

Bird

Sophie Cunningham

Extract

The day Anna began her haunting of me was a Thursday. August 14, 2003. Eleanor rang first thing, 'Just to say hello. Is it hot in New York today?' And yes, it was. The temperature was heading for the mid-Nineties. That doesn't sound so bad, but with brick and stone and bitumen all around, the city turned into an oven. By 9.00 a.m. I was midtown, sitting in my office. Marilyn called. She also wanted to talk about the weather. In Los Angeles, apparently, it was milder and less humid. I appreciated both their calls but I didn't need them. There is not a great difference between one's mother being dead for 10, 956 days, and 10,957. My mother was born in three places. There are four different versions of her dying: she was poisoned; she had a heart attack; she died of cholera while I held her head in my nine-year-old hands, my tears falling onto her face; she died in perfect meditation posture and became a realised being. Even after her death no one can decide what happened. Did she inhabit the Pure Lands? Was she bones in the dust, like her mother before her? Anna was my mother's name. Sofia was my grandmother's. Both died at 43 leaving me their names only. I have not long been forty-three and it seems I may be dying also. As I lie in a morphine haze it all comes back to me. The things I know. The things I don't, by which I mean the things it makes no sense for me to know but I know them anyhow.

Everyone thinks they knew Anna - that was my mother's name - better than me. Perhaps they did. All I know is that she was my beginning. She grew me into a bundle of tiny cells, into a being with a heart that fluttered delicate as a hummingbird's wing, into a creature that swooshed around inside her body until I was so big that I had to curl up, thumb in my mouth, and wait to be born. After she died Lama Gyatsho held my hand - I loved Lama, how could I not? - and led me to her. Still in her robes, she was surrounded by incense and flowers. A grey tabby cat rubbed itself on the legs of the table that her body lay on. He let me touch her and what I remember is how cold she was. He pointed out that her skin was still good. He showed me the spot on the top of her skull where her hair fallen out and explained to me that was where her soul had escaped her body.

I am in hospital because I slipped off the side of a mountain. I was trekking in the Himalayas, I was searching for my mother's ghost. I saw her before I fell; she was sitting on a granite boulder that hung above the track. She was with Lama Gyatsho. He sat cross-legged before her, his fingertips hovering above her temples. She was leaning forwards. Their foreheads were touching. I glimpsed her only a moment before the scree I was walking on skittered and slid. I lost my footing; my leg was shattered. In the time it took to fall through the air and land on a rock shelf not so far below the path time crashed and collided. That was when I understood there is a world in which my mother and the Lama will sit at this tender angle - still as statues, grave as rocks, silent as stones - until the mountains around them are worn to dust by wind and rain, by earthquakes; until mountains become plains, the oceans dry, and the earth burns up in the heat of a dying sun; still they sit, they have always sat, together, until the end of beginning-less time.

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'Az,' he asked. Az was everyone's nick name for me. A morphing of my name, Ana-Sofia. 'How are you coping?'

'I'm fine,' I reassured him, 'when I really need you to call is on the anniversary of Ian's death.' Ian had been my kind-of stepfather and he'd been the one who'd introduced Robert to me.

'I'll do that,' Robert said. 'But in the meantime - lunch?' I had a meeting and told him so. Instead we arranged to have a late afternoon drink in the East Village, down near where we both lived. That's why it was that I was on the L later that day when the lights in the train began to flicker, then went out altogether. There were murmurs: 'What's up man?' 'What's happening?' Someone in a carriage further along screamed. A few people tried to use their cell phones. A voice close to me came out of the darkness: 'The network's down.' No one said, though we were all thinking, 'Has it happened? Is it happening again?', and I imagined the moment when we reached the surface, to find: what? Dust which fluttered down like snow. One building and 5,000 dead or half the city and millions. How much longer would we be able to breathe?

Breathe.

I made myself take slow breaths, to counteract the contractions in my chest. Anger, anxiety, fear: it's all about contraction. The world becomes smaller. We do. Reduced. How did Joan Didion once describe fear? A protein. She called it a protein.

The heat built steadily. The stink of us all only took fifteen minutes to fill the carriage. Young men took their shirts off in the flickering of gas lighters. I saw the slick glow of their bodies. Beautiful. I turned away. Even though I was past the age when it would cross most young men's minds that I desired them it seemed impolite to look.

Two enormous women, one black, one white, sat opposite me. I could smell their distress. The black woman, like me, was sitting very, very still. The white woman rocked and began to chant, 'Oh God, we're all going to die.'

One of the beautiful young men snarled at her. 'Shut the fuck up.' The woman began to cry. A young girl, a teenager, got up from her seat and felt her way towards the weeping woman. She knelt before her, patting her large knees. 'It's alright, ma'am. Don't cry.' The cross around the young girl's neck glinted in a sudden flame and I flinched, then reminded myself: Christians who wear crosses aren't always Bush voters. Anyway, this girl was too young to vote. I could feel all my petty prejudices and fears rising in my throat and thought I might choke on my own bile. The crying was infectious. There was a low sobbing through the carriage. Every few minutes someone tried the doors. The man across the aisle from me took off his suit jacket, loosened his tie and spent several minutes trying to prise the doors apart with a metal ruler he'd pulled out of his briefcase. To no avail.

'It's a safety precaution,' the black woman said. 'This city will kill us with its precautions.' I laughed with her and the man wearing the tie seemed to enjoy the irony as well. We caught each other's eye.

