

Cambridge

JENNY. 10 JUNE 1988

'Here's looking at you, babe!'

A folded piece of A4, a lecture handout from four years ago, flutters to the floor. And I, leaning down to retrieve it, am overtaken by all the gnawing regret of an old love affair I'd intended Cambridge would help me forget.

The cartoon occupies the bottom third of the page. It's drawn in ball pen, and it's ridiculous: under a dinner table, a pair of bony male knees (below a kilt), equipped with human eyes, regard a pair of shapely female legs, ending in elegant feet in high heeled shoes. Max always liked to do daft things, even as he was also absorbing the scientific information. I can see it now: him passing me the drawing while maintaining that serious expression and looking straight ahead at the slide the lecturer had on the screen.

The lecture, early January 1984, was by one of my father's contacts from Caltech. It was held in London, and I took Max as my guest.

The subject was *Hox* genes, a family of 'super genes', each member of which recruits its own unique set of 'worker' genes. These *Hox* master switches, thrown at their appropriate points during development, help sculpt the complex shapes of a mature animal from a simple ball of cells. The lecturer was talking about Pax-6—the 'super gene' that coordinates the making of an eye—and an experiment where the mouse version of Pax-6 was artificially inserted into a fruit fly. Remarkably, extra eyes are produced all over the fruit fly, on its body, wings and antennae, and these are not mouse eyes, but compound insect eyes; the mouse Pax-6 had hijacked the fruit fly's own worker genes. I've since seen pictures. I've seen the real thing.

And now, I've just finished my final exams and I'm clearing up my undergraduate textbooks and stuffing two weeks' dirty washing into a bag for the launderette, having a peaceful, relaxing day—until I see that reminder.

Disturbed by the strength of my reaction, breathlessness, heart thumping, anger rising, I can't stay here. Grabbing what books I've sorted, and the washing, I set out. Taking with me Dad's present for my twenty-first

last year, a Sony CCD-v90 camcorder. Will try to capture Cambridge, like sunshine in a bottle!

At the market, my eye to the viewfinder, is that Daze? My stepsister? Browsing the market stalls? Small and wiry, so unlike me and Hat, great galloping blondes! Daze should be thousands of miles away in Colombia! Why's she here? Lowering the camera, moving closer, I tap her on the shoulder.

'Hey—Daisy! You're back: was it amazing? Not here just to visit me, are you?'

'Four-Eyes—gosh, yeah I was gonna come by your place later ...'

'Nearly gone already,' I say, ignoring her use of my insulting school nickname, indicating my bag, and noticing something new about Daze. An aggressive, Celtic-style, red and gold dragon undulates over the bump under her black T-shirt. Her straight, black, well-worn jeans must be fastened under that with a whopping great pin. 'Undergraduate stuff,' I say anyway, 'for sale to the next generation. So, was Colombia—'

She smiles her distinct, crooked smile. 'Yeah, it was. Gold Museum: you should see it. Ancient, weird, amazing stuff.' I'm amazed by her belly. 'So what?' Daze says.

'You're preppers: when did that happen?'

Daze glances downwards. 'So I am,' she says, like she'd never noticed the bulge before.

'And?' I say. I can't simply rudely ask, *Who's the father?* Or even, *Are you in a relationship?*

Daze tries to move on.

I reach for her: a person can't just get pregnant and have a baby without telling their family anything.

'Hang on,' I say, hand on her shoulder. 'Nobody knew did they? At home?'

'Jen, you look tired.' Daisy picks my hand off herself. 'Go and sleep off your exams. And when do you stop being the big sister to everyone?' She turns away, picks up an orange.

'I just ...' I say, standing between her and the stall.

'Just? Just nothing: my body, my baby, huh?' Her fingers pump the orange like she wants to squeeze it then and there.

'Odd you didn't tell anyone and don't want to talk about it.'

Her eyes blaze: 'Odd that you should care so much.'

And stressed, sleep-deprived, and this morning hung-over, after Finals, besides being upset by that concrete reminder of Max, I go further. She's really riled me. 'Daze, you are being mysterious, you know. You've been working at a fertility clinic. Now you're pregnant.'

'Give it a rest, Jen,' she says, flinging the orange back onto the pile on the fruit stall. 'I was going to ask you to film the birth but ...'

'I don't mean to imply anything. I'm just concerned for you.'

'No need, I've got my own friends. Even discovered a long lost cousin out there. Lost when Mum ran off. She didn't just deprive me of a mum, she took away a whole half of my family!'

'So Daze, he's not—'

'Jen, did I say a male cousin?'

'Good, okay: not that wise for cousins.' She gives me a look: I deserve it. 'Daze, come over if you like, we'll have a coffee—or a herbal tea—or something?'

'You're such a lady bountiful,' she says. 'Like Mum. Like *your* mum.'

So then, I totally lose it: 'Mum took you in and looked after you and brought you up! Is that the thanks she gets?' Both of us forget about the shoppers and the browsers at the stripy-awned stalls as I shout, 'The thanks I get for being a sister to the new girl on the block?'

'You fucking loved doing it, didn't you?' Daze yells. 'You fucking enjoyed doing your caring act.'

It's not a caring act: it's genuine. But Daze is one of the few people I know who, when you try to be nice to her, bites your head off.

And now, the promising day's turned chilly. I am so ashamed. I walk home with the words we'd flung at each other ringing in my ears. The fight was everything bad. Immature. Degrading. I'm a Cambridge graduate (almost), I'm just twenty-two, I'm about to launch myself on the scientific world and hope to do research, but I screamed like a fishwife at my stepsister.

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Later, I'm eating supper alone—tinned tomato soup, housemates both out—when my father turns up.

'Jenny,' he grins when I open the front door, 'last days in Cambridge? But you'll be back, won't you? Can I take you to the best restaurant this side of the border?'

