

THE MISSING LINK

A Novel by Erica Pensini

Contact: erica.pensini@gmail.com

If we knew what it was we were doing, it wouldn't be called 'research,' would it?

“They’re only missing, and sooner or later a person will come along who accidentally opens the door of the room where Alma hid them, and the story will start all over again. I live with that hope” – P. Auster

Disclaimer: This novel is a work of phantasy. All references to institutions, people and places are purely coincidental.

Chapter 1

The heat of this torrid summer is drenching the old bricks and stones which have seen the joy and the struggles of the best generations of students, the cream of our nation. Young people like me, privileged and clever and envied. Now that the graduation ceremony has ended and even the last proud parents and their kids are gone, the place is oddly immobile and silent. It feels like a calming spot, one where I could sit in quiet loneliness with an engrossing novel. Very soon I will not see this place - and this whole city as a matter of fact - for a fair amount of time. There's a big environmental project going on in Spain and I will be part of an international team based out in Barcelona for one year at least. Chances are that the project will last much longer, but for now the details are still blurry and I am not concerned with planning so much ahead anyways. For now what I want is simply to step out of the academia and buy myself some buffer time before getting organized for real life, whatever real life is. This city has started to fit too tight on my skin, and I am relieved at the idea of taking off to a different continent, to a city that inspires me based on pictures pulled off the internet and on some travel guides.

Tonight I should be happy. I just earned a degree from a top-notch university with top marks. I have a job already, it's temporary but that's no matter, so many of my class mates would pay to be in my place now.

But I am not happy. I am not sad in a proper sense either though. It's a sort of emptiness I feel within me all the time, in the background, and that - paradoxically - haunts me most intensely in those moments when I should feel most accomplished. I start wandering in the empty hallways, making my way to the cafeteria where I have been so many times. I want to know if I can recollect the emotions I've lived here, remember the moments, and it is so very odd that I feel absolutely nothing, as if this was my first time seeing this place. I move on, inspecting the classrooms, and for each one I visit a hollow echo reverberates within me. At last I give up, but right when I've decided to get out of here my eye gets captured by a flier. It is black and white and very plain, but I read, in capital letters, EXPERIMENTAL DREAM STUDY. I get closer to the board on which it is affixed, and this is what it says:

EXPERIMENTAL DREAM STUDY

Volunteers wanted for an experimental psychology and medical study in which dreams are analyzed, reproduced and used to trigger buried memories.

Duration of the study: 1 month minimum

Call the number below if interested!

I have a month and a half ahead of me before flying out to Barcelona. Why not call? I have enough time. Why call is perhaps a better question though. I am curious, that's all there is to it, or maybe there are more profound reasons that I choose not to investigate.

There's probably nobody to pick up the phone, it's late, but I pull out my cell and call anyways. The phone rings free for a while, and I am relieved, because I have already changed my mind and I don't really want to be part of the study anymore. I am about to hang up when a voice talks to me from the other end.

"Why don't you drop by tomorrow morning at 8 am, does this work?", asks the girl who introduced herself as Stephanie, and so I'm stuck.

I jump on the streetcar with fragmented images buzzing in my mind as inconsistent flies, thoughts of what tomorrow's dream session will be like, of Barcelona, of the last day of school and of other things forgotten as fast as they are remembered, things that are now buried memories.

Chapter 2

It's 8 am and I am sitting in a zone of the hospital labelled as "experimental psychiatry and psychology". I've spent the last half hour filling forms with my personal information and subscribing a number of clauses I haven't read too carefully. I suspect that this whole psychology business is a complete waste of time, and yet I am curious to see what will come next. I am swaying between these bipolar moods when Stephanie greets me flamboyantly.

"You must be Iris!", she says with a broad smile, ready to shake hands even before I get up from my chair, arching her brows just a bit instead of placing a question mark to her statement

Something in my face tells her that she is not mistaken, and before I have the time to reply she introduces herself, "Stephanie, good to meet you".