I sat. Images came to me: of people, Jews like my mother - which I suppose means Jews like me though I was not brought up as one - being forced into train carriages; jammed in together so tight that when they died they remained standing. I tried not to think of Tokyo, eight years ago. People down in the subways gulping gas into their lungs: the nausea, the running eyes, the blurring vision, the pounding of their hearts. My mother died of a heart attack. Of all the different versions of her death but that is the one I believed to be true. A heart, starved, wears out sooner.

A story my mother once told me came to me. Vivid. One late Summer day, when she was living in Paris, she sought out the catacombs. She'd only visited them once before and that first time she'd been with her friend, Gabriel. This time she was alone and she felt uncertain as to how to get down there. She walked through the park where she knew she'd find an entrance, to a large pile of boulders. She looked among them for a crack she could disappear into. As she gathered her fur coat to her and went to slip into a fissure a gypsy girl came towards her; a girl with dark hair and dirty rose cheeks. She held a candle and matches out to Anna: 'Here,' she said.

Anna gave the child some coins and tried to kiss her on the forehead but she ran away, flinging the candle and matches onto the ground. Anna picked them up, then slipped between the rocks. Once she was inside she groped around until she found the iron ladder she'd been

told to look for and clambered down it. When she finally found her footing on the tunnel floor she lit the candle, which sputtered unsteadily. For twenty minutes or so there was nothing to be seen in the uncertain light. Nothing to be heard but the drip, drip, drip of weeping rock. Suddenly skulls and femurs flickered into view. They were golden brown with age; made beautiful through arrangement: hearts, skull and crossbones. The Nazis had been down there during the war. The resistance were down there too. They both crawled around in the dirt never knowing the other was there. Anna saw that not all the bones were neatly arranged. Many of them had been tossed in random piles after being dug out of cemeteries more than a hundred years ago: a thigh in one direction, a skull in another, ribs scattered heaven knew where. There was a scuffling down in the darkness, faint as the scurrying of mice. There were stifled giggles. The noise became louder as the two teenagers descended upon her and laughed loud with shock when they saw her before dashing past, shrieking at an even higher pitch. Anna felt her way up the path in the direction they'd come from. The passage became low there, so low she had to stoop over and trail her hand over perspiring bone walls to orientate herself. Suddenly, the wall fell away and she followed its slopes into a small room filled with a pile of bones. She curled up in the bone nest, covered herself in velvet darkness, and slept.

After an indeterminate period of time - it could have been a minute, an hour, a century - she was woken by the sound of more shouts, though they seemed along way away. She called her mother's name - 'Sofia?' - then fell asleep again. When she woke for a second time she felt hungry and cold and needed to piss. She clambered out of the room to the tunnel, but instead of turning right, the way she had come, turned left, and walked until her stooping became a crawl under collapsing walls. Anna crawled back through the layers of Paris, past the time when the boulevards were built, past the time her Jewish forebears were evicted from the city, once, twice, many times, back through the years and centuries of plague and war to the time when the city was nothing more than a few Roman soldiers on the Isle de la Cite, digging houses out of the mud. People died down there - of course they did, they died everywhere - and Anna was surprised that the thought of death pleased her. She sat for a while, covered in dirt, trying not to wet herself, and that is when I began to kick. 'It was the first time,' she told me, 'that I ever felt you but after that you never stopped.' When I first heard the story it had seemed to me she was trying to tell me that I had saved her. That the thought of me had given her the energy to haul herself back along the tunnel and up to the surface. Now it occurred to me to wonder: was it the thought of me that had sent her down there in the first place? I had visited the catacombs myself once, when I was visiting Paris, so perhaps that was why this sense I had, sitting in a train carriage in 2003, of being down in the catacombs with her more than 40 years ago, was so intense. There was the evocative heat and dark of the subway. There was the fact I really had been down there with her, albeit in utero. But the scene came to me more vividly than these truths would allow for. The sobs and mutterings of the train carriage faded away and so did my fear about being stuck down there. Imagining myself in a tunnel with my mother made me feel safe, which is strange, when you consider she didn't make me feel so safe when she was alive. So. This was the first time I felt she was haunting me - it was a gentle haunting - and since my accident my falling through time to be with her happens so often I have come to think of it as normal.

After an hour we heard workers approaching. We saw the bounce of their torches. A few moments later they were opening the doors. 'Just a power blackout's all this is folks,' a man, with a heavily-lined face, drawled. 'No cause for alarm. Happening all over the East-ern sea-board.' He drew out the last two words. To reassure us. 'But here's the bad news. We're jammed in here between Sixth and Union Square. We can walk you out, but it'll be a few blocks.'

This man, this gnarled but lovely man, led hundreds of us along the track. We stumbled. The smell of uric acid in the tunnels was strong. I could hear voices chattering in the distance and wondered, for a moment, if they were the voices of the people who lived down there, driven into the warm dark by poverty, or shame, or both. Torch lights flitted ahead of us like fireflies. In the quiet that had descended on our group we heard the scuttle of rats. A large one brushed a woman's foot and she shrieked then fell heavily to the ground. I lent over her. 'It's okay,' I reassured her. 'This will be over soon. We'll help you.'

The man who'd tried to force the doors open, the one who'd caught my eye, moved towards me, insubstantial as a shadow. He touched me on the elbow.

'Here, let me help.' Then we all walked together towards the pinprick of light we could see far, far away in the distance.