'Which border?' I ask.

'Any border. County boundary, anyway.'

'I've just downed most of a tin of cream of tomato.'

'Aw, baby, and alone? I've brought you something. Very exciting. Bring a friend.' And he hands me tickets for his latest venture: an academic forum, *Towards a Baby for Every Infertile Couple?*

'Tomorrow?'

'Yeah—you busy?'

'Not really ...'

'Come then—things to learn, people to meet.'

'Dad, did you know Daze is pregnant?'

He hardly misses a beat. 'Well I'll be—' he says. 'Daisy.' Laughing, he adds, 'Does it suit her?'

'Be serious. I don't think Des or Mum know. Did she—did she have anyone? In Colombia?'

'She ran around with one of the technicians a bit: he was keen on animal rights. English. Everyone else there is American or local.'

'So maybe?'

Dad shrugs. 'Maybe,' he says.

MAX. CAMBRIDGE, 10 JUNE 1988

Maybe sharing a house with a genetic researcher is not the wisest move I've made. But I needed short-term accommodation. And there was the advert on the med student bulletin board: *House share, large airy room available March–September. Contact Wil du Plessis.*

Sometimes, I feel as much a refugee as Wil. South African politics drove Wil here: his skills as a researcher and teacher in the expanding biotech area are keeping him here. And back in Cambridge after four years, I am so relieved to be escaping First Truly Reformed Presbyterian, and family ties. Newcastle had no places for prospective GPs to take the necessary paediatric rotation.

But Wil turns out to be teaching Jenny Guthrie—with the big specs and strawberry blond hair! Do I or do I not want to make contact again? She's not only sweet, and amusing, she's a sharp inquisitive mind. She was a perfect foil for Dad's views on science, religion, and women. Jenny represents the evil which lurks within all three. Together we once attended a lecture on the newly discovered Hox genes.

Forget that: I'm wrestling with a reply to a letter from my Uncle Euan in Hexham, coffee and a cigarette as aids to this. The front door bangs and Wil appears, making appropriate remarks about the willing and conscious destruction of my cells.

I get up, stretching. 'Aye, and my Uncle Euan expects a good Christian guy to join him in his practice once I'm qualified. As my father says, "*if you havena' a Call then medicine's a grand second-best*".'

'How about this?' Wil slaps a flyer down on the kitchen table. The blurb describes a day forum on fertility, open to post-doc research students and others in the field, at the prestigious Drey Clinic. Medical Director Dr John Guthrie will speak about new developments in this rapidly expanding biotech area.

If I were to attend this day-long academic meeting, would Jenny be there?

Wil reaches into the fridge, and brings out two cans of lager. He pulls the ring on one and hands me the other.

'Guthrie's rumoured to be into cloning: in certain quarters, people are concerned. We—the academic geneticists and embryologists—should know more about what is being done on our doorstep. Even you generalists should.'

'I'm concerned we've an empty fridge tonight. Why's it always me who buys the provisions, man?'

'Family eldest: exaggerated sense of responsibility for others. Shall I buy the take-away?'

I chuck my empty ciggie pack at him, and tell him I have an older sister. He says, 'So introduce me sometime. And scratch that itch.'

'What itch?'

'Did you not tell me you used to date Miss Guthrie? I discern there's a remaining interest—or do I?'

How far does Jenny go along with her father? Do I want to meet her again? Last chance, before she graduates and moves on.

JENNY. SATURDAY 11 JUNE: THE DREY CLINIC, CAMBRIDGE

In my four years at University here, I've learned that impressive as I thought he was, my father—dynamic practitioner and researcher at a privately funded clinic—is regarded by the brotherhood of the academic community with a slightly jaundiced eye. Since Carter, American Presidents have been less keen on some kinds of scientific investigations. So after years across the pond, Dad returned to England, financed by some huge biotech organisation who appointed him Medical Director of their labs and attached clinic. Where? Down the road from where I was studying!

I'd not connected him with Daze until she mentioned her plans for after graduation. A few months admin working for my Dad. At a clinic in an out-of-the-way South American country where he's giving some of his time to an experimental programme. It really was weird: why'd she want to go there?

The Drey clinic has its own lecture theatre for conferences and symposiums, the auditorium—windowless, air-conditioned, fluorescently illuminated by concealed lights—slopes downwards to the usual long desk, podium and blackboard.

And it's filling up. Today, the university scientific establishment's jumped at the chance to view and critique Dad's private setup. Dad sent me three complimentary invites: I'm here with my housemates. Laura, who's writing a thesis on Immortality. And Maeve, a just-finished Nat Sci like me. Maeve's a real eye-opener. My first week in Cambridge, October, 1984, this Irish girl knocked on my door, smiling, 'I'm College Rep for the Christian Union and I'm here to invite you to our Freshers' Squash.'

'No, thank you. I'm not religious.'

A few weeks later, in lonely first-year mode, I went to M and S, to buy a nightshirt. Retail therapy. I learned it at Mum's knee when Dad left: it remains her, and my, medicine of choice.

There's Maeve by the racks of glam knickers!

'Sure it's for my bottom drawer, Jenny!' Nudging me and grinning. 'Sure you imagined being a believer would mean I wear white cotton cross-your-heart bras and full briefs? When the work gets me down I come away to add to my outrageous underwear collection. Wouldn't

you feel better, wrestling with that complicated maths they dish us biologists, knowing underneath it all you're clad in red lace with hearts and bows?'

Well, how'd I know? Raised on the Bible, given to offering her work to God in prayer, Maeve's also generous, warm, and intelligent. Of course I didn't join the Christian Union. But I did join the college choir, and so did Maeve.

