YOUNG WOMAN WITH CAT

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“And if the body were not the soul,
what is the soul?”

- Walt Whitman: ‘I Sing the Body Electric’

“Noone knows what a body is capable of.”

- Spinoza

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As a child, I often saw my mother naked. Or half-naked, really: she had no problem taking off a shirt or pulling one on in front of me. I remember her arms, her pale stomach, untouched by the sun, her breasts only partially covered by her bra. But her bottom half was always hidden away in her long skirts; since she never wore trousers, I barely even knew the outline of her legs.

For the philosopher Roland Barthes, a writer is someone who *speaks through the body of their mother*. But for years, I forced myself to do the opposite. I kept my mother's body a secret. I was ashamed of it.

For a long time, I saw my own body as something totally independent of my mother's. It was a bit like the Tom and Jerry cartoons, with the child forever dodging in and out of the legs of all the busy grown-ups – grown-ups whose upper bodies and faces are never shown. That was more or less how it was for us, I thought. My mother was there, and I was here; she was the *fat* one, and I was the thin one. Or, in the words of my father: I was the pretty one, and she was the ugly one.

We're actually far more similar than might be obvious at first – which of course shouldn't really be so surprising, given how long my body has lived in the shadow of hers. In that familiar shadow I loved so much, and spent literally my whole childhood looking up to her from.

Later, growing up, I suppose I tried to escape my mother and her body. But through my writing I'm always coming back to it, even when, as in this book, it isn't completely centre stage. Her body's traces, its wounds: they echo within me.

Here, putting pen to paper, I can risk the impossible and try to tell the story of our bodies –mine and hers – somewhat differently. I can write faster than our shadows and turn back the clock. Back to a time when my mother was not as ill as she is now, and when I was not yet a writer at all: I was just a young woman with a cat. I can summon up new truths from our depths, conjure miracles. In the act of writing I can attempt to save us both. Just as writing has always saved me.

Chapter 1: A Ghost in the Throat

It all started with something that really must have started earlier.

It was the beginning of February, and the third day in a row that my throat had been sore. I had stopped going into the Institute where I worked, and was trying my best not to use my voice at all, gulping spoonful after spoonful of thyme-infused honey. And yet my throat was still on fire.

With nothing seeming to have any effect, I decided I would have to get it checked.

You need to see a doctor, my mother would have said. That was her golden rule: by the third day, you had to see a doctor.

In the kitchen, my cat was purring. Sir Wilson lay stretched out across the floor, making it impossible to reach the stove without tripping over him. I bent down, stroked his thick black fur, and filled his bowl – he rushed over straightaway.

As I made my way down from the fifth floor, I tried to figure out exactly what to say to the doctor. I knew it was important at least to present myself as a semi-sane person. But I wasn't sure I could accurately pinpoint when I had first noticed the problem with my throat after all.

It had been a stressful time, frankly. I had just about scraped through my PhD thesis but had frequently felt I was out of my depth; I had somehow managed to avoid a total breakdown but had pretty much neglected my body completely, as so often happened when I focused on one thing. And then, once it was finally over, there had been some fairly raucous celebrations. I assumed I was probably just exhausted.

I trudged through the heavy snow, along the street and past the familiar buildings. It had snowed again in the night, and everything lay still. All the children in the neighbourhood were all away or asleep, and the city seemed as calm and empty as it was in the height of summer. A few paces in, I realised my feet were freezing. Stupidly, I had only worn trainers, not boots. I remembered something I'd read about birds' feet: they were naturally cold already, and could walk across frozen lakes with no issue whatsoever.

Your head and your feet – you have to keep them warm. My mother's voice again, of course. *Your health is the most precious thing you have*, she always said.

But I didn't wear hats as a matter of principle, even if it might have done me some good, considering the scars I had across my head, and inside it, too: they were sensitive to both the cold and the heat. In my early twenties, I'd had a benign tumour in the frontal part of my brain. It had been removed, but the cause of it had never been clear, and the right side of my skull was a landscape

of hills and craters. The bone, skin and tissue had healed quickly, and the scar was about the size and shape of a hoofprint. A kick in the head, essentially.

There were four other people waiting at the clinic. I suddenly felt like the strange clown in a book I sometimes read with my friend Leo's young daughter – *Fifth in Line* by the poet Ernst Jandl. It starred a group of somewhat deranged creatures in a waiting room: a sad penguin, a one-legged duck, a bear with a broken arm, a bandaged frog, and finally that strange, not-quite-human clown, its nose dangling from its face by a thread. *Next please, One out, One in, Fourth in line / Next please, One out, One in, Third in line…* Right on until the final page: *Next please, One out, Now you're in, Hello doctor*!

