

## Truth and Lies

*A girl. Definitely a girl. Hair like straw, amazed eyes, dainty limbs. A dancer, perhaps. Yes, a ballerina, soft in pink, long, delicate arms, swan-like neck. Would she have looked like me or Martin? Would she have suited her name? Imogen. Would she have really been an Imogen? Would she have been a good baby or would she have had us pacing the bedroom, trying to piece together the verses of a long-forgotten lullaby. Would she have been school captain, good at maths, worn braces? Would she have been shy or confident, outgoing and sporty or curled up with her nose in a book? What would her voice have sounded like? When would she have started her periods? Would she have loved her breasts or hated them?*

I swilled the water around the bowl, feeling for leftover teaspoons and watching bubbles float around the surface like islands of frogs' spawn. I could hear my mother-in-law, Audrey's voice behind me, the imperious half-whisper rising above the sluicing of the dishwasher. I could even imagine how she would be standing: right hand on hip, left on my husband Martin's elbow, head towards his face, chin tilted upwards, lips pursed, nose pinched, eyes slanted slightly as though looking into the sun. The voice was just the right pitch to penetrate the subconscious but not quite at the volume to be distinguishable. I pulled the plug, the water gulped down greedily with sufficient noise to stop Audrey in her tracks.

"Lovely dinner, Claire," Audrey said, taking up a tea-towel to help dry the remaining items. "The turkey was superb."

Martin kissed the back of my neck. "Delicious as usual, thanks."

"It was just a frozen bird, nothing special." *A bit like me. Hard, frozen inside.* "Do you want coffee? I'll put the kettle on." I heard the weary note in my voice. Audrey's eyebrows raised slowly as she nodded.

"I'll do that," Martin offered, shooting me a puzzled look. "You sit down. You must be worn out from all that cooking."

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“Yes. I remember being up at the crack of dawn to put the bird in the oven, when Martin and the others were young. Such a busy time, Christmas with children,” Audrey pulled her thin lips into a half-smile and I could have sworn she emphasised the ‘with children’ bit. “Still, hopefully you’ll know all about that soon enough.”

Perhaps my exit was clumsier than I intended, as I left mother and son tutting in the kitchen, to rejoin my father-in-law, Ron, in the living room. His snoring reverberated around the room. Our fat ginger cat rose up and down on his lap. I smiled, envious of his oblivion. I lowered myself into my armchair, the one closest to the wall. *The wall where her pictures would have hung. The wall where I can picture her grubby hand prints. The wall against which she would have done handstands.*

Martin walked in, frowning at me. I shrugged. He hadn’t remembered. Why should I remind him? Martin, Audrey and me, we all drank coffee in silence. Ron slept on, Audrey’s shoulders tensing with each snore. I kept an eye on the clock – the hour was approaching. The hour when the house would be filled with the noise of children. Martin’s brother’s kids – three in all, boy, girl, boy, and also his sister’s infant baby boy. *Cousins. Playmates. Mentors. To be compared with, to be delighted by, to fight with.*

“You look peaky, dear,” Audrey said to me. A simple enough statement, but it irked me all the same.

“I’m fine,” I said with a hint of a sigh, looking at Martin. He was annoyed: I could tell by the way his mouth straightened slightly and his shoulders rose a notch.

“You’re not feeling dizzy, or nauseous then?” Audrey’s eyes strayed to my stomach. My hands automatically covered the area where the imaginary swelling should be. “It’s just that I noticed you seemed...heavier.”

“Mum!” Martin exclaimed. For once, I was grateful for his intervention.

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“I’m just saying,” Audrey mumbled, put out at being chided. Ron snuffled loudly and opened his eyes. “We were just talking about how lovely it will be when the children arrive, weren’t we?” Audrey nodded to her husband as he hoicked himself upright.

“Don’t know about lovely. Noisy would be a more descriptive choice,” he muttered.

Within minutes of their arrival, the living room was a garbled mess of wrapping paper, decorations that had been yanked unceremoniously from their branches, assorted toys, books and games. Somewhere amidst the detritus, was a soft blue baby blanket, plush white lamb and cloth nappy doubling as a puke rag for my sister-in-law, Cheryl. She had tried to lay the baby, Noah, on the floor, but the older children were wild with seasonal excitement, so he was lifted back into the snug safety of her Baby Bjorn carrier.

*Would there have been a connection between my baby girl and Noah, as they would have been so close in age? Would these cousins have been more than just playmates? Would they have shared a secret intimacy that the others would not have been able to penetrate?*

Audrey was in the kitchen, plating cakes and slices. Martin, dutiful son, was at her side.

Cheryl, exhaustion greying her eyes, stood by my side as we surveyed the damage. “The whirlwinds of terror have swept through, but I do believe we might have a period of calm before the next storm, that is, after they’ve been overloaded with sugar and fizz,” she giggled.

I laughed too, despite myself. “It’s hard to believe that in a few short years, Noah will be a whirlwind too. He looks incredibly peaceful.” I noticed the tiny frown lines on his forehead.

