

PAINS COME AND GO. I'm riding on waves of them. They're nothing like the orgasmic surges described by my New Age birthing teacher, but not nearly as bad as my mother's tales of pelvises split in two and of women losing their minds from the agony.

I suck on gas and air and long for the sight of Tobias's face, full of roguish charm, as if he's inviting the world to share a secret joke with him. When my mother first met him, she told him he looked like a friendly horse. It's a comparison he loathes, but I cherish it.

And finally here he is, his dark curls even more ruffled than usual, typically late for the birth of his first child. His haggard look is, I'm sure, simply due to an ill-timed night out on the town. Tobias is not one of nature's worriers.

I have a moment to be amazed that I knew, from the instant I first clapped eyes on him, lurching about on a dance floor, that he'd be the ideal mate and father of my child. Then the midwife gives a kind of cry: the baby's heartbeat is lost. Suddenly the room is full of lights. People in blue scrubs and masks rush in and Tobias, unshaven and sweaty, is weeping and saying, 'Yes, yes, anything, but please just make sure they're

all right,' and I'm being given an epidural and then I'm having an emergency Caesarean.

They put up a screen and there's a strange rummaging as if somebody is moving furniture around in my insides. I'm drifting in and out of consciousness. And the drugs – the natural ones of childbirth and the sock-off powerful ones of the doctors – must be great because, after nine months of obsessive fretting, I am calm and Zen.

More pulling.

Somebody shouts: 'It's a girl!'

There's a loud wail: my baby is here; she is behind the screen. They won't let me see her. Seconds seem like hours. I'm wild to see her.

Finally, finally, they bring her to me.

She has wide grey eyes, one a bit smaller than the other. I have a second of thinking: she's no beauty. Then a switch flips in my head and the nicest and best possible kind of face is a little lopsided with slightly uneven grey eyes. Tobias appears at my side, weeping uncontrollably with happiness, pride and love.

It's a perfect moment. One of those rare times when you wouldn't prefer to be anywhere else, doing anything else. Where past and future melt away and there's only now.

They're wheeling me out on a trolley with the baby tucked beside me and I'm thinking: this is just the beginning. She's mine now, forever, to have and to hold. We've got all our lives to get to know each other. I feel a flood of love like I've never felt before; it extends to the baby, to Tobias, and radiates out from there, enough of it to light up a whole world.

I've seen a couple of newborn babies before, and each of them was quivering, as if in awe at the splendour of this

world and the immensity of the distance it had travelled. But not this one. My own little space traveller is perfectly serene.

Then she starts to twitch. I catch a glimpse of a clenched fist shaking. Tobias shouts: 'She's having a fit!'

I have a moment of primitive, instinctive dread: Oh no, it's over for this baby. Our normal lives are over.

Once again it looks like a scene from *ER* as doctors in scrubs rush in.



If you want things to happen, you have to plan them. I know this: I'm a chef. To make a béchamel sauce, for instance, you need the right ingredients in the right proportions, at the right time. Measuring, timing, taking care. These are all things I'm naturally good at. Tobias doesn't understand this. He's a musician who composes music for TV documentaries and for short films. He rarely gets up before noon and leaves papers, clothes and the debris of his life strewn everywhere. He is chronically, horrendously late. He says he likes to be open to fate and this he calls creativity. I'm creative too. But you can't be sloppy with a sauce. It just doesn't work.

Since we first started trying to have a baby, I've planned every last detail.

I know:

That our daughter will be called Freya (a nice old-fashioned name with a slightly New Age meaning: a Nordic goddess of love and birth) even though Tobias says I'll have to trample over his dead body first.

That our child will have broad shoulders and lovely long

legs like him and straight light brown hair and wide serious eyes like me.

That she will have his *joie de vivre* and my flair for organisation.

That as soon as we get out of this hospital we're going to sell up and move to the South of France.

So now, as I lie here in a morphine-induced haze, doctors in scrubs whisking Tobias and the baby away can't faze me. My plans are laid. All will be well.

In southern France, the sun will shine kindly on us. The people will be friendly. Our daughter will grow up bilingual, sophisticated, safe from paedophiles. She won't need the latest Nike trainers; she won't eat junk.

I can see the house we'll buy: a cottage in Provence with roses and hollyhocks around the door, a field of lavender dotted with olive trees, the deep blue of the sea merging into the azure sky.

I'm floating over that sea, that field and that house and somewhere, far below, Tobias, the baby and I are living our perfect lives.



I'm awake early.

I want to be with my baby.

It's hard to tell if the morphine's worn off. I'm still woozy and confused, but I'm also in terrible pain.

It's a huge effort to recall where I am: in the small private room the hospital keeps for what it calls special cases. Beside me somebody is snoring, reminding me that Tobias has been allowed to sleep here on a camp bed. On the table next to me my mobile phone starts ringing. I fumble and reject the call.