

Love at First Sight

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The doctor climbed the five flights to my flat, bitter with lumbago and the bloody law that demanded he climb these stairs at all. He had been summoned, despite my protestations, by the midwives. 'Sorry,' they said. 'It's an NHS rule.' They were gone now, and we were three, alone; cocooned with cushions and quilts and soft shawls. We were strange and warm and new. We were waiting for the bad fairy to appear. From the bedroom, we could hear his leather trench-coat slap-slapping against his boots as he marched nearer. Charlie was snuggled, fists closed around the curls of new lambskin, the first sleep out of the womb, perfect. The doctor pushed past my baby's father, to point a long finger at me. 'You, you're irresponsible,' he said, and I thought again how much he resembled the child-catcher in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

'You wouldn't be smiling like that if something had gone wrong,' he said. Then he snatched up my sleeping baby and sneezed in his face.

'Out,' said my boyfriend. 'Get out!'

Nine months earlier, this same doctor had the strangest reaction when I informed him that I was pregnant. He said: 'And what do you expect me to do about that?' When I replied that I just thought he should know, he looked so downcast that I found myself mumbling apologetically

about world overpopulation, Chinese girls, Romanian orphans, grain-shortages, children in care.

'I see,' he said, fixing me with a disappointed eye, while I rubbed my tummy through my jeans. 'But you want to *keep* the baby?'

I stuck to the ante-natal appointments that Dr Child-snatcher arranged at the teaching hospital closest to my office – it worked out cheaper that way. But I was lying through my teeth each time I confirmed that I would indeed be having my baby there, in one of the terrifying steel beds on wheels that they showed me. These hospital beds were the stuff of my nightmares, the curtains that pulled right around, clattering like a brisk telling-off. And the all-too-obvious metaphor of the hospital corridor made me shiver too. At the end there's terror and white light, bright enough to penetrate your eyelids.

In the early stages of pregnancy, I spent my lunch-hours – and then some – waiting, waiting, at the hospital, hugging myself with the thrill of deception. I sat smirking and secretive and others smiled back sometimes, their faces pale and puffy under sick neon tubes, and nothing much to look at but the gory video-loops of beached women, screaming and bloody, their babies' heads emerging from between their legs like leaching beetroot. Later, when the routine checks became weekly, I was spared the flickering fluorescence, the blood-curdling soundtrack, and instead was back with my doctor, bringing to his surgery a sample of early-morning urine. Each week when I presented him with the jar, warm from my pocket, Dr Child-catcher would look at me over his half-moons and say: 'And what can I do for you?'

As far as he was concerned, I would be going to the hospital for the birth; that was the rule then – first babies, and all that. But I was arrogant and my boyfriend had a friend who was a charismatic French obstetrician. He told me: 'You will have your *bébé* how your mother had you.'

My mother popped me into the world at home in Crouch End in a room with a bay window to the street. One of the first things she did after the birth was to stick her maroon knitted mittens on my feet because she thought they looked cold. When the midwife finally arrived, short-of-breath and dishevelled, my mother already had me in her arms. She told the flustered woman not to fuss because for her it was nothing: 'No worse than bad constipation.'

'Well, I never,' said this midwife, who was old and, so they tell me, almost blind. I imagine her peering close, possibly through glasses mended with plasters. 'And look what she's wearing on her feet! What were you expecting, a little monkey?'

My mother prided herself on providing a positive image of birth. She's the sort of woman that Gauguin might have painted. Strong and dark, she looks like a woman who would squat down in the field, have her baby, and continue on her way. 'And when I held you,' she said, 'the waves of love were more powerful than any pain.'

It will be love at first sight. It *will* be love at first sight. That's what they tell you. They tell you about deep eye-contact. It will be impossible to look away, they say.

My firstborn lay, bubbling with mucus, tummy-down on the bedroom carpet. The charming French obstetrician, having stayed on my sofa throughout two nights of 'pre-labour', had missed the baby's arrival by a few hours, his toothbrush packed away smartish into a natty little overnight case.

'You will have to go to the hospital,' he said, having informed us, most plausibly, that he would miss his flight to Italy if he stayed for even one more contraction. 'The hospital is not so bad,' he said.

But it was too late for all that: he had already told me how unsuitable hospitals were as places for birth, how *interventionist* every consultant, how full of germs for the new *bébé* it would all be. One look at my face must have convinced him that he ought to pull an alternative out of the hat.

'I know a girl,' he said, suddenly inspired as his check-in time grew closer. 'Her name is Katie,' and he gave me her phone number as he flew out of the door. He was probably already speaking at his conference in Milan as my baby drew his first breaths.