I kind of hope nobody will link me up with Dad, especially as, turning, I see that Wilhem du Plessis, a golden pin-up rugby-type post-doc in the genetics department (who has taught me a fair amount this past year) is moving crabwise down an already-crowded row, two or three behind us. Followed by a friend ...

Max Mullins. Heart stops. Have to look away. Don't want to know. Max dropped out of my world as suddenly as he'd entered it.

Can't not glance back again. Taking slow, deep breaths. The others don't notice, but I'm going hot and cold and sweaty. Max, here for the Forum? Or here as in, back in Cambridge?

Concentrate: *don't give in to the feelings.* My father's on the podium, introductions are over. He ruffles his notes, requests someone to pull the blinds, and switches on the overhead. I focus, deliberately, on the subject of the lecture. Try to immerse myself in the forward march of biological science.

'Pre-implantation Genetic Diagnosis' Dad says, 'is a logical consequence of IVF.' Yes, I think: and Max even toyed with the temptation to move into research because he believed so passionately in this. He mentioned PGD the very first day we met.

'IVF is becoming normal practice. Fertility clinics such as ours have been set up with the express purpose of combining clinical excellence in terms of pregnancy outcomes, with clinical excellence in terms of ongoing research.'

Dad's naturally into the now vocabulary—*excellence.*

'We are proud to announce that we are in the forefront of offering pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to our patients. Our scientific predecessors,'—Julian Huxley, J. B. S. Haldane, scientists I was raised by him to admire—'predicted PGD would come about in the second half of this century, and they were not wrong.'

As Dad speaks, slides of children affected with the diseases and deformities he mentions appear on the screen in rapid sequence. Thick scaly skin, twisted limbs, distorted features ... Making the tragedy of these diseases far more real. As he tells his audience that 'the key to the elimination of those diseases which we see in paediatric wards and clinics—and those other diseases—hidden silently, symptomlessly away within the genes of young apparently healthy children to appear in later life, lies in the development of PGD.'

So did Max finally defy or persuade his father, and find funding to re-train?

'Pre-implantation diagnosis—what does this phrase imply? In the natural course of events, a fertilised ovum tumbles downwards on its secret journey towards the safe, nurturing home—the womb—where it expects to spend the next forty weeks or thereabouts, growing into a human baby.' Dad has superb podium presence. He presents his stuff compellingly. His slides, the tone of his voice, the pace, all work together.

'In cases of infertility, we may now introduce the ovum and the sperm to one another ...' (*Introduce. I know my Dad, he chooses his words, he speaks not of the uterus, but of the safe, nurturing womb, and although it's perfectly scientific and might have no double meaning, here we have an anthropomorphic interpretation for those who want to smile and even titter. The sperm and ovum are dating.*) '... within the relative safety, but under the bright and penetrating lighting, of a laboratory. In a sterile environment. And in a suitable medium. But still we take care to honour that human conceptus—the fertilized ovum—and to replace it as gently as possible into the environment which best suits its needs, the body of its mother.'

Oh boy, Dad, don't you just understand crowd appeal!

Then, he switches modes. Confidently outspoken against the pro-life lobby, he argues, 'Why, then, should there be any constraints put on the necessary research? When we look at the costs in terms of finances, as well as in suffering, these are surely worth the setting-aside of concerns as to whether, at the blastocyst stage, a few cells bundled together should be granted human dignity.'

Max mayn't like that. And after all that sentiment about honouring the human conceptus. Replacing it gently into the body of its mother. Stuff which sounded almost like Mills and Boon. And, better not catch Maeve's eye.

There's a certainly a little ripple across the audience: Dad has touched some sensibilities even among academic researchers who'd you expect to share his views.

Has Max noticed me? If so, what's he thinking?

'You may feel the PGD process puts an unnecessary burden on the embryo. It is at this point in time a somewhat invasive process: but, a life-enhancing, life-affirming process.' Yeah, buzzwords. Is Dad really concerned about being life-enhancing, life-affirming: isn't it perhaps the power of the science that seduces him?

'And,' (as he begins drawing to a close), 'for all fertility doctors, PGD—and a related technique called aneuploidy screening—brings in a new and fertile class of patient—genetic disease carriers—and offers a new service to infertility patients who have failed with lesser therapies.'

Well, there we have it: an increased field of patients. Several murmurous exchanges take place behind conference papers. Though, has to be said, aneuploidy screening seems a great idea.

‘One final word: I would predict a future in which every embryo produced in the course of IVF cycles will be tested—is that not the way of clinical excellence, of putting our patients’ interests first?’ Dad makes some additional remarks and concludes to a standing ovation. The vast majority here must be his supporters: at least in terms of attitudes. And Max? Is he amongst the predictable few who don’t stand or clap?

I can’t see where he’s gone. My father’s surrounded by hordes wanting to ask questions but he works his way through the crowd, shaking hands until he reaches me.

Where he introduces Maeve and Laura to a few people and dispatches them towards the food. While I’m swept up to have to lunch with his party. Find myself sparkling more than necessary, gulping too much Chardonnay with the buffet of salmon, quiche, mange-tout salad with a fromage frais dressing. Still surreptitiously running my eyes around the room: do I want to see Max or avoid him? I make rather unsteadily for the table—stiff white cloth, porcelain army of tiny white cups and saucers—where delicately boned girls are serving real coffee from wide-bottomed Pyrex jugs.

‘Jenny?’

‘Hi,’ I say. This is it, then. ‘You—came down for the conference?’

I should’ve walked away. I know immediately I sound inane, and that those quizzical grey eyes still captivate me.

He smiles. ‘I’m back in Cambridge. Can I fetch you a coffee?’

‘Please. “Back”?’

Max somehow corralling me, we carry our scalding coffee out onto the terrace, stand staring at the green Draylon lawns of the clinic and lab complex, all glistening in dazzling midsummer sun. There’s even a staff tennis court: *puck-puck* of tennis balls, and white figures leap and run and yelp. I try to sip my coffee elegantly and stop the shaking of my insides.

