

Start

Try to imagine two more different couples than these. You can't. They are as opposite as it gets. Oil and water. Salt and sugar. Always and never. Lost and found.

As midnight came and went, so too did Julius's hope of Anna giving birth exactly then, with the bongos and fire-cracks of the new millennium heralding the baby's arrival.

'Any chance you could push a bit harder, babe?'

'I hope you're joking, you weapons-grade twat,' Anna panted.

'Course!' Julius chuckled.

(He wasn't joking.)

It would've made a perfectly neat nice story. There might even have been some coverage, which could have boosted Julius's stalling pro le. Yes, there might. But the baby didn't come then. So there wasn't. And his disappointment was palpable.

Anna felt the culpability stronger than the waves of intense pain that flooded her body with each contraction. She found herself perversely welcoming the rhythmic spasms as something that was at least tangible and immediate. It was real, and happening right now, and it needed managing, something Anna was supremely skilled at. It gave her an undeniable focus, a job to do, with a result at the end of it. Something to show for her efforts, something to infill the fissures in the marriage, someone she could guide and administer. A little person who would surely listen to her, look up to her and make her feel as though she mattered. Someone to dress nicely. Someone to live because of. A purpose, finally, that wasn't primarily about him. No one could deny her part in this. In this, she shared equal responsibility, if not more. She didn't have to be only Julius's wife. She could be a little child's mother. Finally, she would have made something. With any luck, the next step might be that she could feel something . . .

Something.

Anything.

'Seriously, Jules, please give it a rest.'

'Bloody cheap crap, should've researched it better. Piers has got a brilliant one, got it in the airport in Dubai. Should've done that.'

All the time Anna was attempting to feel something other than groaning birthing pain, Julius was attempting to film his perfect family finally becoming a reality. His irritability about the missed opportunity of a stellar midnight birth was eclipsed by his irritability with his new camcorder, which seemed to be refusing to zoom. The zooming is the most important and impressive element of any successful birth video, surely? Despite Anna's protestations imploring him to 'put that effing thing down, please', and help her instead, he continued to fiddle with it.

Sarah, the older and more experienced Irish midwife, rolled her eyes at her younger colleague as they both witnessed Julius resoundingly deflate their perception of him.

'Could you just move a bit, thanks?' he said, rudely shoving Sarah with his elbow. 'I need to get a good shot of this . . .'

'This,' emphasized Sarah, 'is your good wife, and quite frankly, sir, I don't think she's wanting any close-ups of her noony right now, am I right, lamb?'

'Yep. No,' Anna confirmed between puffs.

Julius took no notice. So Sarah rudely shoved him back with her elbow as she explained to the young trainee midwife, 'Some of our daddies forget themselves in the excitement and, sure, they become utter feckin' pillocks.'

Julius was oblivious.

Sarah was disappointed that he was so singularly NOT the solid, supportive, wife-loving emergent politician he purported to be. Yes, tall, verbose and shiny black, but no Martin Luther King this, she thought. Sarah saw that Julius was a behemoth of self-interest. It was evident that no one could love Julius more than Julius loved himself. An interesting and somewhat terrifying prospect as a potential father . . .

'Oh dear,' Sarah muttered to herself. 'Oh very dear.'

In another room down the corridor, a very different baby is also being hatched.

This room felt almost sacred. Even Hope's occasional muttered blasphemies were holy in their quietly focused devotion. She was praying and cursing in equal measure, to a God that she was eternally grateful to. This baby was a happy surprise.

Ever since Hope moved to London, away from her family in Bristol, she had felt singularly singular. Her loneliness was compounded by the thrust and bustle of so many busy people all around her, all the time. Everyone was going somewhere with a clear sense of purpose, rushing and forever unfriendly. She pretty quickly gave up trying to catch anyone's eye or even smiling. It was a thankless and vaguely humiliating effort, and left her with the sting of rejection to bolt on to her already aching isolation.

Hope was and always would be a natural stickler for high standards. After various placements heading up different cleaning teams, she had been promoted to manager of a fifty-strong team in this very hospital. Hope liked to think that the reason this establishment had a good record regarding MRSA was because of her diligence. The last inspection had been the best they'd had for ten years. Hope was commended.

Hope was delighted.

Hope knew the big move to London was the right thing to have done for her work. The pay was far better, almost three times what she could earn in Bristol. More importantly though, she had been promised the chance of promotion, which was virtually impossible in the smaller city in the relatively monopolized world of commercial cleaning. She would only ever have been a zero-hours contract cleaner there. Offices, universities, schools: wherever the contract sent her, she went. She didn't aspire to a desk job, no, she wanted to work hands on, but she desperately wanted to run her own team and

that's what she could do in London. The main reason Hope wanted to head up her own team was because that was the only way she could ensure the job was done right. It bothered her to be shoddy. Especially when it came to cleanliness. This job was the most natural and satisfying one she'd ever done, however lowly others might regard it to be. She cared not a jot. She wanted to be captain of her small and clean ship. She wanted to steer it, and London was the best port for that opportunity.

