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My Perfect Baby

by Jane Lucas

In the normal run of things, a baby is judged perfect even when it's patently imperfect: it keeps adults awake, it's never satisfied for long and its demands stretch out for years ahead - yet it is 'perfect'. It cannot be improved upon. We embrace its particularity from the moment it plants itself in its mother's womb.

Lily was still very much at the 'perfect' stage, the imaginary life unrolling ahead stage, for she was still tucked inside her mother, Sophie, at eleven and a half weeks young. The probable gender had been revealed, a name settled on that Sophie had held in reserve since childhood, but all else was unknown and therefore subject to the fantasies of her parents who, like all first-time parents, believe they can buck the evidence all around them and deliver the perfect life as is owed the innocent. They lived in an insecurely rented flat above a newsagent, but it was London. Lily would like that.

Sophie curled in on herself and the baby, experiencing an inner solidity usually denied her. As her girth expanded, her husband Matt grew wider on pizza and beer, having taken early schooling in the commandment of fatherhood that he must feel nothing unless his wife demands it, which is when she needs empathy.

The doctor phoned one evening. The blood test results for potential chromosome abnormality were very high. Sophie cried and Googled worse case scenarios and decided there was no way she was having a follow-up test that might lead to miscarriage. They didn't sleep.

In the morning they made their way to the sleek, modern Foetal Medicine Unit, which stands behind a Victorian psychiatric hospital. They clutched hands, vertiginous, normality replaced by a longing for it to be yesterday. After perching on modern chairs in a space flooded with light from floor-to-ceiling

windows and decorated with modern art, they were called into a side room to sit on a low sofa facing a doctor on an office chair. He was expert in getting patients to decide what was best without them realising he was leading them by the nose so, in a short time, they all agreed that Sophie would have the follow-up test, despite the risk. But they couldn't have the test for two days.

They went home to wait and, in separate rooms, hearts pierced by barbed wire with every beat, thought about 'the baby'. Eventually, they lay in bed.

"I don't care if it's Downs," cried Sophie. "They're just different. I'll still love it. They can't take my baby!" Hot tears broke from her.

"They never leave home," Matt said.

Sophie pummelled his shoulder with her fist. "I hate you!"

"We'd need to take professional advice," he said.

For he had heard the doctor say what Sophie hadn't let herself, that there were twenty-three pairs of chromosomes to be tested for imperfections. Downs was the least of it. Twenty-three! What were the odds of a perfect baby in that?