‘Yes. Back. And you?’ Max smiles, clinking his cup back onto its saucer. ‘Just finished Tripos part two?’

We are *being adults*, making brittle cocktail-party conversation over bone china. I can’t do this. Turning away, ‘I have to go,’ I say.

‘Jenny—’ Max has me by my arm. Everyone else has returned to the lecture room: we’re alone out here: *puck-puck*, tennis balls.

‘Don’t,’ I say. ‘I’m—with—’ Max lets me go.

‘I didn’t want to scare you—I just—’ He stops. Our eyes lock: but I can’t read his expression: intense, but what else? ‘Jenny—all that—it was me, not you ...’

‘Thanks,’ I say.

‘Could we maybe—’ Max shuffles his feet.

‘What?’

‘Have a coffee some time?’ he says.

‘We’re having one now!’ I retort. My legs are buckling, but my brain’s re-activated.

Max looks wary. I'm sorry I tried to score off him. A bell tinkles. 'Seems we're needed for the afternoon programme,' he says.

Relieved, 'See you in there,' I say, and make for the Ladies'. The Men's turns out to be right next to it, and we bump into each other exiting the bathrooms. 'Sorry—oh sorry.'

'Sorry.' I swallow.

I kick myself for not walking away.

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Of course, I've not found out why Max's here. I remember only too well the time he was in my life before.

December 1983, my college interview weekend. Raw from a West Cornwall comprehensive, I was so immature! Did I really let him pick me up, as I walked through the college gates, where he was locking up his bike?

'Hi, up for interview?' Our eyes met.

'Ever hopeful!'

'Subject?'

'Nat Sci.' He gave me a look. 'Okay, I can do it, you know!' Tottering a bit in my tight new heels.

'I'm not doubting you. Tough course though.'

'You?'

'I've been here a while: medicine.' Slight, soft regional accent: encouraging, seeing I'd arrived with my own West Cornwall voice intact. I lingered a moment.

'I'd hurry if I were you: groups to tour the University leading off already. You can leave your stuff at the Porters' Lodge.'

'Yes, thanks.'

A horde of interviewees swarmed towards us: I dodged around the edge of the group, stepped onto the cobbled edge of the paved path, and tumbled into the lavender hedge. The interviewees hurried, chattering, past. Wafted with newly-crushed essential oil, stared at and stepped over by twenty-odd bright eighteen year olds, how stupid can a person feel?

'Och, what happened to you?' Same guy: Scots accent. Dad carefully lost his while working in America.

I glanced past my grazed knee and saw the problem. Held up my bereft left shoe. Met eyes with that guy again: his grey, and mischievous. We laughed.

'I did the heel trick, didn't I? Okay, it's a classic. But they're new shoes! That shouldn't have sheared off!'

'Can you stand: you've not hurt yourself?'

'Only my dignity.' I brushed my behind, looking over my shoulder. 'My granny's word!' We laughed again. 'I'll have to find a shoe mender's.'

'If you're sure you're all right, and you've a spare pair of shoes, why don't I take you to find one and then we'll do the tour? I know all the places you'll need to see. Max Mullins—and you're?'

'Jenny Guthrie.' Okay: he seemed okay, laughed with me not at me. Nice looking: dark hair, slim, tall but not too tall. Love those eyes! 'Thanks.' We moved off, me having left my luggage at the Lodge and hurriedly changed into trainers, carrying my high heeled patent pumps.

'Jenny. If this college accepts you, you'll end up well placed. The labs are in Tennis Court Road, just around the corner.'

'And the shoe shop's—?'

'We'll find it as we go.'

Trinity Lane, Gonville & Caius, Kings Parade, Trumpington Street. The wind catching at my hair, blowing through my coat. 'Which branch of Nat Sci, Jenny?'

'Genetics? Embryos?'

'Perfect timing—I'm about to—I should be—writing an essay on human aneuploidies this evening.'

So Max was studying the very subject, growth and development and why it can go wrong, which had caught my imagination. For him, just a small corner of his training.

Time flew by: Max obviously knew a fair bit about genetics. Then, 'Diversion: shoe menders!'

We waited while they worked on my shoe. 'See here: never should've used that glue,' the shoe mender demonstrated gleefully. 'You brought the other one?'

Max grinned at me.

'Look, you've work to do, I shouldn't be keeping you here!'

'No—it's okay—I can manage, we haven't finished what I want you to see. And hear.'

So as dusk fell, and as we passed another college, 'Listen!'

Carols or something very like them seemed woven into the air. 'You like music? You have to experience this. After all, if you don't get in—well, you won't have heard the best choir in the world, will you?'

'How d'you know it's the best choir?'

'Cambridge Singers? They know they're the best.' Max, grinning, seized my hand and hauled me inside the chapel.

'This isn't still the tour?'

'What else?' Dimly lit, warmed by the light of a thousand candles, a tall Christmas tree with twinkling lights and an amazing choir. We lurked at the back: by now I was on such a high! Like, maybe they're human or maybe they're angels, just here for us? Did I believe in angels? No.

'Amazing. What Christmas is about.'

'Some of what it's about.'

And then, we let go hands: it wasn't the cinema, and I wasn't required to pay for it. Like guys at school who soon wanted to get something from you for anything they gave you: a snog, a fondle. Watch them play

footie, or pound, sweating, around the athletics track. With Max, I'd had a serious discussion on embryology. I'd glimpsed so much already, I had to pass the interview!

'Are you hungry?'

'Now this is really not the tour, is it?'

'We all have to eat! Or don't you?'

'If you're certain ...'