And now Hope was grateful to know that she was giving birth in a clean hospital. In a room where her own team made extra visits to make her laugh and prove to her that they were continuing to do their job well in her absence. They put googly eyes on their mops and drew funny faces on their industrial rubber gloves. In two years, these folk were the closest she had come to friends. A disparate group of people, from almost every nation on earth, come to London, like her, to make a decent living. Some spoke very little English, but Hope always found a way to communicate. Sometimes she drew diagrams to help everyone understand her instructions. It was the silly faces from these diagrams that resurfaced on the rubber gloves of her playful workmates when they popped in on her.

Time for visitors was past, however.

The young, newly qualified midwife Fatu was keen to engage Hope's partner Quiet Isaac in conversation about his home in Sierra Leone. Fatu's own mother was from Freetown and she had visited there for the first time the previous year and wanted to share all her holiday 'Yes! I've been there too!' whoops of recognition with him.

Hope was pleased that Quiet Isaac could relate so easily and happily to this stranger. He rarely had the opportunity to regale anyone with stories or news of his home. Of 'Sa Lone'. Most people only showed a passing interest in this young student's heritage, nothing more than that. He relished the chance to drop into his native Krio to share greetings: 'Cu-shah'; and when he asked her how she was – 'How de body?' – he squealed and snapped his fingers with delight when she answered, 'De body fine.' He hadn't heard that familiar reply for too long. It was a warm blanket around his homesick heart, and it was Fatu's way of representing her mother.

Hope was grateful she could be momentarily distracted from the pains that increasingly racked her body. But another wave built; Fatu held her hands. 'Slowly. Steady. Breathe.'

Down the corridor, things are more urgent. Baby Florence is demanding she be born. Pronto.

Julius was impatient. The sooner she arrived, the sooner his 'picture-perfect family' would be complete. Julius sees everything through his own lens, including how his life should look. His heart wasn't really in this, and he was unaware of that particular tragedy.

Florence as a name had been hotly contested between Julius and Anna. It was one of many arguments during the past nine months. Julius didn't entirely approve of the fustiness of it, but was prepared to concede that it was nicely traditional – enough, probably, to help secure a place for her in a decent school in their over-subscribed West London catchment area. He was a lapsed Catholic who found his faith again very quickly when he discovered that the best free schools in his area were denominational. He also had the priest on speed dial to baptize her as soon as possible since he learnt that the selection process favours those who are baptized first, and of course, all the Catholic EU incomers were quick out

of the traps on that. The authentic continental Catholics don't hang about. They don't give the devil a single slice of opportunity to claim the souls of their innocent babies; they know how sneaky and sly he is, and they act quick. If Julius had his way, the baptism would occur on arrival, along with the first blessed breath. In yet another rare moment of assertiveness, Anna had put her foot down. NO. The baby would be baptized in the usual way, in the same - flouncy dress worn by her parents and grandparents and great-grandparents going way back. There would be hats and tears and keepsake thin candles to keep Satan at bay. And there would be presents, thank you. A cushion with 'Florence landed here on 1 Jan 2000' embroidered on it, possibly. And some silver napkin rings with any luck, that can tarnish, neglected, in a drawer for years. Or a posh teething ring not meant for actual teething. Meant for a box under a bed which won't be looked in again, until her room is being turned into a spare guest room when she hopefully departs for a decent university. Those kinds of presents. After all, Anna had given up smoking and alcohol for nine months; surely it wasn't THAT selfish to expect a party for all her efforts. Florence would be baptized in due course, Julius reassured himself, when the celebration could be properly curated for maximum effect and optimum impact. Could there even be a *Hello!* magazine deal . . . ?

Anna's breaths were short and shallow now. She glanced at Julius, who was busy applying mint lip balm. Anna spluttered a laugh but it really hurt, so she stopped. She often laughed at him. AT him. Not with an 'Isn't he charming with all his quaint eccentric ways' kind of laugh. More like an 'I'd better laugh to dilute how awful he is for everyone else' kind of laugh. Giving everyone permission to see him as a loveable buffoon, thereby defusing and allowing his frequent faux pas and insensitivities. He had recently been with her at her best friend's father's funeral. So disinterested and unmoved by the whole sad circumstance was he that afterwards, at the wake, spitting a mouthful of - flakey pastry prawn vol-au-vent, he'd enquired of said best friend how her father was keeping . . . ?

Even then, Anna had over-laughed to bridge the awful moment and to somewhat mollify her beloved grieving chum. It was fairly exhausting to be a constant smokescreen for his blatant idiocy, but she persisted. It was an exercise in damage limitation in which she failed to realize that she herself was the most damaged. The relationship was broken, but they were both clinging to the wreckage.

Well, she was clinging to the wreckage.

He WAS the wreckage.