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She stroked the downy lines of hair forming on his head. “We’ve had a rough night. Cried for hours. Of course, Andy slept through it.”

“MSHS”

“What?”

“Male selective hearing syndrome. It’s extremely common in fathers of newborns, apparently. Perhaps you should get him checked out,” I suggested with a wry grin, grateful for some conspiratorial humour.

Cheryl giggled. Noah let out a snuffly yawn, then bobbed his head round to face the other way. “So, how are you?”

“Good.”

“No, I mean, really. How are you coping with all this,” her hand swayed out around the room. “And mother?”

I smiled, my mouth wobbling slightly. Dear old Cheryl. Perceptive. Caring. Always my ally. “It’s been a little hard, and Martin, he... he hasn’t said anything. I’m not sure he’s remembered, about today, I mean. And I can’t bring myself to say anything. I mean it’s so long ago, and I’m trying to move on and all that...”

“You can’t just move on, Claire. It’s not that easy. You have to talk to him, tell him how you really feel. He can be dense, but underneath, he’s a pretty sensitive character.”

“He wants to try again, but I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You’ve got to tell him the truth, Claire. He deserves that, at least.”

“I know.” I sniffed, wiping my nose on the back of my hand just as Audrey made her grand appearance with trays of sweets.

“Mum,” Cheryl strolled to Audrey. “Would you take Noah? He’s getting a little heavy for my back, and I’d love to pig out on some chocolate log.” Good old Cheryl.

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“See you in the New Year,” Audrey said, planting two sherry-flavoured kisses on my cheeks. “And with some special news, I do believe.”

“Bye Audrey,” I could barely manage a whisper. I heard her muttering to Ron all the way out to the car.

Martin let the door slam carelessly. I wrapped my arms around my middle, desperate to run upstairs and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, but Martin’s waiting figure, upright and tense, signalled to me that sleep would be hard to come by.

“What was all that about?” he said, half-slurring.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your attitude. All day, you’ve been off.”

“I’m just tired, that’s all.” *You can’t just move on, Claire. It’s not that easy. You have to talk to him, tell him how you really feel.* Cheryl’s words knocked into each other in my mind.

“It’s more than that. Mum’s upset.”

“She’s upset? What about all her comments hinting that I’m pregnant. For god’s sake, Martin. She was downright rude to me!”

“Crap. She’s got that sixth sense thing, that’s all. She’s not usually wrong about these things. Have you done a test recently?”

I stared at him, open-mouthed. “What? Do you really believe I’m pregnant?”

“Why not? We are trying, aren’t we?”

My head pounded. My heart was beating like drums under my ribcage. My mouth dried to fur. Six months ago I lost our Christmas Day baby. It was a sunny day. Our newly-planted camellias were flowering as I potted in the garden. Martin was working. We were going to have dinner with Cheryl and her husband that night. I had a sudden craving for

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oranges. I stood up, felt a cramp in my abdomen. I passed it off as too much weeding. I was eating my second orange when the cramping returned. It doubled me over. I called Martin's phone. It was switched to voicemail. I called Cheryl. By the time she got to me, it was too late. The warm, oozing blood was running down my thighs.

I never knew that my love for a being that hadn't even taken a breath could be so deep-reaching. I didn't understand the impact that creating, and then losing, a new life could have. I couldn't do the very thing that my body is designed to do. I couldn't keep my baby safe. It was my fault. Not Martin's. He would have had a protective and nurturing role when the baby was born, but during those nine months of incubation, it was my job, my responsibility. I had failed.

Martin was upset, understandably. The family was caring, initially, but then after a few weeks, it was all swept under the carpet. It was 'just one of those things'. It 'wasn't meant to be', 'it was all for the best'. What was all for the best? My baby was dead. How was that for the best? How could the loss of a life be just one of those things, like a broken toy or a scratched CD, something to be discarded and replaced in today's throwaway society.

Martin wanted to try again straight away. The doctors said it would be okay. And so, the world continued to revolve around me, but from the moment it happened I have felt like I've been walking a straight line down the centre of the universe, with no mind for what else was happening. I couldn't cope with seeing the peripheries or the trivialities that blight or enhance a day. I put myself on autopilot, cut myself off from any emotions or feelings and simply functioned from morning to night.

But at night, when Martin was sleeping his guilt-free sleep, dreaming about his son or his daughter, making plans for our family; at night, when I swallowed that pill in secret, I cried my soul out: for my lost baby, my lost place in the world, for me.

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When he asked me that question – ‘we are trying, aren’t we?’ I looked hard into him. I tried to connect with him again. I tried to get into his head, to learn what it was like to still live, to want again. His brown eyes, full of tender love and concern, pierced me, but still they didn’t see what I felt. He wanted to forget our baby. He had forgotten that today was the due date. He wanted to move forward. He lived in hope. There’s truth and there’s lies. And then there’s hope. And I couldn’t deny him that hope. Not yet.