So had I picked him up, or had he asked me out? We ended up in a vegetarian eating place, neither scruffy café nor formal restaurant.

'Thinking about tomorrow?' Max asked over our pizza, like he could read my mind.

'About how it'll be if I don't get in.'

'When's the interview? You can come and find me—afterwards. We could—'

'Yes?'

'We'll see: we have a child with what appears to be Patau's on the ward just now.'

'Which means?'

'I can't tell you more than that she has certain dysmorphic features—you know the term?'

'Yes. I've read a bit. Don't most babies like that just not make it to birth? And with amniocentesis, shouldn't all—most—be, like, weeded out, today?'

'Jenny, a lot of people believe abortion, painless infanticide and euthanasia is justified in the case of severely disabled infants. They argue the lives of others—parents and carers—are ruined. As well as the suffering of the child itself. I'm not convinced by those philosophers ... and I do see these children. Some worse than Serafina—than this one.'

Why did this fantastic guy have to sound like he was religious? Avoiding why, I quoted Dad, 'If we could see the genetic problem in the embryo, we could simply offer the parents IVF, and throw away the duds.'

'Yes—we could—if we were certain about them.'

'They're only embryos.'

'Human ones.'

'Okay: Serafina, the child you talked about. A worse one—what kind of worse?'

'You want to know? Maybe you've seen pictures. Skeletal deformities, thick scaly skin, maybe unable to communicate, with a desire to self-harm—yes.'

'And the embryos should be—'

'What I want, maybe, is to get into research on the genetics—the diagnosis—' Max shook his head as if clearing the thought away.

'So why don't you?'

Silence. Both of us stymied by developments.

'You finished?' Max asked. 'I'll get this.' Waving away my offer to pay my half.

Outside, 'It's cold: I'd better take you back, then? To college?'

'Yes—yes I'd better go ...'

After his initial confidence, he seemed more diffident, hesitant and quiet. Such a perfect afternoon: how frustrating to stumble over something difficult. 'You're not, like, a pro-lifer, are you?'

A dry laugh. 'My father's a big-shot minister!'

'Government? Oh my God ...'

A grin. 'No. Presbyterian. Extreme.'

'Like—church? Ouch.'

'Like church.'

Embarrassed, I tried to sound nonchalant. 'We live in a church: an ex-church. It was built as a Methodist chapel.'

'But you—?'

'No, not religious.'

'Medicine is respectable, you see. And Cambridge is good: the pursuit of excellence.'

'My mother's a doctor. General practice.' I wanted to maintain our links. So I didn't mention Dad. Strangely, Max didn't ask. I shoved my hands in my pockets and must've hunched over, because what he asked was, 'You're not cold? You want this?' Offering his scarf.

Gratefully, I took it: though it tickled my neck.

And we walked on in silence: I thought about his ironic comments on his studies here. We reached my staircase. 'It was nice of you to do this.'

'All part of the service,' Max bowed, quietly mocking his use of that phrase.

'And the pursuit of excellence?' I countered, matching his irony.

'You could add that,' he said, laughing.

Next day was my interview. Then I went to the children's ward, where Max loaned me someone's white coat and introduced me to the Patau's child, Serafina. Mosaic Patau's, a survivor now eighteen months old.

And I went home.

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We phoned, we wrote. Were a Creator God and a scientific outlook incompatible? We had to argue for and against the existence, relevance, importance, of God. I pulled out some reading matter Dad had supplied, and realised my atheism was simply second-hand. Max did the same with his faith.

Dad arrived back from the States, announcing he'd be working in Cambridge too—or at least very near by. And gave us tickets to that exciting lecture in London: Hox Genes.

But although Max dreamed about genetic research, his family wanted him in general practice with an uncle. Mum's turn: part of the clinical course was a six-week GP placement, and experience in a rural practice in West Cornwall—my home—looked like a good contrast to Cambridge. Despite the evident rural poverty, past and present, Cornwall's seduc-

tively beautiful. And wild. As he worked with my mother, Max and me kind of slipped from being close friends to being much more.

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It was late May, pink ragged robin, blue scabious and yellow trefoil flowering everywhere. The last week, on Max's afternoon off, we walked the family dog across the cliff tops to Land's End. I took stacks of photos. Then, pausing to sit amongst the heather, we silently shared a bar of chocolate. The sea was a misty indigo, gathering clouds touched the horizon. I didn't want the afternoon to end: soon we'd part, Max would be gone. First on a visit home, and then, back to Cambridge.

'Last square,' Max said. 'Open, Jenny ...'

He placed it in my mouth, and as we kissed, I let him gather me up and lay me on my back. I pointed out a tiny speck high above. 'Look, that's a lark: *The Lark Ascending*?'

We both knew that music.

Max leaned over me, blocking out the sky. Kissing my throat, my breasts, my belly. I lay trembling, hardly breathing, as the lark sang.

I undid my thin cheesecloth shirt so I could better feel his mouth on my skin. It was me who undid the top button of my jeans. Max who slid his hands inside like an expert, and me who thought, 'Hmm, the minister's son's done this before.'

And then without thought I flopped my thighs open as he explored me, I let my specs fall off, and probably made a stupid groaning sound: though when I felt how hard he was, I tensed up because, whatever, things were going further ... And at that point, a huge raindrop fell into my eye. Max rolled off me, cursed as I'd never heard him do, and said roughly, 'We can't do this.'

'Why?' Though part of me was relieved.

'It's wrong. You're eighteen, you're off to college.'

My world was fuzzy, I groped for my specs. And, as he rearranged his clothes, and straightened up, Max cursed again.

'What?' I said.

'Your glasses,' he said. Handing them over. 'Not as they were.'

'It's just an earpiece gone.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I can balance them.' Grabbing them from him. Calling the dog to heel.