And then I really was called in, and the friendly older doctor was peering down my throat.

"Any fever?" she asked.

I said no. In fact, I hardly ever ran a temperature, but she couldn't know that. Meanwhile, it never failed to amaze me that doctors could ask questions and continue their checks all at once.

I felt her push a long rod of some kind uncomfortably far down into my throat.

"It's laryngitis. Inflammation of the larynx. And you've got it badly, too."

"Eek," I said. "How did that happen?"

“Probably an infection,” she said. “And no wonder – it’s not as if you have much defence against it.” The woman threw the horrible rod into a bowl of disinfectant. “Your tonsils seem to have been taken out so recklessly that germs are always going to get through. We certainly don’t do that any more – or at least not like *this*.”

I’d never even realised there could be such major differences in the way that tonsils were removed. My mother had simply followed our family doctor’s advice, after years of treating me with the traditional warm mashed potato wrapped in cloth, that is. In my generation it had been the norm – almost fashionable – to take out children’s tonsils. I remembered a sarcastic article I’d read: *Where have all the tonsils gone?*

“Right, an infection,” I said. “Even if I don’t have a cough? Or a blocked nose?”

“Yes, that is slightly odd,” said the doctor, now eyeing me more closely. “What about heartburn?”

“No,” I said. I had been incredibly thirsty, though.

“It might be something from deeper down. Acid reflux. There’s still not a whole lot known about it.” She shrugged. “It isn’t really my area.”

I was given an antibiotic spray.

“Try not to talk unless you really have to. And most of all – just get some rest.”

Even as I was packing the spray into my bag, I decided I wouldn’t use it except in an emergency. I didn’t really want to start taking medication.

The roads still hadn’t been cleared as I made my way back. I gazed across the white-tipped branches. Suddenly, I had an impulse to lie down and make a snow angel, like my brother and I had done as kids. I glanced around. Everyone still asleep. No one would be bothered by my angel. Before I knew it, I had jumped down into the white and was spreading out my arms and legs, staring up into the pale grey sky.

I realised I was missing my brother, as in fact I often did, even though missing him had started to seem pointless as the years had passed, and now just felt almost unreal. He lived in London and we didn’t see each other much. It was odd – I thought of him in winter most of all, perhaps because we’d always picked snowdrops together. Another thing my mother had said rang in my ears then: *Sometimes I think he was only born a boy because your father wanted a son so much.*

I hauled myself up. Even with my throat still searing, sooner or later I needed to get back to my desk. I still needed to prepare for the last part of my PhD ordeal – the so-called ‘defence’ of my thesis.

“What do you need to defend yourself *from*?” Leo’s daughter Henny had asked, with her typical five-year-old’s perceptive prowess.

Frankly, I was terrified of the big day ahead. It was set to be scheduled any time between three weeks away and another six months – it all depended on when my two examiners could agree on a date. The fact that this was still undecided really wasn’t helping.

I touched my neck, cautiously. Usually, in a situation like this, I would have called my mother straightaway. Having raised us, she was practically a doctor herself. She sometimes refused to make *long-distance diagnoses*, as she put it, but she often did end up offering advice. But of course this all played into the complicated anxiety problems I had developed over the years.

“If you’re ill, you need to go to a professional,” my therapist had insisted. “And *not* call your mother.”

I checked the time. In Japan it was the middle of the night. Much too early to ring my brother. As always, for the lunar year, he was visiting his boyfriend’s family there. The photos he’d been sending were so beautiful they actually reduced me to tears.

At home, I brushed the snow off my gloves, stripped my clothes, and slipped into my beloved bright pink bathrobe: a Juicy Couture one I had found in a secondhand shop. It was perfect – elegant and soft.

I felt for my larynx. For some reason, I was picturing the mechanism that let air through to the vocal cords as one of the padded keys on a clarinet.

Ignoring the doctor's warning, I sat down at my desk. My thesis was all about an eighteenth-century impostor: a 'fake Japanese man' who had once been moderately notorious, but since then had been all but forgotten.

"You and your Japan obsession," Leo always marvelled.

Unlike my brother's, my fascination with Japan was entirely imaginary: I only knew the country from books and stories.

I leaned forward, touching the bright green leaves of the two bonsai trees my brother had put up in hanging pots above my desk. He was a gardener, and seemed to know the strangest varieties with the strangest names – 'False Tea', 'Money Tree'. Mine were both Serissa, or 'Snowrose'.