She takes the forms I filled out and leafs through them quickly before bringing me to another room. The room is bright, small, cozy, familiar with many personal objects, something very different from what I expected. I thought shrinks used rooms that were dimly lit and neutral, deprived of any reference to the doctor's personality to prevent the patient from analyzing the doctor. Instead I look around and note, "You like cats".

"Yes! I do", Stephanie replies enthusiastically

"So do I", I tell her, my eyes still inspecting the place

My defensive wall is creaking just slightly. This woman does not seem to want to play games or hide, or maybe she is such a good player that she plays and wins seamlessly. Let's wait and see.

She starts explaining what this is all about, and although each of her sentences is clear when she stops talking I am still not sure about what I am getting into. All I understand is that her research team wants to exhume memories that have been lost, especially traumatic memories. They somehow intend to use fragments of dreams to trigger other dreams until the lost episodes are reconstructed in their entirety and relived in a full length dream, following which the person becomes fully conscious of his or her past.

Have they done this with somebody already, I ask. They are recruiting volunteers now, I am the first one who showed up. Promising!, I think, and smirk.

Stephanie sees my skepticism. She becomes defensive – it's only for a flashing second, but I still notice.

"Well, if this is an experiment one has to start somewhere", I say, because for some reason all of a sudden I don't want to let Stephanie down.

Stephanie nods and smiles, amicable again, and continues her explanation. I will have to write down my dreams as soon as I wake up, recording as many details as I can. We'll meet every other day – if this is not too much for me – for sessions approximately three hours long.

"The ideal strategy is to keep a fast pace. Does this work for you?", Stephanie asks and I say it does.

"During each session we will induce controlled sleep, and we will monitor a number of parameters to try and understand your mental state during the sleep. We will also impart signals to your brain while you are sleeping to mimic part of the dreams you had the previous nights. We will pick whatever seems significant to you or whatever appears to us as a hint, something that is perhaps blurry but that we somehow perceive as a window to remembering a problematic memory that you chose to forget", Stephanie tells me

"What makes you believe that I choose to forget things?", I ask, with a tone sharper than intended

"What are your expectations?", Stephanie asks in return to my question, looking at me intensely

"My expectations with regard to what?", I say, taking time, because I don't have a real answer

"With regard to what you will be getting out of these sessions", she replies calmly, her eyes still transfixed into mine

Now the question is too well defined for me to elude it.

"I came here for no reason, out of curiosity or perhaps boredom. But if you need some motivation and want me to give you a better reason I've got one for you. Sometimes there is a face that resembles mine, I know it does but I can't see it. I want to reach towards it but I can't, ever. I've dreamed this since I can remember", I say – and there's challenge in my voice

The words have come out before I knew it, and I am suddenly feeling disarmed in the middle of an open battle field. I regret having given my dream away, while realizing for the first time that it has been haunting me for years. I wonder if I really want to know what it is about and if this dream has really been my reason to call Stephanie.

"Do you want to start a full session tomorrow at 8?", Stephanie asks, and I shrug

"Why not", I say

Chapter 3

I'm sitting on a streetcar heading home, and I think about what I told Stephanie. If I keep seeing a face in my dreams, and if that face resembles mine, could it be that I have a cousin or an aunt or someone I met once upon a time and then never again? I have a very large family, and we don't really see each other very often. Perhaps one day there was a family gathering and I found a remote relative that looked like me and from whom I had a hard time separating? Perhaps the explanation for the dream that haunts me is as simple as this.

Family pictures, that's where I should look.

The idea occurs to me suddenly, and I wonder why I didn't have it before. I still live with my parents, and all the family pictures are in the attic. I am sure they are there, even though I am not sure where this certainty comes from since I haven't taken the time to go through them in ages, if ever.

I realize that I have reached my stop just in time before the doors close, and it surprises me that time has gone by so fast.

