

Excerpt from *Language of Origin*

(Full story available in *Comforter*, to be released 2020)

Because her mother, Mila, was a phlebotomist, Ruth knew at a very young age that her blood type was O negative, which was rare, and that she could give it to anyone. When a clumsy boy scraped his knee on the playground, or when the teacher got a paper cut and firmly pressed a bandaid to her finger, a red bloom flowering beneath the cloth, Ruth would think about her own blood pouring into their bodies to accommodate the lost volume.

Ruth was a shy child, owing in part to a slight speech impediment that gave her trouble with the letter R. This was corrected through a series of rigorous therapy sessions, which fixed the problem but left her with some lingering hangups about words. She was also prone to uncontrollable fantasies involving decapitation. She had a habit of snapping the heads off of all her Barbie dolls and lining them up on the windowsill, then hiding the plastic bodies around her bedroom. Mila would have to go on a hunt so she could put all of the dolls back together.

Perhaps unknowingly exacerbating these fantasies, Mila would often tell Ruth that she had her head *on a cloud*. Having moved to the States from a remote village in the eastern Swiss Alps, Mila was often approximating idioms by confusing those heavy little prepositions. In a sympathy card once, rather than writing *my heart goes out to you*, she wrote *my heart goes out with you*. Ruth looked over her mother's shoulder as she spelled this in shaky ballpoint letters, opened her mouth to correct her, and then paused. Two hearts leaving a house together seemed sympathetic enough. Plus, it was written in pen.

While her mother spent her days collecting the contents of veins, Ruth's father worked as the quality control manager at a licorice factory. Life handed her things like this. Here is a boring truth about money being made. Here is a joke about blood sugar.

Ruth took her semantic hangups to an ivy league school in a city known for its violent crime, where she got a Bachelor's degree in English Literature. After graduating, she got a job doing something administrative at a nonprofit organization that provided free writing programs to underprivileged girls. She rented an apartment in a small coastal city known for its seafood. She owned silk blouses and sensible shoes, was a member of the Y, subscribed to a wellness magazine, and received a travel mug in the mail for the monthly donation she made to a local radio station. She considered adopting a rescue dog. On some weekends, she would visit her parents, who were now a few hours away by train.

She went on dates with men and women, one of whom told her that she had "an east coast face, but a midwestern body," and one of whom ate an entire roast beef sandwich in four enormous bites. She tried her best. She was often overwhelmed by all the clarifications she had to make.

"No, not eroticism," she once corrected a marketing manager from Pittsburgh. "A *rhoticism*. My Rs sounded like Ws. As in, my name is Wooth."

“Not romance,” she said to a paralegal from Michigan as she explained her mother’s native tongue. “Romansh. It’s a rare language spoken in southeastern Switzerland.”

“Sounds made up,” the paralegal said. “Is it like French?”

“Not really,” Ruth said, wondering, why does a thing always have to be *like* something else?

In bed, Ruth liked some light choking. But she was shy about admitting this, so she would just wear turtlenecks to dinner, and occasionally reach up to pull the fabric a bit tighter around her neck. She would ask her dates what their blood type was, and discovered that this knowledge about oneself was specific to her, the phlebotomist’s daughter. Most of them didn’t know. Then she would brag about how O negative blood was rare, and how only eight percent of the population had it.

Not only was her blood special, it was hard to extrude. Mila was the only one who could draw it on the first try. Nurses stabbed and prodded her, first trying both elbow creases, then the tops of her hands. “Come on,” they would whisper, digging the needle around while Ruth stared at a jar of cotton balls. She winced and bruised and fainted. But Mila could smack her daughter’s arm into a tourniquet, command her to make a fist, and fill a few vials without saying anything at all.