My own interest had begun with a book by Haruki Murakami that my ex-boyfriend had given me, saying simply: "Read this. You'll love it." And sure enough, I fell for *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, with its lemon drop-sucking narrator and the mysterious twins Kreta and Malta Kano. Soon after that, I discovered Yōko Tawada's books in a seminar, and lost my heart to them completely.

Sir Wilson was brushing against the legs of my chair. Clearly, he was hungry again. "From deeper down," the doctor's voice echoed.

It was maddening that my body was failing me right at that moment, of all times. I had been working on my thesis without having to pay fees but also without any funding; then, at the start of that year, I'd suddenly had incredible news from a scholarship foundation. For six months, I would be receiving money – a substantial three-figure sum every four weeks. I had immediately called the foundation in concern, sure that there had been a mistake. There hadn't. And so I'd decided to cut back on my shifts at the Institute. Along with the scholarship, it was still just enough to live on and pay my rent. My loft apartment was just a single room, a kitchen-living space, and a bathroom. It was an old contract, a good landlord – I knew I was enormously lucky.

When Leo came by, she was carrying a tired-looking Henny in her arms. Sir Wilson rushed over immediately – he adored both my friend and her child. But it was unrequited: Leo didn't like cats, especially not Sir Wilson. "He's always right up in your nose," she said. I had to admit she was right, quite literally. Sometimes, I woke up at night with his backside pressed against my face, barely an inch from my nose.

While Henny curled up on the sofa with Sir Wilson, Leo handed me a container of warm lentil soup, along with a bottle of ginger tea and a pillbox. I assumed it contained some of her usual salts or homeopathic beads.

"You have to take laryngitis seriously," she insisted.

“Sure, sure,” I said, waving it off.

“I’m not surprised you’ve got so ill, with the amount you’ve been working.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean,” she said, and then she disappeared into the bathroom.

As soon as her mother was gone, Henny started up with her usual questions. There were two things she was especially fixated on at the time: dinosaurs and reincarnation.

“Ela?” she said. “What happens if you’re reborn as a dinosaur?”

“What?” I asked.

“Well – well – then you’re already extinct. Aren’t you?”

I’d never heard her combine her special subjects so succinctly before.

Leo returned from the bathroom. She uncorked the red wine, and sat down at my computer. There were so many times I’d watched my friend as she made her way through an entire bottle, growing increasingly sad and then hilarious by turns, and talking her head off even more than usual.

Leo pointed at the screen.

“It could be this – *silent reflux*,” she said. “It’s when gases come up from your stomach, without the other symptoms you get with acid reflux. But it attacks

your mucous membranes just the same. It says here – you'd need a gastroenterologist to diagnose it."

I shuddered. *Wild horses* wouldn't drag me to a specialist, I thought instinctively. I continued gulping down the delicious lentils. Leo really did make the best soup.

I realised she was watching me closely.

"You can't just leave it to get worse and worse again," she said, glancing at the scar on my leg peeking out from beneath my bathrobe.

This one, on my left calf, was around four by four centimetres in size, and its shape was a little like the Cape of Good Hope. A second-degree burn, the doctors had decided, after I'd scalded myself with boiling water – and only had it checked a few days later, when the wound had already become infected. It was a living testament to my erratic approach to health in general. Sometimes, I panicked at the slightest twinge, while at other times, I managed to ignore the pain completely, and ended up not going to a doctor at all, or only when it was far too late. It was only thanks to my therapist that I didn't wind up in hospital every two months.

"I promise, I'll take care of myself," I said.

By now, Leo had emptied half the bottle. I came closer and snapped the laptop shut. My head felt heavy and overheated.

“You really need to,” she said. “Exam or no exam.”

Leo reached for my hand. I lowered my gaze. There was nothing I could hide from her. She knew all about my anxiety around exams. We’d always been so open with each other, through all sorts of things – naked with each other, in so many ways.

“I will,” I said. “I really will. Promise.” I smiled, but Leo’s expression was still stern: what I called her *teacher’s look*.

“Didn’t you say there was a special word for this in Japan?”

“You mean *karoshi*?” I frowned.

Karoshi means something like *death by overwork*. But I associated it more with manual labourers whose bodies were crushed under heavy loads. Or with managers who fell apart after relentless overtime. But not with people like – well, like us.

“We definitely do as much as managers,” said Leo. “Just without a manager’s salary.”

She pulled a face, and then she yawned. “We’d better head off.”

I could see she was hesitating over something.

“Do you think you can still watch Henny tomorrow afternoon?” she said.