As I exit the streetcar, as I cross the iron gates securing our estate and walk the path embraced by old trees shading away the summer heat, as I unlock the door and step in the luxury in which I grew up, at every step I take I perceive an uneven note in me. The idea of going through those pictures puts me ill at ease, as if I am about to disobey to some untold rule. But why?

The scene flashes back to my mind. I was a kid, I can't remember my age but I was still in elementary school and I had sneaked up in the attic. At the time I had liked to go there because it was a hidden private spot, from which I could see whatever happened outside while making myself barely noticeable. I was there, sitting on the floor with a photo album open on my legs, when my mother walked up. She started as she saw me. "You startled me, I didn't expect to find you here", she had said. It took my mother a few seconds to realize what I was doing, and when she did she bent and closed the album. "Why don't you go out and play, it's such a nice day!", she had told me with a high pitch in her tone and a nervous giggle. From that day my mother decided that I should stop spending time in the attic, and I never opened the album again. "Why would you want to spend time in the attic when there are so many better places in the house?", had been her argument. I had gone back only once, when she wasn't there, and I had noticed that she had boxed up the albums and placed them in a corner where she probably thought they'd be less noticeable. The episode had disturbed me, but I had pushed it in some remote corner of my mind and stopped thinking about it till now.

Are the pictures still in the attic?

As I head to the attic time rewinds and I become the tense kid disobeying mom's rules. I know there's nobody at home, but I landscape the rooms before dimbing the stairs, my heart beating fast. The attic's door squeaks as I push it, and I curse the unoiled hinges. I realize that things haven't changed much there, and the space has the odd flavour of spots where time has stopped. The box with the pictures is still there, but it has been taped close. I'm cooked, there's no way I can go through the pictures without

leaving traces, but I am not willing to give up now. After all there's no label on the box, nothing that can identify it unmistakably. Perhaps I can buy an identical box somewhere else? The risk is worth the candle, and I start to peel the tape off the box.

I take out the albums, making sure I don't get their order mixed. There are about twenty albums, I arrange them by columns and start to look at them one by one, suddenly focused, calm.

Column one. There are my parents, young, smiling, holding hands on a beach, on the porch of a villa, in a number of cities. I keep going, and I find shots of my relatives, people I hardly remember now. And then there's me, my father is holding me in his arms with a satisfied expression on his face. I pull out the picture from the album and check the date. 1983. I was two years old then. I move on, and find more bits of me: me at 3, 4 and 5, all the way to elementary school. My high school pictures are not here, they are downstairs, receiving for some reason a different treatment from these.

I move to a second column, and there are my parents again, somewhat different, young but not as cheerful. I can't get myself to place them in time, was this before me or after I was born? I flip some photos and start reading the dates. December 1980, February 1981, June 1981, October 1982, June – August 1982. Strange that I am not in any of these pictures.

Wait.

My head feels empty for a moment. Wait. I am not in these pictures and my mother is NEVER pregnant. Never. I was born on May 16, 1981. That's what they told me, that's what all the documents say. So why did my mother not have a huge belly on December 1980? Why not in February 1981? And why wasn't I on any of the pictures taken in 1982?

I close the box hastily, without care. Why would I care anyways? I get out of the attic, out of the house, out of the property and slam the fence behind me, hard, with all the anger I have in me.

I want to shatter the whole bloody place cluttered with its lies and fake order, but I run instead.

Chapter 4

I don't know where I am going, I am running just to get away from the place where I have lived till today.

When my cell phone rings it startles me. I suspect it's my mother, the person who calls herself my mother. She has the habit of calling me in the middle of the day for no real reason, making up a different excuse every time. I am tempted to smash the cell phone, but then I read "Joshua" on the display.

I stop running.