Max marched ahead, kicking the heather. I marched behind, holding my jacket over my head as the rain slammed down, my camera swinging from its strap against my chest. It took maybe five minutes for Max to stop, wait for me, and take my by then icy-cold hand. 'I'm sorry.'

I said nothing. Max tucked his arm round me, and we marched on. 'Jenny: wrong time, wrong place. If we're soulmates, that's more important. Isn't it?'

'Soulmates? Do you have to be religious, for that?'

'What do you think?'

'Describes the feeling.'

The feeling I thought we shared: that we couldn't part.

And whether or not we have souls. Max hadn't made a lot of his religion while he stayed in Cornwall. Then after he left, he wrote the most awful, cold, distant, letter. '*Something's come up, I'm leaving Cambridge.*'

No Max when I arrived to start my studies?

I should've thought, '*This is your mother's clinical rotation student you've got here, Jenny, he's only here for six weeks' GP experience. You're going to mess up things for him as well as you.*'

I should've known religious people have a strange guilt about sex.

But that couldn't be the real reason.

Still hurts when I think about it.

I'm astonished by his appearance at Dad's Forum. Amazed he'd the audacity to walk up and casually suggest we had a coffee. Devastated I'm still reacting to his presence.

For me, the afternoon programme's all but destroyed.

'No guy's worth breaking your heart over, twice,' Laura wisely counsels. 'Didn't he drop you just before you arrived here? Isn't that the most heartless thing to do to somebody?'

'Did he apologise yet?' Maeve adds.

Laura's an example to follow, enjoying Cambridge while keeping the guys at arm's length. I develop a running mantra, pounding the early morning streets: *no guy's worth it.*

MAX

Phew! Walked right into her: pretended that was cool. What did she think, what did I really think?

Stupid, inane conversation we had.

Back come all the memories, and after them, back comes the old temptation, to go delving into the science of human imperfections, physical ones, mental ones, and their prevention. Work leading to what my father describes as having murder built into it. A conversation with Dad in which I dared broach the subject of developments in pre-implantation genetic diagnosis ended *that* ambition!

Mum was in the kitchen with two Down's syndrome kiddies she child-minds. 'Max, we gonna make fairy cakes today!' they'd told me.

'When they're ready, can I have one?'

I went out into the hallway: Dad's study door opened a crack. As I entered, he was tossing a file into a drawer, his back turned. 'Would you all learn to knock first—the Congregation doesna' pay for a secretary in my home—' he snapped.

'Dad—d'you want to be left or can we share that dram you promised?'

'Max—come in, come in—how is Cambridge? What can I do for you—you had something to discuss?' Yes, a smile for me, his expensively edu-

cated medical student son. ‘Sorry, I thought it was another twin tumult falling across my threshold. *Children are a gift from the Lord ...*’ he quoted dry-humouredly, scratching his head.

Dad circumnavigated the desk and closed the door, very quietly. Took out glasses and golden Glenmorangie. We sat: he on his swivel chair beside the desk, me on the pink Draylon-covered loveseat he keeps for couples come for counselling. Sipping a dram with my father. Laddish stuff which gives me the heebie-jeebies: *beware Greeks bearing gifts*. ‘Well, Max?’ he said. ‘How was your term?’

First I asked about his plans to expand the Christian school attached to First Truly Reformed. ‘Indeed!’ Dad glowed, rubbing his hands, then seizing the file he had just put away and thrusting it into my lap. ‘Building plans. We’ll need to be asking the Lord for funding. A large number of parents are very keen. I’ve been interviewing for a headmaster experienced with an older age group: d’you recall Colin Eccles?’

‘Colin’s applied? I thought he was happy at the Grammar?’

‘The Lord’s timing, Max.’

The phone interrupted us. His demeanour changed as he talked: someone’s problem or tragedy took over. After that, Dad seemed to have forgotten about Colin.

‘Max, what was it you came for?’

Referring to Mum’s growing conviction that children with disabilities are not being catered for in the church, I appealed to his belief in God’s love for his whole creation. ‘Dad, I want to be where I can make a difference, reduce suffering—and the difference we medics can make is changing.’

‘Yes, I believe you do, I believe it is,’ he said dryly. ‘You discerned God guiding you towards being a doctor; I hope you’re no’ going to change now?’

My father dislikes bad planning as much as he dislikes imperfections. He suspects any hint that his God’s guidance can be in any way flawed. A change of heart is in his eyes merely a message from the human mind—a corrupt entity if ever there was. Every perfect gift arrives from the holy and unchanging God’s perfect, inscrutable-to-the-fallen-human, mind. With God’s perfect timing.

‘Och, just listen: I see desperately sick or defective kiddies on the wards, their short lives filled with pain. I think of First Truly-type families for whom termination’s not an option. Termination of pregnancy is vile. But, without it, we doctors must care for these infants destined for almost immediate death. We should also try to use science to prevent these terrible tragedies.’

Dad looked dubious.

‘Listen,’ I tried coaxing him, speaking as abstractedly as possible. ‘Pre-implantation diagnosis—once we reach the clinical stage—would give IVF patients a safeguard against the most common genetic disorders. And guarantee genetic abnormalities are not transmitted into the next generation. Conditions like cystic fibrosis?’

Silently Dad surveyed the Oriental rug for answers. Its amazing regularity of pattern just might have a fault: I hunted one out, and drew his attention to the squashed pattern in one corner, 'D'you see there how that's not quite right? If a fetus were to have that—imperfect patterning—d'you know what it might do to the overall phenotype? D'you also realise the pre-natal tests we have at present increase the risk of miscarriage—they actually pose a threat to the possibly normally developing fetus?'

Dad's eyebrows drew together as he gazed into the future in that crystal tumbler. 'And would you not think—as your mother does—of those children as equal in the sight of God?' he asked. 'And there is the touchstone of ethics, is there not? There is taking science too far—'

'Can that be done?'