“Of course,” I said, without thinking for a second: Leo had recently started working full-time again. She’d had to cut her own studies short when she got pregnant, and now she was a primary school teacher. Now that I’d properly given up smoking, she was happy for me to look after Henny again. While I’d been struggling through my thesis, my apartment had been permanently shrouded in smoke.

I looked into Leo’s eyes, and they somehow seemed even larger and rounder than usual. Something unfamiliar flickered in them.

“Can’t I just sleep here?” Henny asked.

Leo shook her head, and lifted the child onto her hip.

“Not tonight, anyway. Another time.”

Alone again, I collapsed into bed, exhausted. My ears were ringing. I loved Leo to bits, of course, but spending an evening with her came at a price. It was like the *Thousand and One Nights*, only in reverse. Scheherazade kept telling her stories to survive. Leo’s endless talking, meanwhile, was lethal. She lived up to every stereotype of being a teacher.

My mother had developed a similar habit of talking incessantly whenever people bothered her about her weight. It was as if words – those airy, fleeting things – could make her body disappear. Except that a body, of course, can never quite be talked away.

I swallowed. It hurt like hell. A dull pain throbbed in my temples, too.

Let's just hope there's not something wrong with your brain again, murmured a quiet voice inside me.

everyone lives summer in their own time,

you live yours in snow.

Yōko Tawada: *akzentfrei*

Chapter 2: Lady Lazarus

A few days later, my throat was so painful that I actually woke up cursing out loud. I was so thirsty I downed two glasses of water in one go.

I scrabbled around for the spray I'd been given. I chewed at my lower lip, uncertain. Then, habit won me over. Against my therapist's explicit instructions, I decided I had to call my mother. I knew it was a mistake, but I couldn't resist.

As soon as my mother picked up, I could hear the two children she looked after in the background. The older one was six, and the younger one was four. My mother sounded busy but cheerful, as always, and not at all reproachful about my long silence. It was only when I mentioned my throat that suddenly she sounded concerned.

"Try it!" she shouted, over the noise. "Try the spray, for heaven's sake."

"Alright, alright," I said. "If you say so."

"You and your university," my mother muttered, at the same time comforting one of the boys. It sounded like the three of them were playing a board game. "All that studying. It can't be good for you."

It had always been a point of contention. My mother had never set foot in a university. She did always insist my field of study was *wonderful*, but she

found everything indiscriminately *wonderful*, no matter what I did or didn't do in life – purely because she was relieved that I, her child, was still alive and hadn't somehow died. As far as she was concerned, I could have worked as a clown. The only thing that mattered to her was my health. It didn't even make any difference if my job was decently paid or not.

"You probably just need to take it easy," she said.

Taking it easy was her magic cure-all. Not that she ever took it easy herself. She always spent every last drop of her energy on other people, just like the poor girl in one of the Grimms' fairytales who gives away all her money so generously, only to end up penniless herself.

"Oh, Mama," I sighed. I really didn't want her to worry when she had plenty of her own concerns.

Then came: "By the way, I've started doing Reiki."

I was speechless. Wasn't Reiki something only rich people could afford? As far as I could recall in that moment, it was something about placing hands over the body to channel new energy to specific areas, and heal them.

"You don't even have to do anything," she said. "You just lie there and breathe. Imagine that."

I listened to her account in disbelief. "Right," I said. "And who are you doing it with?"

“With a nice older man in the neighbourhood. But Ela, listen, I have to go now.”

I considered asking about her fibromyalgia, but decided against it. My mother had suffered from this type of rheumatism for years: sometimes her pain was now so unbearable that she could only move in limping steps. A few months before, she had reluctantly started using a walking stick. She could really only just manage her job as a nanny.

All too ready to give advice on any ailments I had, she struggled to talk about her own. Or rather, she spoke openly about things like toothaches or the flu. But even back pain was trickier. Too many orthopaedists had blamed her weight.

We hung up. I couldn’t figure out what had unsettled me more: the Reiki or the Reiki master. It felt like a minor revolution. Her body had always been a battlefield. Usually, no one was allowed anywhere near it, not with their words and not with their hands.

I walked over to the kitchen table, took the white spray bottle out of the box, placed my finger on the nozzle, pressed down, and inhaled. It tasted disgusting: acrid and chemical.

“Ugh,” I said aloud, glancing at Sir Wilson, who was spinning in circles and chasing his tail – his morning ritual.

I stepped into the hallway and cranked open the skylight. He immediately leapt onto the little staircase my brother had built for him. From there he could get out into a wire enclosure. About half the cats in the city with rooftop access ended up falling to their deaths while trying to chase birds. The old rule about cats only jumping from places they could climb up from was clearly not true. Their hunting instinct overpowered any instinct for safety. At least the enclosure gave Sir Wilson a bit of fresh air.

