

# Five Breaths Or Less

by A.J. Grace-Smith

She flew through the air, linen skirt billowing around her. Below, her buckled bicycle was taking a different route. Less aerodynamic than she, its trajectory was brief, crashing into the ditch. Elspeth kept on flying. Time slowed, and expanded.

Glossy flash of a blackbird's wing, the perfect orb of his eye tracking her, orange beak gaped in indignant chinked warning. Elspeth saw the beech tree that would break her fall.

It was the Royal Mail van that had done it; unexpected flash of red speeding across her line of sight as she emerged from the narrow track lost among the hedges and into the wider country lane. Elspeth had panicked, lost her head, lost control.

She lay now in a graceless heap, a crumpled rag doll. The wind had been knocked out of her, and she hung for an age on the edge of a breath, lungs frantic. Time slowed, and expanded.

Red. Anyone would think, given Elspeth's pale skin, dark hair and eyes, that red would be a colour to be favoured. A glamorous slick of lipstick, a dress, a coat. She remembered wearing a red coat as a small child. They'd lived in London then. But Elspeth had not returned to London in many years, not since her mother uprooted the family to the Cotswolds, contracting their world to a network of winding lanes, no television, trying to keep warm in a house with a temperamental stove, and a chimney that smoked.

Dilated on the edge of breath, Elspeth became vaguely aware of three things. There was someone thrashing about in the hedge nearby. They seemed to be looking for something. She wondered if they would find it. She was aware that she could no longer feel her body, but she could not feel any pain either. A flutter of movement caught her near vision: a little brown bird foraging through the litter of leaves and beech mast. She lay so still, it did not trouble itself about her. Its bright black bead of an eye examined her incuriously. And now at last a slender breath found a way in, and out, in, and out, of her lungs.

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The bird hopped directly into her blurred line of sight, the soft breast feathers glowing red in the thin streams of sunlight dappling the beech canopy. And now the pain descended, and the brutal thump of dizziness sent the world spinning away. Elspeth closed her eyes. Blood colours danced against her eyelids. Another breath, and another, an eternity between breathing and not breathing. She opened her eyes again, mildly pleased that she could. The robin had gone, and the sound of thrashing was drawing nearer.

There had been a day, a difficult day, that Elspeth sometimes remembered. Only sometimes. Never voluntarily. A day of errands. A hurried day, not enough time to do all that needed to be done. Rushing here, rushing there, and always in her father's wake, holding her mother's hand, trying to keep up. A bewildering day, ending in tears cold on her mother's cheeks, and blank-faced strangers asking questions that couldn't be answered. They might have been speaking a different language; Elspeth didn't understand them. Her mother did not seem to hear them. Her father ...

Gone. Something was gone. She felt sick. A trickle of bile, and blood, forced itself from her throat, spilling in a slimed ribbon down her chin. It tickled, and she wanted to spit the taste away, but could not shape her lips to it. Her tongue was only a weight in her mouth. In, and out. In and; the outward breath limped away. Time, and her lungs, remained dilated.

Elspeth saw the bus that had crushed her father. It was red. Her heart faltered.

Time dilated.

Elspeth saw the van ahead of her. She panicked. It was red.

Time stopped.

He found her beneath the beech tree as the ambulance pulled up beside his van. Her eyes were fixed, the pupils unequally dilated. When he pinched the pad of flesh below her thumb, the colour did not return. Her long hair was caught about her throat, and caught against the striated bark, tangled in the ivy. Her body... he tried not to see the unnatural angles of her. The shock of her impact on his

van hit him then. One of the paramedics led him to the ambulance to wait for the police. He did not see them move the girl.

