

My Heart's Content
a journey to transplant

Angela Hughes

The heart that beats within me is not the one I was born with.

Crumpled pyres of wrapping paper, ripples of laughter and coils of fairy lights cling to the deadened branches of the tree in the corner – red, green, yellow, blue.

Breathe in.

Sage and onion and hot fat. The molten smell of cheap cigars and the fire-crackle inhale to fill my dad's mouth with smoke, his cheeks puffed out, lips pursed to hold a secret.

And out.

Colour rises in my mum, her fringe parted, plastered to her forehead. The heat of the room absolves her body of the shop-wrap-cook-clean, creating space between her shoulders and ears.

There, in the middle of it all, my great-grandma, arms raised. Tan tights, silver perm and Crimplene, throwing her body around the drum-beat, mouth stumbling over the words to the *Jungle Rock*. For each stamp of her foot, an applause of needles and glitter from the tree.

Christmas 1976, I am nine years old. Dinner is over and I'm sliding my fingers into my mouth one-by-one, working my tongue around their length and sucking them clean of the briny remains of a packet of peanuts. Each finger pulls free with a resounding pop, followed by a giggle from Lorraine, my sister and a pointed look from my dad, eyebrows raised, reprimand poised.

The table, dressed in white linen with such precision earlier in the day, now resembles a drunken reveller at the end of a party, shirt untucked and tie askew. Various members of my family are draped over the furniture and scattered across the floor, laughing and egging my great-grandma on, whooping and singing. Lorraine and I bob our heads side-by-side, blonde pony-tails swinging, heels drumming the front of the settee. Our younger brother Stuart has tuned out, his attention captured instead by the primary-coloured Lego at his feet.

An imprint of my finger greases the indented red button of my new tape player. Years later, I'll unearth the cassette from among the childhood debris secreted under my bed and before I leave home for university, I'll play it for my mum. Mesmerised by the familiar Yorkshire accent and deep-throated laugh, we'll sit and stare at the dust-covered machine, willing it to release the ghost of our Christmas past.

Despite my mum's pleas to keep the tape safe, my great-grandma's voice will eventually be lost for ever, replaced by recordings of songs which, in later years, I will deny I ever listened to.

More than thirty years from now, I'll be standing outside a classroom when the doors at the end of the corridor stammer open. A man will walk towards me: scarlet jersey, blue ruck-sack and wide smile. He will introduce himself as Paul and I'll notice the fingernails on his right-hand are longer than those on his left.

Our first kiss will be three months later, on Christmas Eve, and we will have little idea of what is to come, of our shared cottage with the leaking roof and mould in the hallway, where Paul will lift me out of the shower, wrap me in a towel and hold me against him to warm my body. *I won't leave you.* Or how he'll carry me from the car, up the

slight slope to the front door, in time for me to throw up in the black and white tiled bathroom. I won't run.

In our embrace we won't notice the fluid collecting in my lungs, my waterlogged body, or the blueness of my lips and nails. I won't leave. And when he steps back to look at me, it will be impossible to see the day where I collapse in the car-park of our local hospital. You. Side-by-side, stretched out on the bed, legs entwined, we'll be unaware of the phone calls Paul will make from work, several times a day, just to make sure I'm not-. We won't hear the ambulance's siren nor see the blue flashing light that will race me to a bed in the Advanced Heart Failure Unit of the national hospital. It will all be lost in the moment I lean my head against his chest.

I'll never

The day Paul and I meet, we are ignorant of the hospital room, two years into our future, where a nurse will stroke my arm to wake me and in a low voice, tell me she's there to take blood. All my grandparents will be dead, Stuart will be at home on the other side of the world and Lorraine and her husband, Stan, checked into a hotel close to our parents, will implore sleep to keep a hold of their children, Lydia and Dan, for a few hours more.

'Is it really now?' I'll ask, voice blunted by sleep, tongue large in my parched mouth. The nurse will turn and with a smile, remind me she woke me just after midnight to tell me what was happening. About the offer.

A shake of my head to clear the fug of sleeping-pills will commend a half-remembered dream into reality.

leave you.

Before all the phone calls to my family, before Paul arrives from the hotel to hold my hand, before the scrubbing and showering and blood-letting and paper pants, before the consent form and the word M-O-R-T-A-L-I-T-Y, before the handshake and the transplant fellow, before the hugs from the nurses and the surgeon's reassuring squeeze of my shoulder, before the coordinator and the corridors and the theatre door, before the kind faces of the theatre staff and white masks and green scrubs and injections and cannulas and iodine and anaesthetic. Before they saw through my breast bone and cut out my heart. Before that.

Before.

That.

Before all of that, I'll close my eyes and dance with my great-grandma to the *Jungle Rock*.