

Chiara Valerio

## Seven fourteen twenty-eight

*There's a certainty you are grasping now*

*And it's not the Angel*

*It's not a miracle*

*It's not the hand of the Lord*

*It's you*

'Heart of Darkness', BAUSTELLE

I have nothing in hand. If I was an illusionist they would be five surprising words, more, they would be a curtain, all eyes would be on me, bright and ready to goggle at the appearance of a rabbit or a bunch of flowers, or a dove, maybe. I'd rather the flowers. Red yellow and white, large and callous, no roses, no green. Roses wilt and the green goes brown. There are never any roses in illusionists' bunches, not even in the fairground magicians'. Because they wilt. People in love give roses because love wilts. They know, they lie and eternally give roses. I'd never want to receive a flower like that. One that's a warning. And then whisper what a wonderful smell what a wonderful smell and smile, get a little excited forgetting that roses wither and love and new shoes and other things and that there are plastic and fabric flowers that are no answer anyway. Especially if you are allergic to dust. I say I have nothing in hand and I look at my dry palms because in this nothing that I'm clutching I can't even keep a secret. Every time I've covered my mouth with my hand I haven't been able to keep quiet. Every time I played Guess where the

sweet is as a child, right or left, left or right, here or here, I always lost the sugar. Losing is bitter. I have nothing in hand and I can't keep a secret. Last month, on a Wednesday, I met a man and we ended up in bed after a beer and a rambling chat. I paid the first, he the second which was the same anyway. A light double-malt in a glass that looked like and perhaps was a small goldfish bowl. Goldfish often seem drunk, they swim round until they're dizzy and sometimes they jump out and end up on the floor. Then someone comes rushing along and doesn't notice. The fish on the floor. And they slip and fall and die. Sometimes someone hits their head. They don't notice the absence of the red in the opaque transparency of water and fish food. On the floor of the house trodden a thousand times. And the neighbours whisper They must have been drunk. Instead it was the fish, but it can't tell anyone, mum's the word, swallow your tongue. Bowls know something about objectionable drunkenness and secrets should only be told to the dead, who have nothing in hand though. Maybe a coin. Or under the tongue? We ended up in bed together, and it had never happened to me, a beer and a man between the sheets, all in the same evening. On a Wednesday at my house and at ten to eleven all done because my mother called to say Goodnight darling, and I You too mum and he Does your mother always call you at this time and my mother Who's that there with you? And I No one mum it's the television. He smiled buttoning himself up slowly, as you would imagine a reformed stripper to do, fired by kindness and pity as if for a thirty-year-old woman it was humiliating to confess to her mother that she kept the television on with a convincingly fifties film playing. How many men ask Does your mother always call you at this time. What time? All time is for mothers. Being a mother is like having all time. Then he left and I didn't even see

him to the door in case he thought of a reply. Or maybe it's women who think that men are interested in replies, that they are more sexual beings than socialites. The reprises of safe sex with no outcome. If it's safe there is no outcome. If they wrote no outcome in the advertising or on the packet no one would ever buy contraceptives of any sort again. No outcome is so fatal. No outcome is fatal. I put things in order, tidied up, listed the objects caressing them one by one with my eyes and turned the light off to rest. And I slept. The past month I've been sleeping like never before. I have nothing in hand I can't keep a secret and usually I can't sleep. We saw each other again at the bar I offered him a beer he left saying Have a good evening in front of the TV. I don't know men well but I'm amazed they behave like little damsels in a fit of pique. Or maybe it's him and why I invited him home, maybe I love piqued damsels, of any sex. I love piqued damsels, covered in lace even when the lace is a tidy moustache and inlaid sideburns and the springs of tanga briefs and two earrings and freshly cut hair. That smells of fields and scythe. I switched off the light. Mothers even have sleep time. They watch over children's sleep, check they sleep peacefully and dream of honey and enchanted forests and don't get their head wet if it rains and don't fall into ravines and don't scratch their sores, which is worse. A good mother wouldn't buy a goldfish for a living room with a marble floor. A good mother would never go and live with an infant in a house with a marble floor. A hard floor for a velvety head and a malleable creature. I never thought I'd have children. Not that I'm against it, but I didn't think it would happen like this, suddenly and without thinking, one Wednesday evening with a stranger disobedient to any contact after a light double-malt beer. I must be pregnant because my periods are even more regular than Kant's walks