"Joshua. I'll come over", I say before he gets a chance to speak

"Sounds good. See you in a while then", Joshua replies, and hangs up

We don't need too many words to understand each other, Joshua and I. Joshua is the only real buddy I have. We love each other and we do so freely, we are lovers when and if we please. He never got offended when I went missing in action because school imposed its meat-grinding pace on me, and welcomed my return when I went back to I knock at his door. And I always went back as soon as I could. There are other people crossing my life, it happens all the time, but after a while they disappear because I don't have the patience and time to keep any of my relationships, except for the one I have with Joshua. Joshua lives in a half rundown place, he is an artist but what pays his bills are the small jobs he does – he is a pizza boy one day, a plumber another and a pet sitter the next. He takes any job and doesn't stick to any for too long.

I could take a streetcar but I decide to walk.

I keep going till my feet get sore and my hot skin grimy with the dust of the road. Then I jump on a streetcar, and let it carry me to the outcast street where Joshua lives, right behind a respectable community, like a prank in the middle of a good day.

"Hey", Joshua says after opening the door when I reach his flat, and disappears in the kitchen as I throw my bag in a corner and flip off my shoes.

He comes back with two lemonades and hands one to me.

"So?", he asks, plunging in the couch

"So I don't know who my mother is", I reply and Joshua bugs his eyes

"Ehm?", he goes, the hint of a smirk on his lips

"Not a joke", I say, and start to explain

Joshua listens to me, and I can tell that he is processing the information fast, that he has something in mind. He doesn't interrupt me though, and when I'm done with my story he remains silent for a while.

"Have you ever considered getting your DNA analyzed?", he then asks

"No, but...", I say, pondering the possibilities I would open up if I did

"Well, maybe you should. If your real family members did the same, for any reason, then you could find out who they are", Joshua tells me

"Well, if you want to know...", he adds, interpreting my silence as hesitation

But I am not hesitant, rather I am imagining what will happen. I picture my real mother and my father happily welcoming me back.

Would they?

Perhaps they are dead, perhaps they never wanted me. Why would they welcome me if they decided to give me away? Still, I want to know. I need to know.

"I do", I tell Joshua

"I can show you the lab where I got my DNA analyzed", he says

"You got your DNA analyzed?", I exclaim, because this is all but expected

"Yes, when my mom died. I wanted to know the odds that the same could happen to me, at some point in life", he says, and bows his head

I am still standing with the lemonade in my hand, while Joshua is sprawled on the couch. I leave my glass on the floor, take Joshua's and do the same with his. Then I cuddle on the couch, balling up against Joshua so that our lanky frames are one tight bunch of bones. It's hot and we're sweaty, but still it feels more comfortable to be tied up like this than to stay apart.

"Do you want to go to the DNA center now?", he says after a while

I nod yes, and Joshua pulls me up gently.

"Let's go then", he says smiling

After being squeezed against the couch Joshua's head is a blond mess. I laugh, running my fingers through his hair. He shakes his head, like a dog after taking a swim in a lake, wild and carefree.

The ride on the streetcar is long, and for a stretch of time we sit without speaking. Then Joshua looks at me, and I can tell from his face that he has been thinking all along, but that the thoughts struggle to translate themselves into words.

I look back at him and wait for him to phrase his thoughts.

"Your dream, the one you keep having. You always tell me the face you see resembles yours. But it's not yours", he starts

"It's not mine...no", I say

"So it's your mom? Your real mom, I mean...", he asks

I think about it for a moment.

"No...there's a small face, a face as small as mine", I continue

"Small? Is the dream about your childhood?", Joshua asks

"There are two faces. Yes! Yes, there are two faces! The small one and another one, a big one", I exclaim, my voice rising

People eye me for a short instant, before going back to their business

“You’re right, it’s a dream about my childhood!”, I exclaim again, my tone rising into a joyful pitch
I’ve realized something which was always there in front of me and yet invisible.

“Where are you in the dream?”, asks Joshua

“I don’t know...”, I say

“What do you see?”, he asks again

“Colours. Bright colours”, I start to remember

“Which colours?”