'Do you imagine when they split the atom—' Dad said.

Did he have to open up that classic? 'Do you not think that if the parents could choose—however they love the kids—they'd have chosen—do you not feel that—even given equality in the sight of God—it is preferable in this world for a child to be born as near a perfect image of Him as possible?'

My father held up his right hand, STOP-sign-style. 'I'll not hear more of this, James Maxwell—you're away down there having thoughts unworthy of you put in your head. A lassie, engaged in investigations tending to interfere with the Almighty's ordering of things, has bent your ear. God's image is marred by human sinfulness, not by disease or defects.'

'Disease and defects enter into the world as a consequence of sin. You taught me this.' I realized that I was crossing a line here: arguing with him around scripture, which he won't tolerate, seeing himself as the expert in the mind of God. So I hurriedly backed off. 'Dad—can we be a little less emotional? I am as compassionate as you—Jenny—'

A real slip there!

He seized upon it. 'Who is this, that you listen to her? A lassie has bent your ear and—'

'Och, Dad! Jenny's concerned as I am to relieve human suffering.' The look on his face was hard to read. Then, 'Humph,' my father responded. 'She doesna' ken the Lord, does she?'

And then he was just looking at me, silent. Waiting for more?

This looking can be very effective—I got the feeling of condemning myself by every extra word I said. My words bounced back into my own ears to make me reconsider. 'I—I'll leave you to think about it,' I said. 'It's maybe a lot to take in?'

'It is a lot to take in from you.'

I walked quietly to the door, opened it, and passed through: hoping I had made a dignified exit, leaving Dad to consider my point.

Mum called me into the kitchen. At the table, two small aproned figures, plump, smiling, hair tied back in ponytails, were very carefully spooning frosting from a bowl onto individual sponge fairy-cakes, and spreading it with blunt knives.

'Not ready yet!' they called, scattering on bright-coloured hundreds and thousands.

'How was he?' Mum asked softly. As always seeing her task as gathering up the shattered pieces of her children's hopes and gluing them back together in a different, acceptable pattern.

'I'm fine,' I lied, 'just waiting for my fairy cake, hey?'

'Never forget—he loves you, Max,' she said. (She means Dad—or God?) '*I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my strength? Even from the Lord, who made heaven and earth ...*' she quotes.

Research? Making a difference? Impractical student dream.

So—and ignoring Dad's remarks about Jenny—off to her mother's workplace for clinical experience in a rural practice. Shameful, really, the way you can deceive yourself. Until God appears to be providing the way out.

Shameful how we all jump to Dad's command.

JENNY. 17 JUNE 1988

For the next week, I try to forget who I met at Dad's forum, and what that person had done to me. With an effort, I throw away that cartoon, the last I want to see of Max.

Then, I rescue the torn pieces from the wastepaper basket and stick it back together. Last reminder. I know, Daze: you lose someone, you want to keep something of them. You kept the baby. I suppose. Seeing you wouldn't be drawn and spill about the father, I can only guess you broke up.

I'm off to face reading my results from the lists they pin up, when I open the front door and there's a person on the step. Three people: a woman who looks more Daze's type than mine, baby on her hip. Clutching her trouser leg, peering shyly around, a tousle-haired, crumby-faced toddler. 'Jenny Guthrie?'

'Yes?'

'Your sister's in labour. I'm Lily—we're neighbours. Our bus is next to Daze's on the Site.'

'Site?'

'Traveller's site—she didn't tell you?'

'Oh my God, she wasn't due was she? Where?'

'Addenbrooke's. Probably early or a false alarm, but they took her in.'

I manage not to say, *I really don't want to get involved*. Even if since seeing Max again, I imagine I understand how bad Daze is feeling about her baby's father.

'Listen,' Lily says, 'she's okay, but she said maybe you'd come over with your—' (gesturing with her free hand) '—she wants it filmed. I can take you up: we've got the car today. Would you?'

The baby clutches her breast, bare under her T-shirt.

'Okay,' I say slowly. Daze must be desperate to get this filmed, to ask me. So, maybe I can make up for our row at the Market?

Typical, Mum had said when I rang and said, 'Did you know Daze is expecting?' And Des, her Dad, acted the totally hands-off parent: *this is Daze's life, she's an adult making her own choices*. But keep him informed, and he'd come over once term ends. Meanwhile, he's busy directing the end of year production of *West Side Story* at the sixth form college.

And Daze absolutely wouldn't want the parents there, filming her in labour!

Lily's car's a 2cv equipped with a tangle of kiddies' toys and books and crocheted blankets. We rattle up to Addenbrooke's and she leaves me to cautiously find my way to the maternity department.

The obstetrics team seem totally unfazed by Daze's idea, supply a gown, and before I know it I'm both labour partner and, primarily, film producer for the first appearance of my step-dad's grandchild.

'So Lils found you, then?' is Daze's greeting.

'Yeah: ready to record the celebrity entrance!' I say. Hoping Daze's request and my response signify apologies all around.

I pan the room, while Daze leans over the disposable vomit-basin. Then the midwife takes a look up her butt: I can almost feel it myself, that opening-up. Why do people get themselves into this? Some of them even endure painful treatment up at Dad's clinic first.

'You okay—the sister okay?' they say as if I'm not there.

'C'mon—she's about to deliver—' The midwife looks again at Daze's dilation, shoving the junior registrar aside. They glare at one another, poised to pull rank: he's an inexperienced doctor, she's an old hand.

I'm an unwilling film-director. Unused to the clinical setting.

'Right—she's fully dilated, the head is crowning—I need that paediatrician!'

The midwife looks at the registrar: *I told you so*. Daze's on the delivery bed.