'I wonder if it's a girl or a boy?' said Katie, the more glamorous of the two midwives who, at remarkably short notice, had supported my weight, on chairs, one either side, while I crouched and pushed and shouted that I'd changed my mind; Katie and Martha now had scratches on their thighs to prove it.

'Let's see, shall we?' said Katie brightly.

I was lost in thinking about my boyfriend, about how loud I had just screamed as the baby's head was born. It felt searing, like a Chinese burn, only hotter. My boyfriend was in the next room, as agreed, but the walls were thin. Katie was prompting me to take my baby into my arms, to have a look, but I was too shocked; in fact, I had started to shake all over and I thought I might be about to cry.

'I wonder, is it a boy or a girl?' she tried prompting me again.

'Bit hard to tell, really,' replied Martha, looking down at the baby, still lying tummy to the floor, and giving me a nudge.

'Boy or girl, bit hard to tell,' Katie repeated. The bedroom door flew open. My boyfriend stood there, crackling with dread.

'My God, please, no!' he cried, staring at the snuffling baby at my feet. 'Please, not a hermaphrodite!'

I was trembling and laughing, but still all I could think was: I hope my boyfriend likes this baby.

This baby was a shocker: astonishingly long, with the muscular back of an athlete. I had been expecting a mouse-sized child, a bit floppier somehow. The size of my bulge had not prepared me for a whopper: he must have been tightly packed, like a Jack in the Box. Katie measured him twice. He stretched a full twenty-four inches away from me, from the purple backs of his heels to the cap of his head which had been squeezed into the shape of a parking cone.

'A boy,' breathed his father when, finally, I brought him into my arms. My boyfriend had two daughters already, now he had a son. Had I done well? Did he love our baby? It seemed too pathetic to ask, but I was consumed with needing to know.

'Will you look at that,' said my boyfriend, grinning, crying. 'His scrotum's bigger than mine!'

Guiltily, I held my baby closer. I hadn't imagined that he'd weigh anything, that he'd feel this solid. I was waiting for something to happen. 'He looks just like you,' someone said. 'He looks like you both.' He hadn't cried yet, but Katie said it didn't matter. I thought of Narcissus and his pond. I looked down and caught his eye. It was a bright black marble, unblinking and so penetrating that it was like staring at the sun and I had to look away.

It's a decade later. We're in an ambulance and I'm watching Charlie's eyes, praying; praying to a God that my atheist parents assured me did not exist. Charlie's pupils dilate as oxygen flows from the mask. I am assailed by a memory of my grandmother. She's pale as wax, she's laying her hand on her son's coffin. 'No one should have to outlive their child,' she says. Love at first sight is mere romance compared to this.

When they loaded him on to the stretcher, after the emergency doctor – the too-young, too-pretty, hopeless, emergency doctor – had wrung her hands, unable to tell me why he couldn't breathe, refusing to tell me that he would live, he stared at me with the same intensity as the day he was born.

The ambulance man smiles at me. We talk about Harry Potter because the new one's due out tomorrow. I think: Please God, don't let him die before he's read it. I say: 'You'll be fine now,' and it's hard not to look away because I don't want him to see the doubt in my eyes.

On the day he was born, the Berlin Wall was breached. There was a big black headline on the front of the *Evening Standard*: GREAT DAY FOR FREEDOM, CHARLIE COMES DOWN. I'm boasting, ecstatic. Had the Wall remained, I explain, he would have been Moby, because that was top of our name-list, not Charlie, so, if only for that, he should be thankful for the collapse of Communism.

Before I started gabbling, the registrar at the hospital had wanted to write his name as *Charles*. Charlie, with the kindly air of talking to an imbecile to which mothers of ten-year-old boys must become accustomed, tells me it's time to calm down. It's possible to laugh now that he's been nebulised and stabilised. In fact, my husband, David, and I are verging on hysteria. Everything's suddenly so funny – the fact that the ambulance wouldn't start, that the emergency doctor didn't recognise a case of (alarming rather than life-threatening) croup when she saw it. Charlie points to the Zed Bed set up next to his hospital bed. 'Could we get a double?' he asks. 'There's no way my mum and dad will both fit in there,' and we collapse, giggling, on to it.

As I lie in the dark, too rich in adrenalin for sleep (in any case they're still checking Charlie's blood pressure every

hour), I think how I have slept in hospital with both of my younger sons – each on their day of birth, but only once on purpose – but never before with Charlie. I can hear a baby crying, inconsolably it seems, further down the corridor.