“It’s like a mosaic. It’s a mosaic sprawled through my tears”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because they are taking me away”

“From whom?”

“From the faces”

“Who are the faces?”

“It’s a big face and a small face, like mine”, I repeat

“Your mom and your sibling”

I start crying

“What do you see through your tears? The mosaic, what it is like?”, Joshua insists

“It’s hot. The mosaic is hot when a big hands holds mine and I touch it”

“It’s summer. What’s the mosaic like?”

“Like a lizard”

“You see a mosaic coated lizard?”

“Yes”

“Describe it”

“I don’t know...”

“Try”

“It’s blue”

“What else?”

“It’s climbing”

“On what?”

“On a rock”

“A big rock?”

“I don’t know...”

I grab my head and cover my ears

“No!”, I scream and the crowd turns again

Joshua hugs me as if I were a kid

“Let’s paint when we go back”, he says

We often do. I don’t paint in the place where I live, where my parents live. The flawed perfection of my family’s luxury is uninspiring. It inhibits me.

But I didn’t expect him to come up with this now.

“Paint?”, I ask, wiping off my tears

“Yeah. Lizards are nice to paint”, he says, and I understand his plan.

Chapter 5

The tubes of colour are spread out all over the floor and a blank canvas is waiting for me, rested against the wall. Joshua never puts anything away, it kills the inspiration – he says – and I think he’s right.

“I’ll be working at the night club tonight, I’ll get off at 5 a.m.”, Joshua tell me

I nod.

“In a week they’ll tell you something about your DNA...you never know what you’ll discover. But the real key is here”, he says, pointing at his forehead

“You know what happened”, he continues

I shrug

“I am not sure...”, I say

“Well, I’ve got to go now. Will I find you when I get back?”, he asks

“I’ll be here”, I tell him

Joshua smiles, blows a balloon with his bubble gum and pops it. I can tell he’s happy that I’ll stay.

“Yeah good”, he says and walks out, still smiling

The door clicks close and I am alone with the blank canvas.

The image was clear in my head, but now that I am trying to get it out of me on the canvas it seems to fade away. When I close my eyes it comes back, but as soon as I try to define the details, the whole image becomes evanescent.

The whiteness of the canvas is unnerving. I look at my watch, it’s 5.33. I close my eyes, I reopen them and it’s 5.35. I do this over and over again.

It’s 6 and the light in the room has gradually changed. The canvas is still blank and I start to panic.

I close my eyes once more and when I open them I stop caring. The painting doesn’t have to be my dream. It can be anything. I just have to get the colour on there, the image that will form doesn’t matter.

Dots of light blue. Dots of yellow. Other dots of blue, darker. The colours add up, and it doesn’t seem like I am controlling them. My hand moves from the palette to the canvas, it dips in the water, in the colour, in the rag to cleanse itself and get ready for the next tint. It simply happens. I am starting to see a lizard, its blue and yellow and white and there’s a bit of brown too in there. It’s a dotty lizard. Its skin is a mosaic. The dots add up, and now...

...now I recognize it. Yes, I actually recognize it! It’s shiny and its gloss reflects the brightness of the day. Light blue. My hand fills the space around the lizard with it. That’s the sky, I remember this joyful sky.

I am peaceful watching the lizard.

My eyes close again.

I see a face. Someone places a hand on me, it is a warm protecting hand that presses against my head. And there’s a face. That face is like mine, and when it cries I cry.

When I open my eyes I see the lizard through my tears as if it were streaked, somehow deformed.

The brush dips into the colours, still wet on the canvas, and drags them into long stripes. The sky is blurred too now.

“No! No! Help, help!”. This is what the voice yells as I am being pulled away from the protecting hand.

The face like mine disappears.

I open my eyes and I am terrified, I gasp for air, I can't breathe. I run to the bathroom and vomit, it is so painful to cry and vomit, I feel like I will suffocate and die.

A protecting hand starts to caress my head.