I could still feel the rawness in my throat acutely. It would take time for the spray to work, I told myself.

With a sigh, I sat down at my desk and opened the file of notes I had for my thesis defence. But instead of reading through them again, I stared at the portrait I'd hung above my workspace. It showed a young, round-eyed man with full, elegant lips, a gentle face and a curly white wig. He had called himself George Psalmanazar and claimed to be a native of Formosa – the island known today as Taiwan, though he wrote of it as part of the Japanese kingdom. He had even invented an entire alphabet and made it all the way to Oxford to lecture on it. My impostor.

Suddenly I realised how hungry I was. My stomach was already growling. I decided that for breakfast I would make one of the miso soups my brother had brought back from Japan.

It still felt strange to start the day like this. For years I'd had to be at the office at the Institute so early, and having time in the morning was a luxury that felt almost forbidden.

The soup was delicious. Aubergine, leeks, morels, tofu, all floating in a rich, thick broth.

"Mmm, tasty," I said, speaking out loud again.

But just as I was finishing the bowl, I was hit by a pounding headache. A dull pressure pulsed in my temples. Something felt very wrong.

I stared down at the bowl, with its trace of dark broth. A jolt of suspicion shot through me. Was that – a spasm? I rushed to the bathroom and examined my reflection. No doubt about it: the tendons in my neck looked tensed. Was my tongue swollen? Yes. Or maybe not? When was the last time I had actually looked at my tongue?

Back in the kitchen, I grabbed the paper insert that had come with the spray and unfolded it. There it was in black and white: in rare cases, it could trigger an allergic reaction.

My thoughts zigzagged. Maybe it wasn't the spray. Could it have been the soup instead? I ran to the bin, rummaged for the packaging, and smoothed it out again in a panic. It stared back at me in the Japanese I couldn't begin to decipher. I knew that miso paste was made from soybeans, and people could

be allergic to soy. But although I had a serious allergy to black textile dye, I certainly wasn't aware of any others.

So what was my body reacting to? Was it the medication in the spray or the soy? What a mess. What was I supposed to do? Call an ambulance? But was I being hysterical? Or sensible?

"Just keep calm, keep cool," I whispered, while also swearing under my breath. That was another of my mother's expressions, and right now she was the last person I wanted to think of. I had only tried the stupid spray because of her. For some reason, the word *fugu* came to mind, too. In a short story by Kazuo Ishiguro, the narrator's mother eats a poorly prepared serving of the poisonous fugu pufferfish, and dies.

I touched my neck. The tension in my tendons hadn't eased, but it didn't seem to have got worse, either.

Then, with the world's worst timing, the doorbell rang. Henny. Her daycare was closed – there was a national strike.

Leo had joined the protest in solidarity, but of course that meant her daughter would need looking after.

"What's wrong with you?" Henny asked, looking worried.

"It's nothing," I whispered. "I'm fine."

Then a different word popped into my head.

Air, I thought. Then *fugu*. Then *air* again. My hands leapt back to my throat. Suddenly I understood.

“I can’t breathe,” I said softly, sounding surprised.

“Oh,” said Henny.

I ran to the bathroom again. It wasn’t tendons I’d seen. It was my blood vessels – hardened and stiff as rulers. That was when the panic really hit me. The only thing I could clearly think was that Henny absolutely must not see how scared I was.

“Hang on, Henny, one second,” I called out cheerfully.

With my fingers trembling, I ordered us a taxi. Then I hurried back to the hallway, where Henny stood watching me wide-eyed. She had already taken off her coat and hat. I knelt down and helped her put them back on. I tapped her nose gently.

“We just need to pop to the doctor. It’s nothing serious. Okay?”

I counted the seconds as the taxi bumped over the cobblestones. We arrived at the surgery I was registered at. Maybe it was Henny, clinging to my hand and announcing so solemnly, “Ela says she can’t breathe,” or maybe it was my ghostly pale face. In any case, we were seen immediately.

“Well, well,” said my doctor at first, a smile playing around her mouth. “Long time no see.” But her expression quickly darkened.

She had stepped towards me and asked me to open my mouth.

“Your tongue – it’s swollen!” she said, alarmed. “What did you eat? Why didn’t you call an ambulance?”

She pressed a button and a nurse rushed in, and after a few quick instructions, she jabbed a syringe into my arm. Within seconds, the pressure eased, and the tightness in my throat began to fade. Only the horrible bitter chemical taste remained.

I took a deep breath. Another close shave.