The midwife stops her commanding 'Hold on!' and says, 'Push! Push! Now, pant like a dog!'

'I know, I know!' Daze gasps.

Through my lens I watch, waiting for a first sight of my step niece or nephew. Out between her thighs pops the head—but should it look like that? It's tiny, purply-coloured, and strangely shaped. Its eyes minute, malformed, its nose what a textbook might describe as a proboscis, its mouth—hare-lipped.

On the next push, the trunk and limbs appear. I almost stop breathing: internal organs in a sac outside its abdomen. Should I stop filming? But part of me's curious to have a recording of this. A picture from one of Mum's textbooks. The ones I illicitly gaped at when I was a kid.

The midwife has the thing now: lying limp in her hands. Its spindly legs have very strange feet, the underneath curved, the toes webbed. Its hands are clenched, the five webbed fingers holding down the thumbs. Can it, will it, live?

First time I've seen human birth. My hand on the camcorder wobbles. I focus on anything, anywhere, as boing!—the door swings open. Next frame's another shock for me: 'Paediatrician on call!'

I'm back in Cambridge. Can I fetch you a coffee?

'So where's the baby—what have we got?' he asks.

I let the camera fall onto the delivery bed.

MAX. ADDENBROOKE'S MATERNITY DEPARTMENT, SAME TIME

'So what do we ... have?'

I glance at the silent medical team grouped in a huddle. Then for a moment, I don't believe it.

Suspend your personal feelings.

One week after that Forum where I had re-encountered Jenny, here she is, gowned up but recognisable. And the new mum's—*Daze Potter*.

I cross the room, tap the senior midwife's shoulder. 'Paediatrician on call. So where's the baby—what have we got?' I quietly repeat.

A beat passes. Then, 'Better you take this.' Midwife dumps a warm, softly limp, blood-streaked humanoid into my hands. I'm used to babies, but here we have a tiny, severely dysmorphic child. As I take one quick overall look, it opens its mouth, gasps, and that's it: gone.

The obs team are back with Daisy.

'Nice and smoothly—' someone says. 'Can you just push for me?'

But rightly picking up on the atmosphere, Daze stretches out her arms for the infant. 'Give me my baby! Aren't newborns meant to cry?' She turns to me, accusing. 'The kid's not crying! Shouldn't you put it on my tummy?'

I hold it in my arms, deciding. What can we do? What shall we say?

'Oh that's normal, very little babies usually—' someone interjects.

'Placenta when you have it,' I say.

'—need help with breathing—' someone adds helpfully. We're all used to suppressing our natural shock and empathy.

'I'll see if—' Jenny's voice, trembly, breathless. I blank it out.

In every textbook they tell you: *experience the widest range you can in a big teaching hospital*. There was a hint this bairn might have problems. Professor Nicholson, the paediatric neonatologist, would've sent me, if I hadn't been already on call. The rarer chromosome changes flit through my mind, but mainly I think drugs, I think environment—*young girl from a travellers' site*, they said?

They have the placenta now—but it's not complete. I continue cradling the dead baby; they cut the cord. I double-check there's no sign of life, and place it not on the heat-pad, not wired up and linked to a battery of helpful machinery, but alone, naked, in the Perspex cot.

Jenny peers in. 'No—oh *God*,' she breathes, biting on her knuckles.

I take her shoulder, gently turn her away. She gives a sharp intake of breath. 'You don't have to look—why don't you—'

'Max,' she says. 'How ironic is this?' Our eyes meet a second, hold.

At least we both know it's no time to talk. A couple of paedrs nurses who've arrived to take the baby to SCBU cluster over the cot while I make a more detailed check. A baby about nine inches long, grossly dysmorphic in ways which don't indicate any known syndrome—a pathetic little scrap, born into a family I know personally. Quite a challenge.

'What's happening? Why's he—?' Daisy asks.

'The paediatrician? It's quite normal. Your baby's very early,' someone responds before I can explain anything. Normal—*normal*?

'Yes—I expect they'll need to—' someone's saying. 'Need to what? Dr Mullins? Max?'

'Yes—yes I'll consult Professor Nicholson—take the usual samples—he's not here at the moment—'

We're all keeping our voices down. The retained pieces of placenta are what worry the others. Jenny goes back to trying to soothe Daisy: Daisy's fully aware there's mystery and trouble. They're both pale, tense. Jenny, I think, is close to tears.

Daze rounds on me, 'Look, just stop lying—what's wrong? Let me see—or tell me! You're Max, who dumped Jenny, aren't you?'

I'm hit in the stomach by her words, but try to keep a cool professional attitude.

'We're just thinking about you—Dr Mullins will explain the baby later—' says the obstetric registrar.

It'd be easiest for me to leave the room taking the baby along in the cot. Jenny's knowledge of early embryos won't help her or me. I could try to ignore and avoid her from now on. But life is suddenly throwing us together repeatedly. I'm exhausted by the whole scenario. As Daze starts up again wanting her child, I snap at Jenny. 'See to your sister.'

She touches Daze's arm, then holds her and looks in her eyes.

'I don't think your baby made it, Daze. I am so, so sorry.'

So Daisy's suspicions are confirmed, and she yells out in grief. Or something. And then someone shouts 'That placenta—we have a bleed!' They bash open the doors to the interconnecting theatre and the whole shebang—all of us—shove Daisy through on her bed. 'Sorry, the sister can't come through!' The doors swing shut.

JENNY

Shuddering a bit, I touch it. Gingerly, I pick it up. Tiny, fragile, warm and blood-smearred.

Vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle? And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? Horrible poem—O-level? Hadn't known what Yeats meant. Know now.

Oh the poor creature, the poor thing! Can't believe myself: tears try to come: it's a kind of a baby. What'll Daze do, think, feel? What'm I feeling, shivering with shock?