"Iris, what happened to you?", I hear Joshua say as he bends beside me

"You're back", I whisper and realize that I can breathe after all.

"Come", he says, pulling me up and washing my face in the sink

I rinse off my mouth

"Joshua...I am sorry", I say when I manage to speak

"What happened?"

I don't know what happened.

"I'm happy you're back", I reply instead

"Have you been sick for long?", he asks

"I don't know..."

"Did you sleep at all? Let me bring you on the couch", Joshua says, slipping an arm around me

But as we head to the living room Joshua catches a sight of the canvas lying on the wall and stops short. He remains silent and his face tells me that he is stunned by what he is seeing

"WOW!", he exclaims

"The dream is real...", I tell Joshua

He looks at me and nods

"Do you know what you just painted?", he asks me

"My dream"

"That lizard...I think it really exists. I've seen something in a picture that somehow reminds me of it", Joshua says

"Which picture?"

"A picture of some place...it was on a website"

"What was the place?"

Joshua bugs his eyes, trying to fetch the memory.

"I don't remember", he says at last

"Oh come on! Yes you do!", I exclaim

"It was long ago..."

"But can't we find it again?", I insist

"We must try", Joshua says

"What time is it?", I ask

"6 am", he says, taking my arm and reading the time from my watch

"I have to see the dream shrink at 8, you know?"

"Well, let's have a shower and some breakfast since you have some time", Joshua tells me

I love how easy life is with him.

We slip under the shower together and I wish I never had to see Stephanie or step out of this place again.

Chapter 6

I'm getting out of the streetcar and heading to see Stephanie for our session. The shower with Joshua had cleansed the nausea and the anguish off me for a while, but now all of a sudden the lack of sleep and the turmoil of the last emotions weights on me.

When I step in Stephanie's office I feel tired beyond exhaustion and wish I were elsewhere. I simply don't want to talk.

The feeling must be stamped on my face, because Stephanie looks at me for a moment before asking me if I am all right.

"I suppose I am", I say

"So do you feel ready for today's session?", she asks me and I say sure, we can do it.

She seems to buy my answer, but once we reach the room where the session should take place she becomes inquisitive again.

"Are you sure you're fine? We can postpone the meeting if you want", she insists

"I've painted for the whole night and things have somehow come back to my mind", I tell her and stop, not sure about how much I want to give away

"What did you paint?", she asks

I delay the answer for a moment

"A lizard", I say at last

"What's the lizard to you?", she asks

"The lizard is about something that happened when I was a kid", I say

Stephanie waits for me to continue. It is too late to stop, I should have kept my mouth shut in the first place if I didn't want her to know. So I tell her about whichever shreds of my past I could retrieve during tonight's excursion into lost memories.

"Did you see who dragged you away?", Stephanie asks after I finish the story

"No...all I know is that somebody was taking the face away from me", I tell her

"Do you have any other memories?", she asks

"No, not really...do you think we can just start the session? I'm tired, you know, so it won't be hard to sleep and dream for you to do whatever you need to do", I say with unintended aggressiveness in my tone

"Ok...so what we're going to do now is have you lie and sleep. We can give you some sedatives to help. We're going to hook up electrodes on you to get some indication of how strong your emotions are while you sleep. We will link whatever we can record to what you remember. You need to tell me what you see during the dream, it matters that you do not omit details because that will help us understand what was going on. During each session we will try to *continue* the episode you remembered the previous time, to add up another bit to it till the whole puzzle is complete", Stephanie explains, repeating what she had already told me the day before

The room is spinning and my head hurts. Perhaps it's the fact that I am tired, but I am irritated at this place, at Stephanie, at her pretense of understanding who I am and of the freedom she is taking of nosing into my life. I am allowing her to, but that's no matter.

What can she know? Even I don't know.

But she's intuitive, I give her that.

"Oh...I forgot to ask", Stephanie says suddenly, "Do you want to remember? And do you trust me to go through the process with you?"

