

Incident On The Line

Her phone rings at the moment the tube train breaks off from its moorings up the track. The string of silver carriages sways towards her, the driver growing visible, propped up on his elbows.

‘I don’t know quite how to say this,’ a voice comes in Katja’s ear. ‘But would you like some eggs?’

Eggs? She thinks of brown eggs in their box, flicking the soft lid open as she does each Saturday in the supermarket queue, to check they are not cracked. Quails’ eggs: smaller, greenish, speckled. Barn eggs, farm eggs, free-range, organic, eggs with added vitamins, eggs with Omega –

‘Hello?’

‘I’m here,’ Katja says.

The tube doors part, passengers disgorging, manoeuvring their hard-edged suitcases down on to the platform.

A ripple passes through the men and women standing by: a synaptic firing that will carry them on through the deepest confines of the Piccadilly line, up escalators, through thrumming streets and coffee shops, on to the sanctuary of their offices and wide, grey, empty desks.

She does not follow them. Instead, relinquishing her place, she sits down on a bench.

Ruth, whose voice comes down the line, has never phoned her. Her tone is half embarrassed: as though Katja may ask her to call back later on.

‘How are you?’ Katja says, as her mind rattles through the reasons for this call. Ruth is the sister of Evie, her oldest friend. Is Evie ill? Unlikely, Katja thinks, for her sister’s voice seems nervous, not alarmed. Did she imagine that, at the start, Ruth mentioned eggs?

Hope – familiar, foolish – seeps into her veins. She beats it back. Hope is not her friend. Hope is what she feels when doctors peer into her notes, and needles pierce her skin,

and her hormones flow and ebb, and she and Cal, her husband, wait, through weeks and months and years, for a thing that does not happen.

‘Evie told me what’s been going on.’

Evie, to whom, two days ago, Katja confided the unseemly rollercoaster ride of her struggle to conceive. A truth she has kept concealed; and now regrets confessing, for how has poor Evie felt, to have such misery flung over her? Bitter, fetid words, that carry, beneath their stench, a whisper: why me? Why me, not you? Why do you have three children, while I have none?

Another train is peeling up the track. Katja sits, hunched over her phone: saying, by her posture, do not come near. Do not ask if I will move my bag so you may sit down.

And perhaps her fellow commuters - attuned as they are to each others’ bodies and the distance, finely calibrated, that must be kept between them – read her signal, for not one of them approaches.

And Ruth is saying, in a cheerful tone: ‘I have two boys now, I’m not planning any more.’ And: ‘So I’m wondering whether you would like – whether I could give you – some of my eggs?’

And with those words – heard for a second time, so she cannot be mistaken - a tsunami bursts inside her. Katja’s life is overturned, her body sucked into the surf, spun and tumbled, spat out, abandoned and regathered, like a sand grain on a beach.

As she wheels and pitches, thoughts rush to her head. Ruth is younger: four years younger, she remembers, from the days when she and Evie played together, and Ruth was the little sister, imposing on their games. Thirty-four, Ruth must be now; compared to the thirty-eight that Katja is herself.

What a difference those four years make, to the men and women who inhabit the clinics she now frequents. To them, she has discovered, thirty-four means possibility. While thirty-eight means eggs that – “forgive me, Mrs – uh – Chalke, for being blunt” - have passed their use-by date.

She stares at the dark-stained constellations, left by chewing gum, that dot the platform edge. The tracks, weeds, caressing couples round her, fade. There is only her voracious longing, and the voice at the far end of the line.

‘Thank you,’ Katja says, over and over. At some point she stands up and drops her leather glove. Not until the evening will she find the glove is missing. Since it is new - a present from Cal, who endures this with her - she will try hard to track it down. Even at the lost property office at Baker Street she will not find it: so the glove, in her mind, becomes a sacrificial object, that must be lost, to enable whatever happens next.

‘You are sure?’ she says.

The crucial question, etched already in her heart: for how can Ruth, who does not know her well, be willing to undergo whatever medical procedures are required? Some of which she has experienced herself, and knows to be invasive and unpleasant?

And Ruth is reassuring, overflowing with kindness and conviction; asking what she should do next.

‘I’ll find out,’ Katja says.

She thinks of the little room, where an Italian doctor has informed her that donated eggs are what she needs. A suggestion that, for all his charmingly accented English, has seemed impossible; for whom could she ask for such a thing, when she has no sister, and her closest friends are the age she is herself, and thus – in the plain talk of the clinics – over the hill?

Hearing this, the doctor has hinted at an international marketplace - an ova pick-n-mix, as she imagines it - where eggs may be bought and sold. And Katja - knowing by instinct that such a place, while it may offer hope, is not for her – has felt her dream diminish.

And now, on a suburban station where she has stood a thousand times, the offer of some eggs has blown in on the breeze.

Then the call is over.

Besuited men and women are trickling down the steps, the next train trundling down the track: familiar sights she cannot comprehend.

In the years she has spent trying to conceive, a wind has blown against her.

Katja does not know, as she boards the train and surges into Northfields, that, with Ruth, that wind will change direction.

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She does not know, as the train slips into South Ealing, that she will say many times in the months ahead: ‘Are you sure?’ And: ‘Don’t feel you can’t change your mind.’ For she understands the burden of her hope, and does not want Ruth to bend beneath it too.

She does not know, as the train enters Acton Town, that Ruth will say, ‘Don’t worry. I want this to work, as much as you do.’ Or that Ruth’s eggs, under a microscope, will gleam with youth and health.

She does not know, as the train sinks underground, that, when two small embryos are implanted, each one will seize the chance to grow. Or that, on the morning she takes a pregnancy test – as a huge gas explosion rocks her part of London – the line will show up blue.

She does not know, as the train nudges into Gloucester Road, that two babies will be born: too early, too small, in anxious, frightened days. Or that those tiny, wrinkled forms will grow up strong and true.

She does not know, as the doors slam open at Green Park, that each boy will one day say to her: ‘You are not my mother’. Words she will hear and weather, for to say them is their right; and motherhood is a bucking horse, that sometimes throws her off.

How can she know, as she ascends on a silver stair-case to the street, that her sons and Ruth’s will form their own connections? That, from this confluence of science and human kindness, a tube-map of relationships will flow? Or that, in the time it takes to reach her wide, grey desk – or so it feels - two young men, grown, will head off up the tracks?

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