“Don’t you see the danger you’re putting yourself in? With all your stress and anxiety?” said the doctor now.

It was true. I was either rushing from one emergency room to the next or drastically underestimating how bad things had got. Even so, I instinctively switched to defensive mode – I was being shouted at, after all.

“I’m seeing a therapist,” I blurted. “Actually.”

I was a subject to be taken seriously, I wanted to say. I was aware of my neuroses and addressing them, see?

“Oh, and therapy helps with anaphylactic shock?” she said. “And – who is this exactly, anyway?”

Her gaze had shifted to Henny, who was chewing gum and had settled into my lap, her feet dangling just above the ground. I was struck by how small she was. Her tiny body almost broke my heart.

“She’s my girl friend’s daughter. A friend who’s a woman,” I corrected myself, catching the flicker in her eyes and then regretting it immediately. What business of hers was it who I might share a bed with?

I thought about how often my mother must have endured looks like that. The first family she had worked for as a nanny was black, and whenever they walked through the pedestrian zone of the small town she’d moved to, people would always stare at them openly: the two black children and the fat white woman.

Meanwhile, my doctor had rummaged in a drawer and produced a small packet of extremely shrivelled gummy bears. Henny had good enough manners to say thank you, but I saw her bewilderment as she inspected this not entirely appealing gift.

The doctor turned back to me.

“You’ll need cortisone. What was the name of the medication? The one you reacted to? I’ll make a note.”

She flipped through her papers.

“And what about my throat?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“My laryngitis?”

I instantly wished I hadn’t used the technical term: I knew it sounded smug. She raised her eyebrows. I held her gaze. The allergy was one thing, but an allergy surely couldn’t be what had caused my larynx to be inflamed in the first place. Or could it?

“Antibiotics for that,” she said. “Your throat is bright red. Wait – didn’t you have a reaction to that one antibiotic before as well?”

Was I imagining things, or was she expressing disapproval that my body had dared to reject the wonders of the pharmaceutical industry? It was true: an antibiotic she’d once given me had indeed caused such severe swelling in my lower abdomen that an ambulance had had to whisk me straight to the hospital from her surgery. Then, I hadn’t felt like a proper patient either. I’d felt like a total nuisance.

“Do you have a fever?”

I shook my head. I’d said again and again that I never had a temperature. Wasn’t that the kind of thing that should be recorded in a patient file? She’d once even lectured me on how it wasn’t healthy to suppress a fever – how the body needed it to sweat out infections.

“No fever then. What do you have?”

With forced control, I listed my symptoms again. Sore throat. Headache.

The lines in her forehead deepened with each word. Her tight curls framed her face, still friendly, if perpetually stern. I suspected she didn't quite believe me.

"We'll do a blood test."

"Really?" I tried to sound neutral, but my voice was shaking.

"Yes, really," she said sharply.

Taking blood from me was about as easy as convincing a vampire to take a stroll in daylight. Just the sight of a needle made me shudder.

"A blood test?" Henny echoed, intrigued.

I was having real trouble staying focused on both her and the doctor at the same time. I wondered how Leo managed it. Did you eventually get used to always keeping half of your attention on your child, somehow?

I hoped the nurse on duty would be Bärbel, at least. She was a lovely woman of around sixty, and the only person who could ever get blood from me without causing immense pain.

For a moment, I nestled my nose into Henny's hair and breathed in her scent: a mix of butter and vanilla.

"Anyway, I'll sign you off sick," said the doctor.

After all these years of seeing her, she still didn't seem to understand what working at the university meant.

"That won't make any difference," I said, unable to stop myself. "I still have to work."

My field of study was something else she disapproved of, I knew. Literature – just another remote, ivory-tower subject. Thanks to my father, this line of thinking was all too familiar.

"It sounds like you're slipping into that *victim role* again." She rolled her eyes.

"Don't do that!" yelped Henny, alarmed. "They'll get stuck that way forever!"

For a moment, my doctor looked startled. Then she was off again.

"You do need to snap out of that victim role. And fast."

It was more or less with these same words that she'd referred me to therapy before. The last time I'd walked into her office, she'd initially diagnosed seasonal fatigue, then burnout. And in fact, feeling *burnt* really had seemed the right metaphor: that hollow state, the aching limbs, the body like a cold, empty house after the fire had gone out. Twice already it had got to a point when I'd been unable to manage everyday life for months. I'd then made the mistake of telling her about the tumour I'd had. She had responded with blunt frustration.

"What? And after all that you still haven't sought help?"

The truth was, I had tried, right after the operation. My boyfriend at the time, a psychology student, had suggested I might have post-traumatic stress. But the therapist I ended up with had rejected the idea.