"What do you mean?", I say

"I have the impression that you want to keep some details to yourself, and that's understandable. These sessions make sense only if you are willing to open up and tell me what you know, otherwise it will be very hard to progress", she tells me.

I don't really know how much I want Stephanie to be with me on this, and I shrug.

"Can we move on? At least give this a try?", I decide at last

"You're the main actor in this. We can move on if you want to"

I lay on the bed and I feel the sleep dribble on me a drop at a time.

Blackness.

There is somebody behind me, he is dragging the face similar to mine away from mine, I know it without seeing him. I know it's a man.

There's some noise, I hear the movements rather than seeing them, and there are hurried voices. Somebody tells me to be quiet, that everything will be ok. The voice is odd, the words are pronounced in a way that is foreign to me, but still I understand their meaning. I feel the person does not care about me, and yet it keeps telling me that I will be fine, and to be quiet. I sense that if I cry something will happen, I perceive that the man is scared. Then suddenly I hear cries, they are familiar cries and I understand that it's the face that has been taken away from me that it is crying. I know the face is somewhere close although I cannot see it, I can just hear the cries and the voice telling it to be quiet. I can hear the noise of the street and the noise of the car's engine, and then there's blackness again.

And there light's again.

I am back in Stephanie's room.

I figure there are tears rolling down my eyes, my face is moist and I'm sweaty.

I'm incredibly sad.

Stephanie is right, do I want to remember?

It seems like memories are not helping me at all, maybe I should stop. All of a sudden the void that was with in me seems to be elated indefinitely. Now that this window on the past has opened and I can't say who I am, I don't know what to do with myself anymore. Not that I really did before, and now it's too late to turn back anyways.

"Are you ok?", Stephanie asks me.

I don't reply. I do not want Stephanie to know about my pain, about my emptiness. She feels me, and gives me a moment of quiet.

"If you want we can stop here", she tells me

"No I want to go on...", I say

"When you were dreaming I recorded the signals. They were intense, very intense. You cried and at a point you were screaming", Stephanie told me

“In the car...it wasn’t me screaming...”, I say and all of a sudden the realization dawns on me

“It was my sister...my mother was with us, outside, somewhere, and there was that lizard...and we must have been kidnapped. But why?”, I say, talking to myself

“My mom...my real mom...they took us away from her...mama...”, I whisper

The wonder at the absurd idea that my mother can perceive me somehow, somewhere, wherever she is. She must be somewhere...

And I want my sister back.

I don’t know how long I have been abstracted in my memories, and only now I realize that Stephanie is there, listening to me.

She keeps quiet, she doesn't say a word and just wants to let me speak but I stop, because this is really all I can recollect, because I am exhausted.

I stay on my bed for a moment longer, not really sure about what I want to say or do next. But then I decide, suddenly, that I *need* my DNA results now. I will go and ask if they can rush the analyses. I will pay anything, anything. I’ll beg, cry. Anything. If my sister is there, if my mother is there and they have thought of playing the same card, then there is no time to lose.

“I have to go, right away”, I say

A question mark appears on Stephanie’s face, but she doesn’t ask.

“I went to a place to have my DNA tested because I suspected that my mother, or well, the person who calls herself my mother, wasn't my mother...”, I start, the disarrayed wording mirroring my state of mind

“And so you’re trying to find you real mother”, Stephanie says, concluding my sentence

“I don’t know what I’ll find...knowledge could be worse than ignorance, but I can’t stop just now”

Stephanie nods.

“Once you start telling the truth, there is no ending¹...I read this somewhere, I can’t remember anymore”, Stephanie tells me, pensively

“Next time we should have *you* take a nap”, I say, and I giggle for the first time I have stepped in here

Stephanie laughs too, but then her laughter dims into a smile and I notice a shade of sadness in her.

“Sorry...”, I say

¹ The Chymical Wedding, Lindsay Clarke

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