

## Rachel Bower

### Potted Plants

2020 Short Story Competition

I am standing up on the train, swinging my baby Roksana from side to side, a little madly, like a pendulum, trying to hush her. She is facing the passengers, wailing whenever I pause.

"You must be looking forward to getting home," says a well-meaning woman.

She is smart in her red felt coat with shiny toggles, but the toddler on her lap is squirming to get down.

"Getting to our house, yes," I smile, "but Barnsley's not home."

The woman sits, looking up, waiting for me to say more. Her toddler is now staggering around our end of the carriage like a drunk.

"Sixteen years we have been there, but people are not friendly, it is not home for us."

The dead white rat on the doorstep had staring ruby pink eyes. I lifted the pushchair over it first, Roksana strapped in safely, then reached back over for my rucksack. I couldn't kick it to the side: the feeling was unbearable for my toes.

"I can't sit down with her now," I tell the woman a bit too loudly, over the rattle of the carriage. My right arm burns with the weight of the baby. "She slept most of the way on my chest on the first train – people smiled at us – said we were sweet. I couldn't stand up though, not even for the toilet, because I was so scared of waking her."

The woman laughs, in recognition. The blowers are hot on our feet.

"But this is our third train of the day, and the baby has had enough."

We're on our way back from Berwick-upon-Tweed. My Mama and new niece are happy up there, in the cramped flat with steamy windows. It's my sister's first baby. There's no sea view but if you open the door onto the balcony you can smell seaweed. Mama met a clean-shaven man a couple of years ago who made her laugh. She said that was enough for her, at her age. She left Barnsley with him for a new life, and my sister followed three months later. They'd love to have me up there with them. The balconies of the flats have been revamped in sunshine yellow, and Mama has lined the edge of hers with potted plants.

The woman in the red coat is still nodding, but she looks flustered. She has caught her toddler again, and he is thrashing on her lap like a fish. I bend down to pull a flashing, musical bear out from under Roksana's pushchair. She reaches for it gratefully.

"How old is he?" I ask, passing the teddy to her.

"Eighteen months. And into everything. Thank you."

I nod. The conversation is easy, in the way that small children allow: how many months, teeth, steps; are they sleeping, eating, walking. It can be boring – painful. Sometimes I can't stand it: want to walk away from it all. But I should hold onto this. A connection. Mama warned me about being naive though.

I thought of that man in Barnsley last summer, in the corner-shop, behind me in the queue. He seemed nice: clean lemon polo-shirt with carnation pink stripes, a shining watch, ruddy faced. But after he heard me thanking the newsagent for my change, he started blustering on: how the country was going to the dogs; how we just feel let down. Undercutting British workers. No offence, but we just can't carry on like this. I nodded politely, struggling to manoeuvre the big wheels of the pushchair around him out of the tiny shop, before I could bump it down the step. The woman might be different.

"Where are you getting off?" I ask her.

"Sheffield," she replies, with a small smile. "We've only been out for the day, to the Hepworth Gallery."

She looks lonely. It's only a two-carriage train, but all the passengers from our side have melted into the other carriage - away from our noisy kids.

"Would you move up to Berwick?" she asks next. She seems very interested.

I tell her no, without hesitation. "I need to make my own life now. For my daughter." The small gold hoops in my ears shiver.

Send them back! Sprayed on the Polska Biblioteka, three weeks before our trip. Out! Out! Out! Oh yes, everyone's happy enough to eat at Passion Food – with its exposed bricks and timber – all those people rushing to give their Polish food a 5-star rating on Trip Advisor. But it's different when it comes to sharing a street, a school, a block of flats.

"I want to start a life with my baby now." My throat constricts, painfully. "Somewhere she can be happy."

I look at the woman's straightened hair, her flushed cheeks, her bag spilling organic baby snacks.

She nods, gazing down at the electric teddy, and gently pushes a flashing green button. We don't talk for a few minutes, concentrating our children, swayed by the train.

"What did you do before you had her?"

The question comes as a surprise.

"I graduated when I was pregnant," I answer, proudly, "as a teacher of music. I'm no musician really, but I love it. I used to play violin in a band."

Two months ago, someone posted clear, plastic-coated cards with sharp corners through all the doors on my street. Leave the EU, No more Polish Vermin! Someone had taken the trouble to laminate them. I know that one of my neighbours took his to the police, hoping for fingerprints on the film. I put ours straight in the black bin, and slotted the chain into place on the door.

"I want to find a job teaching music," I say. "In a school or university. That would be my dream."

The woman looks at me, thoughtful. I wonder why she's listening so carefully.

"I'm not sure where we'll go though – it's just me and her. Poland's not home – I haven't lived there since I was seven. I'm a mother now though – I have to work it out for her."

The rat had sharp teeth, clamped and bared. Its tail stuck out, straight as a baton. There was a bit of blood in its ear, bright and recent. I pray it will be gone when we get back.

Corrugated roofs and coiled barbed wire flash past the window. Soiled clouds and cropped fields like stubbly scalps. The rain is loud on the glass. Her toddler is cute really, with his yellow curly hair. I don't like usually like other people's children, as a rule, although you have to pretend to. The woman is staring at me a bit oddly, unsettled. She wants better; she is thinking about her own paid-up maternity leave; the academic job she hates; her leafy street. She is probably nice. With her freedom of invisibility. The train clatters on, the tannoy occasionally blaring: See it, Say it, Sorted.

"We're nearly there now baby," I murmur to Roksana in English, strapping her down into the buggy, wailing. She arches, resists.

The other woman stands up, returns the musical teddy and offers to help me off, as we slow into Barnsley station. When the doors concertina open, I back out and she picks up the foot of the pushchair with one hand, clamping her toddler with the other.

"Thank you," I smile, going backwards down the steps. "Powodzenia!"

The doors fold shut. We face each other, through the glass, souls mirrored. She is crying now, on the train, red coat hanging open. Her mouth is distorted. As the train pulls out, I pull up my hood, the fake fur trim already soggy on my cheeks, then turn away to wrestle with the impossible rain cover of the pushchair.