and the story about the bridges of Königsberg may be a legend but this isn't. I've had my period every twenty-eight days since the age of fourteen. Which if you think that fourteen is half twenty-eight you can't help feeling you are bearing a degree of precision that would make any German railway timetable or the British postal service pale by comparison. Any Holter monitor. And I'm seven days late which is half fourteen and a quarter of twenty-eight. I've stopped drinking beer and I've remembered I can crochet. I've bought an expensive cotton thread and devised a very complicated pair of bootees. I've been to the haberdasher's and I know it would have been much easier to make a little blanket or a doily. But I wanted the bootees. A pair of bootees for my child. If I can't be a mother at least I can crochet. Red bootees. I don't care if the way is mad or subversive and chaotic. Nor even if it's an obsession, it just needs to be mapped out. The red bootees trace the way of my baby, which announces itself with a seven day delay and painful breasts and kidneys and bloating like when you've drunk too much and trips to the bathroom. Pregnancy goes hand in hand with objectionable drunkenness and the inability to expell air. I'd like to go up to the piqued damsel with the clean shave and tell him we are expecting a baby, that his strawberry or watermelon red or rose pink contraceptives have presented us with a delay that is not that of a train or any old connection or of a waiter at table. A delay of pink flesh. But I don't know him and I don't know what to say to him. Having a baby with someone of a different sex is a fact that can happen. If I was a cook these fifteen words would be my great hors d'oeuvre, instead I imagine sitting on the sofa in front of my father and mother who know all about children. But they didn't come along. They got married young and all the rest, with the half-chicken at

the late-Seventies wedding and the two-tier mimosa cake and four bridesmaids and envelopes with money in them and a borrowed cot, she with a hat and bucket bag he with flared trousers just on his ankles and a man's bag and thirteen-inch glasses with gradually tinted lenses. I could ask mum what happened to my cot, where the lending round stopped. At what degree of kinship. And in a Shakespearean voice and bard's posture declaim, Speak mother, wherein is held my cot? Doth it perhaps hold infants within its bars of contention? Make an act of containment, mother, yours and the cot's and tell me where it is, confess now or it will be late and I shall already have bought it! My mother would laugh or I might smile and simply, one Sunday at table, because Sunday lunches are the crucible of all anxieties and expectations and unpleasant surprises masked as news. Mum dad I'm expecting a baby, isn't that great? Great with no other words, great for sure and a new cot because I remember my sleep-inducing, oil-painted one. Toxic-painted cream and chocolate. Instead still here in silence and a week late which is half of fourteen and a quarter of twenty-eight. It took me a night to make the bootees. They came out full of knots, I justify myself Mayan knots, to keep count of the baby's first steps with its little hands in mine, one step at a time and him trying to stand up, he presses his feet down because he can see farther standing up. As far as the goldfish bowl that, thinking he's too small to slip and to avoid the living room I have banished to the piece of furniture in the entrance hall. But my son knows that red means distraction, after all he's got red bootees, and he stretches his hands out to the knob and the knob is enough to rock the bowl and surrender the fish. Cause drunkenness with the large waves in the cubic decimetres of cloudy transparency. It's always the food that makes it murky. Only on the

surface at first, then gravity takes it everywhere and on down to the bottom. But it's necessary. The first steps, the fish on the floor struggling for breath my son who bends down to grasp it and shapes his tiny lips into a little oh of wonder and then a large Oh of hunger and awareness. My son bends down to eat the goldfish. My son is drowning with the fish wiggling his naked gums while I calmly keep watch on the cut-out switches on the bathroom and living room sockets because there are no sockets in the entrance. There are no sockets I scream as my son lies icecold on the marble. Seven days late here too, if I did it today, instead of waiting till he's born and chokes to death, if I'd done it last night instead of making the booties that won't stop him from dying anyway, I'd be a good mother. He's not even born yet and I'm already inadequate. If it was a girl she'd already be making accusations. Mothers have all the time in the world for crucifying themselves. If I was a fervent Catholic I could say that this is it, and this is how it has to be, because for one who had to see her own son crucified, millions have to crucify themselves in solidarity. To balance that one out in time and the blood shed or spat. That blood. Spitting blood means getting angry, irritated or tired out, forcing yourself to make things better. Mothers spit blood. And now I too at night with the table lamp on thinking about the fact I'm seven days late and I don't even know Flanders' sideburns' name. I'd like Alfredo, or Alberto or Alessandro or Andrea, a name with an A. I don't know why, but I'd like it, and seeing I'll never go and ask him and he'll never come and tell me I can imagine what I want and start practising with names. I know my son will have me shedding blood tomorrow but today I haven't got my period. I haven't had my period for seven days. I look on web sites, do tests, buy women's magazines, in Italy it's impossible to get it wrong because neutral doesn't

