in front of her a toddler is crying.

Poor thing, she thinks. I hate take-off and landing, too.

That's when she has heard most accidents happen, and certainly it's when there's no escaping the absurdity of spewing a vast metal object into the sky. When they're cruising tens of thousands of feet up, Cath can suspend disbelief, imagine she's just in some strange tube-shaped cinema, watching the sun and clouds through the misty porthole like a film.

Faster and faster they go: she can't believe they're not yet airborne . . .

Finally – *whoooosh!* – they're up.

Phew.

She's been holding her breath the entire time.

She sits back, relaxes. Shortly the 'Fasten seatbelts' sign goes off, and the child in front stops wailing. Cath can feel him jolting the chair, wriggling, restless, so she scratches the white antimacassar above his head to get his attention. He peers round the gap between the seats. His face is tear-stained.

'Hello,' she says, and smiles.

He ducks away, wary. Shortly he re-emerges, wide-eyed, curious.

'Boo!' says Cath.

Again he disappears, and a few seconds later he's back.

She hides her face behind her hands, then quickly removes them. 'Boo!'

He giggles.

What a sweetie, Cath thinks.

So now there's just landing, then her first skiing lesson, to get through. She's dreading that. Cath was never good at PE; she was the girl at school who took every opportunity to skive and sit on the bench, and skiing will require not just aptitude but bravery too.

Still, having stared at her own mortality in the mirror, nothing frightens her quite as much as it did.

* * *

It's no good: Lou can't rest, and now she can hear birds – at this time of year it must be a robin, laying claim to its territory. Perhaps she doesn't miss those trees after all.

She gets up, impatient, throwing back the sheets. At least with Sofia in a separate bed it's easier not to wake her.

She raises the blind a touch to help her see, rummages through her holdall for appropriate clothes, retrieves her trainers from the floor and tiptoes into the bathroom to pull on her tracksuit. She has to do something with this nervous energy.

Down the stairs, softly, softly. Her mother is the lightest sleeper; Lou can't face a dressing-gowned inquisition on top of her own anxiety. She eases back the bolts on the front door, praying they won't clank, and then she's out and on the drive.

She inhales fresh air deep into her lungs, and, without stretching – the desire to get moving far outweighing any concerns of injury – she's off down the lane.

The house is on the outskirts of town. Bare, tangle-twiggled

hedgerows rise on either side of her. In the distance are gently undulating fields, ploughed and ready for planting. Dawn is approaching; mist rising from the valley, spectral grey on brown.

It takes a minute or two for her muscles to warm up and to hit her stride. Ah, that's better – the rhythm helps calm her, each footfall brings with it increased lucidity, shaking down thoughts like rice in a jar so they no longer crowd her.

Sofia must be right. Would she be able to sprint like this if she was really ill? Of course not.

It's just, things have been going so well lately. The two of them are looking to buy a place together; her job counselling kids who've been excluded from school is easier now she's no longer such a novice. It would be typical if something were to trip her up.

As if to comment on her thoughts, a driver toots, forcing her into the kerb, then overtakes at speed in a glistening Audi.

What's the hurry? thinks Lou, annoyed.

She decides to get off the main road. Hitchin is commuter-belt territory; even this early, people are heading to work.

She turns left through a kissing gate and onto the common. The riverside path weaves through alder trees and the arching stems of pendulous sedge. In the reed beds frogs will be mating come early spring, then there will be tadpoles just like the ones she and her sister used to collect in jam jars when they were small. And there in the grazing pasture are the cattle: English Longhorns, an ancient, placid breed. They raise their heads from the vegetation to gaze at her, bemused.

She takes her cue, reduces her pace.

You can run but you can't flee, she tells herself.

Two laps later, she's feeling less agitated. As she jogs out onto the road once more, she has an idea. Yes, why not? She'll go back that way, through town.

She slows to a walk as she approaches the entrance, a mark of respect. She briefly wonders if anyone will mind that she's in her exercise gear, then remembers it's most unlikely there will be other visitors at this time.

It's been a while, but she finds the spot quickly and kneels down. The ground is damp with frost.

How strange to think of him beneath this soil.

Even after all these years, she still misses him. She wishes that she could talk to him; so much has happened since he died. She's finished her training, moved to Brighton, come out to her mother . . . And now, this lump. What would he say about that?

In part he's what's made her so jumpy. She's thrown right back to the experience of his illness: the protracted demise, the pain and fear, the loss of dignity. He became so thin and fragile, a ghost of his former self. The prospect of going through anything even remotely similar to her father terrifies her.

Lou plucks at the grass, struggling with her memories. Although most plants have withered in the cold, the hump still needs weeding, she thinks abstractedly. It can't have been done in a while. She's surprised her mother hasn't tended it – Irene's garden at the B. & B. is immaculate: every pot diligently planted with winter pansies, the drive lined with snowdrops, just beginning to push through. Maybe she doesn't come here much, can't face it. Lou finds that notion strange, but that's her mum all over.

She yanks at the weeds more deliberately, uses her nails to prise them from the cold soil, working from the front of the plot to the back. Soon she's collected a little pile of wilted leaves. She smoothes the earth with her palms, sits back to check her handiwork. The couch grass will need a fork, but it's a start.