“PTSD is what soldiers have. Soldiers who’ve come back from war.” She’d sent me away with a firm smile. “You’re young and strong. Get out there. Live your life.”

I sighed. I owed my current therapist to my doctor too. So she wasn’t a bad doctor, I told myself. Just sometimes a little merciless, especially when it came to *modern conditions* like burnout.

“There’s no pill I can prescribe against capitalism, I’m afraid.”

She handed me the sick note with visible irritation.

I felt Henny slip her hand into mine, as if to protect me. But I decided I wasn’t quite done yet. By now I had already lost face, after all. In my doctor’s eyes, I would always be the chronic anxiety case. In the most measured tone I could summon up, I asked if she had something to treat silent reflux.

“Oh, that new-fangled heartburn? That’s easy enough.” She reached into a drawer and pulled out a pack of tablets.

“Here. Everyone’s taking this now.”

“What is it?” I said.

“A stomach acid blocker.”

She clicked cheerfully through her computer. She seemed relieved, as if the prescription had allowed her to restore some professional distance. She was as swayed by her own emotions as I was, really.

“Oh, and by the way,” she called out as I was halfway through the door. “Don’t go hopping from one specialist to another on your own again. That’ll only end in chaos. You come to me. To *me*. Alright?”

The nurse assigned to take my blood wasn’t Bärbel. It was a young woman, slightly unsure of herself. A very fair – no, platinum blonde – young woman. I closed my eyes and prayed silently. No luck. Henny had already dropped to all fours and was slinking around the room, her shoulders circling smoothly. They were moves she’d perfected from studying Bagheera, her hero in *The Jungle Book*. Oh dear.

Sometimes, in the presence of very blonde women, Henny transformed into the *panther*, as Leo and I called it. This would see her crawling around majestically, refusing to speak or respond to her human name. Quite the opposite: if you tried, she would cry, scratch and lash out.

Leo and I had learnt to fear the transformation. Especially when it occurred in department stores, at train stations or out on the street. “But why?” Leo always wondered. There wasn’t a single blonde in *The Jungle Book*.

“What’s she doing?” said the nurse now.

“She’s playing,” I said, trying to sound apologetic.

“But – on the floor? With all the germs?”

I could only shrug.

The nurse now looked even more distracted than before. Not really ideal for a procedure like this.

Then, as with absolutely anyone who encountered me in a medical context, she commented on my skin.

“What are those? Those patches?” she said, inspecting the offending areas with curiosity. In Japan, I recalled, there was apparently an unspoken rule about observing others subtly, and never staring.

“Oh, that,” I said. “It’s nothing.”

On my neck, my collarbone and my chest, I sometimes developed very noticeable reddish patches. They would come and go, their intensity depending on all sorts of things: the weather, how much sleep I’d had, whether I’d just been rushing around, and of course my emotional state. They looked like tiny continents. Sometimes they were impossible to miss, and at other times they were hardly visible at all. As a child, I had often been said to be *close to tears*, crying easily, but now I somehow seemed to be close to blood.

After two attempts at my left arm and one on the right, the ordeal was finally over. Soon after, Henny recovered, and transformed back from panther to human form.

We stood outside the surgery again. The air was biting, the streets slushed with the remnants of snow. Spring was taking its sweet time this year. Henny slipped her hand into mine again, her fingers as cold as ice. I had forgotten to bring her gloves. Whenever I was out with Henny, I sometimes thought of Gena Rowlands in the film *Gloria*. Gloria, the childless girlfriend of a gangster, ends up thrown into looking after her neighbour's son, quite clueless. That was me, more or less.

I checked my watch. "Time to go home," I said.

We made up a kind of game: I wasn't allowed to speak. Henny taught me a few signs she had picked up at her daycare. There was a deaf child in her group there, and the teacher had helped them learn some words in sign language. Between signs, Henny practised the song she was obsessed with at the time. The rather wise lyrics were complicated and the tempo was quick, but she kept at it, determined to get it right. It had a cutting, deceptively jaunty line about the pressure to *trade-in-your-dumb-old-life* for a new upgraded model.

Leo, it turned out, hadn't yet come back from the demonstration, and wasn't picking up her phone. This was unusual. Money and time were as scarce in Leo's life as in mine. Her husband – who I hardly knew – had been living with untreated depression for years and so was rarely in paid work himself. Henny fished out her key. "It's okay. Papa's home."

I hesitated. It somehow didn't seem like the best idea to leave a five-year-old with her depressed father. Henny shrugged.

"He's sleeping, and I'll practise my song. It'll be fine."