exist and I've stopped raw meat. Alive or dead. I've nothing in hand I can't keep a secret and I don't eat raw meat. This is what I told my mother who called to wish me goodnight and I answered I'm pregnant and she Have you done the test? My mother didn't ask me whose it is and why I'm at home if I haven't got a temperature. Nor whether I'd eaten. She asked me Have you done the test? I'll have to remember always to ask my son questions he finds awkward. You're always inappropriate with a good mother. No mum, I haven't done the test, So how do you know, Mum I'm seven days' late, Well if that were the case I would have been pregnant at least thirty times in my life, Goodnight mum, do the test. It's the dead of night and I have to find a chemist that's open, and hope it's not just a shop for first aid medicines and methadone, that on a forgotten shelf there's a pregnancy test. It's like something in a movie, except that from the fifties film I've moved into a Sundance or TriBeCa-type scene, or, already archives, the bride in a yellow tracksuit who before the fateful line, the reacting strip of life, is a merciless killer and then just fear, awful fear with the oriental hit-woman pointing a muzzle between her eyes. I hate it when my mother asks me if I've done my homework. Same thing. She asks me before I run into the garden to steal the neighbour's duck or the local kids' volleyball net, I hate my mother asking me if I've done the test before celebrating and asking who the father is and how I did it and if not how at least when. It's the dead of night, I have nothing in hand I can't keep a secret and I haven't done the pregnancy test, maybe if I'd waited another three weeks, if I and my period had waited four weeks to present ourselves in person and absence to my mother she wouldn't have been able to oppose us Have you done the test, instead now she's right. It's the dead of night and my mother's right.

I take the car and special care, because a woman in my condition cannot but expect an attendant at her side. But I haven't got one. I have nothing in hand I can't keep a secret and I haven't got an attendant at my side. The green cross on the chemist's sign goes on and off on and off and it hypnotises me. I want to lick it like a mint ice lolly on a summer day or a pistachio cone-shaped ice cream streaked with chocolate, always. I go in. I ring to be let in and find myself in front of bullet-proof glass and beyond the glass a young man who looks a lot like inlaid sideburns says I'm Giacomo how can I help you. Tell me I'm pregnant Giacomo, look at me and tell me I'm expecting a baby. But I keep quiet and I worry, my teeth chatter, I've got bags under my eyes and a pale face which if you don't live in a film with Indians says nothing about your identity but a lot about your lifestyle, it says excessive, maybe Giacomo thinks I take drugs, that I want to break my head on the bullet-proof glass and ruin his sleep forever. Made me unjust against myself how? On the bullet-proof glass, very unjust. I am the one. I'm Giacomo how can I help you, I'd like a pregnancy test. Giacomo smiles as if he was the father, I breathe heavily because I'm seven days' late which is the improbable half of fourteen years and the equally improbable fourth part of twenty-eight days. Giacomo says That's eleven euro. And he's happy because the test is life, it's like vitamins. A hope-loaded over-the-counter product. It occurs to me that eleven isn't an even number. How much a child costs. Stingy and tyrannical mother. And it isn't born. A child costs more than a kilo of mincemeat and it only weighs a clot. More than fresh fruit even unripe as it is. I say nothing to Giacomo, I never say anything to anyone so it's irrelevant that I can't keep secrets and clutch the car keys in the fingers of my right hand and in the left a pregnancy test. A light and reliably coloured parallelepiped.

I want to do the test in the car but I can't, I ought to wait to get back to the bathroom at home. Which is a long way away. I'm curious, I've got pregnancy anxiety which will stop me carrying on my life, even if I'd like something to stop it, because I've nothing in hand. My mobile rings, my mother will be wanting to know, wise at last, who I made this child with, but I don't answer because I've got to find a toilet. I've nothing in hand except the steering wheel, I can't keep a secret apart from the evidence that I took a man to bed and that I don't know this area. But there's electricity and the neon lights are better than road signs. I jam on the brakes, my son will dig his heels in until he has his very own car. With the only drawback that this sign too goes off and on off and on but the sense is intermittent and I feel stupid understanding in bursts. I go into the bar whose name I couldn't read. I ring to get in, behind the counter is a woman with a cone-shaped glass. Not a martini glass, narrower, inside is a milky liquid which may be coconut maybe cow's milk, maybe something else, I ask for a toilet, she winks at me looks at my hands and points to the door at the back. With her chin. How stupid of me the toilet is at the back. I open the box, read the instructions carry them out and wait. The toilet is spick and span and tiled, I smile at myself in the lit mirror. I look as if I'm under water. This is the light. I look at myself in the mirror and I swim. All that's missing is a bowl with a goldfish. If I was at home I could just go in to the entrance to find one. And empty it. If I was at home the fish would be gasping for air on the floor but I'd keep still. I've nothing in hand I can't keep a secret I'm not expecting a baby and there's no goldfish here. Late is late is late is late.