Charlie, awake again, turns his head on the pillow and, whispering, asks me whether I really would have been so cruel as to name him Moby. ‘It was either that, or Fin,’ I say, biting my lips, trying to contain my mirth. I tell him how his father and I didn’t know that he would be a boy until he was born. When they did the scan and we tried to see, not wanting to see, but trying all the same, joking and high at the first sighting of our baby, the scan-operator snapped: ‘We’re not here to make pretty pictures for you, you know.’ I tell Charlie what his name would have been, had he been a girl. ‘Ugh,’ he says, and I remember my Cousin Melissa having much the same reaction. ‘Ugh, not *Delphi*,’ she said. ‘Sounds like a feminine deodorant.’

It was different with David, when our first baby together was scanned. Things had moved on, ante-natal care seemed kinder somehow. Maybe it was just because it was a different hospital and Dr Child-catcher was nothing but a bad memory. Maybe it was because Charlie’s father and I had something about us that shrieked ‘irresponsible’, like a bubble over our heads announcing that we’d break apart before our son’s first birthday. Maybe everyone could see this bubble – Dr Child-catcher, the scan-nurse in the hospital, the woman who looked at me with sad eyes in Mothercare – who knows?

As David and I marvelled at the sight of our twenty-week-old foetus waving at us through a snowstorm, Bill, the scan-man, asked if we would like to know the sex. ‘Yes,’ said David. ‘No,’ said I. We decided that Bill would write it on a piece of paper to allow time for democracy.

We could always destroy the paper if David could be persuaded not to cheat fate. Of course, the moment I hopped out of the car to buy milk on the way home, David peeked, and the moment I returned, I could tell that he had, the sneak.

'Sonny' – that's what Charlie wanted to call the little boy that everyone now knew we were having. I remember him, jaw set with grim determination, as he said: 'If you won't call the baby "Sonny" he'll have to be "Dead Salmon".' At five years old the apple of my eye was finding it hard to adjust to the idea of a little brother.

'Come in and meet baby Joe,' we said when Charlie arrived at the hospital, clutching a fruit cake which had *Congratulations* piped on the top in icing. Joe was a little sleeping Buddha at my side. I hoped that the tubes that stretched from my arms to the drip wouldn't give Charlie a fright. They looked like red liquorice bootlaces. I had to lie still and could only look at Joe from the corner of my eye.

'Hello, little baby Dead Salmon,' said Charlie.

Joe had been born the night before, at home, and with such ease that Charlie, asleep upstairs, had not been woken. Until the sudden medical emergency, my concerns were that my new baby was rather fat and pink. 'Do you think he's lovely?' I whispered. 'Are you pleased?' With echoes of Charlie's birth, I was waiting for my husband's rapture before I was free to focus on the love that I had once again failed to deliver at first sight. As it turned out, that was the least of my problems that night.

'You have a heart-shaped womb,' the consultant had told me when I came round from the anaesthetic on a hospital trolley.

'Thank you,' I said, because there's something about being told that you have a heart-shaped womb that makes it seem like a compliment. How romantic! Better than a kidney-shaped womb, or an ordinary round one, like a

balloon.

'That's why the placenta got stuck,' he said, and he explained that I'd lost almost five pints of blood before I'd reached the hospital.

I remembered him from the night before, from when they wheeled me into the operating theatre; new baby Joe somewhere else, not with me. The consultant's face was looming and blurred then, close to mine then far, far away, masked, only his eyes showing.

'Tell me I won't die,' I had said, and his reply was: 'I'm not God.'

'Remember, there is no God.' My grandmother often told me about coming to see me on the day I was born. My brothers were there, leaning over the carry-cot, repeating the mantra: 'Now, Polly, remember, there is no God.' It was this mantra, my brothers' boyhood voices, that I heard as I sank into anaesthesia.

My brothers were already my mother's sons for six and seven years before she met my father, but I was my father's first child. I hated being a one-off. More than once I begged my mother for a younger sibling but she always said: 'After you?' Or: 'One like you is enough, thank you.' Or: 'Not bloody likely!' And my dad just chuckled but I didn't get the joke. I suppose I thought that if the recipe were any good, it'd be worth repeating.

In bed, forty or so weeks before my third baby was born, my husband said to me (at the crucial, sacred, stay-or-go moment), 'So what. We make lovely babies.' The earth moved. And then, so did the emergency services. The fire brigade this time. Quite what they were doing bursting into our hotel room at midnight we never did find out. But I didn't have a care. I was loved enough.

'So what,' he said. 'We make lovely babies.' My third baby lay in my arms. I breathed him in. The top of his head

was for nuzzling, so warm and buttery. His pastel face was smooth and sweet as a sugared almond. He was newborn Charlie and newborn Joe, and he was newborn himself. I wouldn't have been able to tear my eyes away from his even if I had wanted to. It was only later, as he slept moulded to my belly, that I realised that I hadn't counted his fingers and toes, or looked for faults, or wasted time wondering if his father liked him: love is like that.