

The dentist in five days, you sigh, flicking through your calendar. I'll remind you to stop taking your medication in time, I promise; a simple dentist's appointment could be lethal for you now.

Are you all right on your own? you ask through the closed bathroom door. Like you don't want to see the effects. Like I need more privacy, less of you. All I can remember, though, is being shaved. Not us saying goodbye to each other, not my ribs being prised apart, not the hours that followed.

I wake with a start; you say nothing, everything's dark but normal, your breathing, your heart (no, not all yours any more) beneath my fingertips, which I trust more than the machine on the bedside table.

What are you doing? you ask, and I drop the papers. You wanted to have everything sorted. So I don't have to feel guilty – when to switch off the machines, Mozart, KV622 - II adagio, cremation. You felt claustrophobic even during the CT scans. Nothing, I say with a smile. How about some carrot salad? You're not allowed green vegetables any more.

Here you are, on the sofa, I say. I don't say the "again" out loud. I don't know, is it my nightmares or is it my altered heartbeat? Good morning, you yawn, did you sleep OK?

Let's take our bikes, is your cheerful suggestion, but I think of all the risks. I'll drive you, I insist, grabbing the car keys. Even one little injury and I'll lose you, again. I'm not made of glass, you joke, but I know it's worse than that.

I don't say anything when I catch you looking at me with that over-cautious bidding your time reserved for people you don't know. I wish I could remember. I'd sorted everything out for you, for an emergency. So you could keep your memory of me as I used to be; I didn't expect anything to go wrong in between.

I can't manage any more, you say – and I can't breathe any more. Yes, our life has changed, but you promised me you'd only insist on it if there was no other way. My heart stumbles; if I could have divided it up I'd have given you part of it. It's only after moments too long that I realize you meant your food.

I'm sorry, I whisper at night while you're sleeping, because I've stayed awake. I can't remember. Not the fear before it, not the time that took you away from me, although it was the other way around. You breathe deeply in your sleep, your jaws clenched, your tongue pressed against the roof of your mouth, like you fear someone might intubate you against your will.

I was a monster for you, a sham, only here to torment you. You wanted to get up and go home, just when all your ribs had been cut through. "Hell," you called it. "Brief reactive psychosis" was the doctor's explanation, and he said it normally only affected older patients, people who remembered the war. As though the self had to pass through the bad memories before it took possession of the body again.

That was the moment when I knew you wouldn't manage it, and I was right.

I screamed and shouted, you told me only once, and cursed. They had to secure my arms when I pulled out the catheter in my neck and the blood wouldn't stop bubbling out. I didn't recognize you. Why didn't I?

The sight of me was poison. Go away, go away, you yelled at me, and all the while I thought I had you back. They had to sedate you, your eyes turned flickering inwards, your skin frozen to wax, your cheeks invisible beneath the bones, arms and legs swollen, not you at all. For heaven's sake, go, the nurses hissed and they called the doctor, and as they did so they missed the stitches in your heart bursting open and your heart drowning in your blood.

Translation by Katy Derbyshire