She had barely closed the door behind her when I spotted Leo outside just a few metres away, stepping out of a restaurant – she had clearly just been eating there. It was the upscale, overpriced Italian place that only older people usually went to.

Strange, I thought: Leo was never one for splashing out. I was surprised, to say the least.

In my stairwell, I had to keep stopping. I couldn't even climb two steps without feeling completely out of breath.

Back at the apartment, I collapsed onto my chair. Sir Wilson, lying stretched out like a long black snake on the radiator, yawned, dropped to the floor and arched his whole body, with his paws pressed forward and his back domed

up. Then he leapt up into my lap. I stroked his perfect black head, the soft fur. He narrowed his eyes and blinked at me affectionately.

I glanced at the quote pinned above my desk. It was from the poet and playwright Heiner Müller: *Work and do not despair.* But trying to keep studying just then made no sense. Even I could see that.

I checked the time. Calling Japan was hideously expensive, but the longing that had struck me was stronger.

“How are the cherry blossoms?” I asked, instead of saying hello.

“Ela,” my brother said. “What’s wrong?” He could tell straight away that something was off.

“Nothing,” I lied, then confessed what had happened.

“Oh God.” I could hear him muttering quick prayers. “Promise me you’ll call an ambulance next time.”

We spoke briefly about our mother, then hung up.

Afterwards, I found myself gazing at the bookshelves. I wondered if there was something I should read. Maybe Virginia Woolf, the eternal patient? Before her, noone had ever written so boldly about being ill.

I opened my desk drawer and searched through it for the postcard I had of her, the one that Leo had once given me, saying that I looked just like her.

The long face, the pinned-up hair, the melancholy stare. Supposedly. I pinned the card on the wall next to my impostor, Psalmanazar.

“Well, Virginia?” I said quietly. “Now what?”

I thought of all the hours, days and weeks I had already spent within those four walls, in bed with almost everything going. Somehow, getting ill had become just as much a part of my life as breathing. From inflamed fallopian tubes and norovirus infections to an ulcer in my intestine and that severe allergy to textile dyes, not to mention the tumour in my brain.

I went to the bathroom to rinse my mouth, but I still couldn’t get rid of the revolting chemical taste. *Just get some rest, take it easy*: I knew the advice was well-meant. I thought it over. In philosophy, there was a nice example that illustrated something crucial about human free will. You could lie in bed at night, tucked up and warm, and decide against your better judgement not to get up again to brush your teeth. Consciously neglecting things good for your health, or even intentionally acting against them, is all part of human freedom.

From my desk, Virginia was still examining me with that searching gaze. I decided it wasn’t rest I needed. It was distraction. There was nothing for it: I arranged to meet my friends the Sonnenschein twins. We had known each other since school. One of them – Layla – worked as a waitress in a cocktail bar nearby.

As I entered the Kapital bar, I felt my body relax instantly in anticipation of their wild stories. Kayla had worked as a prompter in a theatre, a sales assistant, a night porter, a call centre operator, a ticket collector, a museum installer, and a nanny – as well as at book fairs, a porn shop and a biscuit factory. For the moment, she was at a market research firm.

“Half the surveys are fake,” she explained. “I sit there all day pretending to be Person X and ticking boxes. Sometimes I’m a struggling pensioner, sometimes a dentist. God knows what the point of it all is.”

What Kayla wanted was to be an actor. She pointed to the neon text above the bar. *Capital is a shy deer,* it said. It wasn’t exactly Marx, but close enough.

“You have to build a career. What else can you do?”

Layla, the other twin, was happy with being a waitress. She loved mixing cocktails, and the tips and conversations.

We spent almost the entire evening talking about the new candidate for president in the US, who seemed to have emerged from nowhere and was blowing everyone away with his charisma.

I sipped my peppermint tea. My thoughts kept drifting. I deliberately didn’t mention my drama with the anaphylactic shock. Just thinking of it made my

throat tighten up again. Now it was Sylvia Plath who came to mind: *I am only thirty. And like the cat I have nine times to die.*

This time, for me, my two strongest weapons – the ones I always relied on to fend off all my fears – had let me down: my work, and my mother. Not only had they failed to help. It seemed they might be part of the problem.

[END OF SAMPLE]

Translator's note:

All chapter titles in the novel bear the names of other works of literature, often relating to the body in some way. Here, the relevant titles are:

Chapter 1: *A Ghost in the Throat*, Doireann Ní Ghríofa

Chapter 2: 'Lady Lazarus' in: *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath

All extracts quoted between chapters are from the poet and novelist Yōko Tawada.