

SUVI MAHONEN

BLOCKS OF COUVERTURE

Mid-morning sun angles in through the office window, casting a warm line across the surface of Dr Barker's desk. It catches the back of his head and shoulders, making the tips of his curly grey hair glow. He's hunched forward, holding the phone receiver to his ear. In his other hand an uncapped pen bounces between two fingers.

He sighs.

"Still holding," he says, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. His elbow bumps one of the several loose clusters of papers and manila folders on his desk. His computer's switched off. Post-it notes are stuck to the monitor. They blur.

I blink. My eyes feel like fibreglass. I try to focus by looking around the room. Blue carpet. Cream coloured walls. The examination couch on my left. Behind us, near the door, a large bookshelf crammed with textbooks and journals. In the corner a sink, a metal bin.

"Yes. This is Dr Geoff Barker."

I turn back.

"I'm after a first trimester screening result." He leans back in his leather chair. There's a pause. "Dani Jackson." He gives them my date of birth and address. There's a much longer pause.

I look at Mark for reassurance. His lips are thin. His jaw's clenched at a boxy angle and the collar of his red polo top is bent.

Dr Barker jots down some numbers on a pad of paper. "Thank you." He hangs up. "Sorry about that."

I attempt a smile.

He leans forward and clasps his hands and looks at me. "Unfortunately your baby's nuchal fold translucency was a little thicker than average," he says.

My left hand starts to tremble. I steady it with my right. I sit, looking at Dr Barker, feeling them twitch in my lap.

"Do you understand what I mean by that?"

"It ..." I clear my throat. "It means the skin at the back of the baby's neck is too thick."

"That's correct." He glances at the numbers on the pad of paper. "Often it can occur in babies that turn out to be perfectly healthy and normal. But there is also a known association with foetal chromosomal anomalies."

"So what's the risk?" Mark asks.

Dr Barker hesitates. He glances at Mark but addresses me.

"As you may remember me explaining to you at your first antenatal visit, the results of the nuchal fold thickness are combined with the placental hormone levels blood test that you had done last week."

I nod. My tongue's so dry it feels swollen.

"This enables an odds ratio to be calculated of the chances of your baby having Trisomy 21, more commonly known as Down syndrome, or Trisomy 13 or 18."

He looks back down at the pad. I try and read the numbers but it's too messy a scrawl.

"The risk of your baby having Trisomy 13 came back as one in 2400 and Trisomy 18 as one in 1150. That's slightly higher than average for your age but still very low."

I don't want to hear what's right. I need to know what's wrong. "What about Down syndrome?" I say.

He blinks. "One in forty." The shoulder line of his thin striped blue suit sags slightly, as if somehow it's his fault.

The trembling in my lap gets stronger. Mark reaches over and covers my hands with his own.

I sit here as the sun line creeps closer towards me, feeling a weird combination of relief and fear.

One in forty.

It could have been worse. It could have been worse.

It's still pretty bad.

“So what now?” I say.

Every action has its consequences. Every journey has its end.

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I don't really remember much about our drive back home. I think I cried a bit. But mostly I just sat there feeling numb.

My fantasy world had collapsed.

This morning I was Dani Jackson. Thirty-six. In good health and have-to-work-at-it-but-still-reasonable shape. Contentedly married to Mark, my dependable, handsome, hardworking husband. We lived in a large, quirky, stone and timber house in the midst of a mountainous forest. And I loved my job, running a small but expanding artisan chocolate-making business. But, most important of all, after years of pain and chaos and memories forgotten, and then, after all that, a year of trying and waiting and almost giving up, I was finally pregnant, and we were going to become a family.

I told you it was a fantasy world.

So here I am. Tuesday. Eight pm. About to have a shower. Standing in the bathroom, staring in the mirror at Dani Jackson. Thirty-six. Plain, bordering on ugly. Creases deepening, cellulite spreading, crooked nose and blotchy skin. In a difficult-at-times eight-years-and-counting marriage to Mark Jackson, a thirty-eight year old short-tempered workaholic who's still studying and training because of unresolved issues and a tendency towards indecision. The house we live in is cold and dark and expensive to run. And as for my business, no-one takes it seriously and I barely break even, and my dreams of becoming an in-demand maker of award-winning chocolates will almost certainly remain just a dream.

I look away from the pallid woman in the mirror who's standing there dressed only in her underwear. Turning on the tap I splash water on my face and neck. A trickle runs down my cleavage, around my belly button, and stops above the elastic of my briefs.

I look down. I rub my hand over my skin.

At least one dream came true.

I can still see it clearly. Our baby's tiny hands. The little lines of light for fingers. Its legs kicking. Its heart beating. The outline of its face.

Why did we wait so long?

The woman in the mirror, who won't meet my eye knows of many reasons, some mentionable, some not. Me and Mark got together when I was twenty-five. Got married when I was twenty-eight. And having kids straight away wasn't on either of our horizons. But when I turned thirty I started thinking. And the thinkings became maybes, and the maybes became we should. So I told Mark and he said no, let's wait a little longer.

And so we waited.

Travel – let's wait a little longer. Career – let's wait a little longer. House deposit – Let's wait a little longer. Until Mark's a 'little longers' turned into one 'big lot longer.' And then I forced the issue. And then the 'not happened.'

I peel off my underwear, turn on the shower taps and get in, feeling the pinpricks of hot water on my face. I think about how easy it is to ignore time. How easy it is to be in self-denial. How easy to fool yourself into believing that there's plenty of it left. Until, that one day, when you finally wake up to yourself, and you're thirty-five, and you realise that your life to this point really hasn't added up to all that much.

And then you start to panic.

Perhaps there was a part of me that didn't mind. In a way I'd enjoyed the solace of mundane thirty-something couple-no-children predictability and comfort. Especially after that night at the train station, when for a long time I drew in, drew back, avoiding any confrontation.

Even with my husband.

Eventually though I had to move on. I set things in motion. Flicked a rail switch so to speak. And now our lives were hurtling towards an unknown destination.

Unfortunately we were on separate tracks.

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I enter my office and creak the door shut behind me. In the dark I make my way to the desk by feel and boot up the computer and wait for the electronic wheezes and grunts to settle down. By the time I've finished googling chorionic villus sampling, amniocentesis, chromosome analysis, and Down syndrome, my headache's worse, my shoulder's burning, and the little clock on the bottom right hand corner of the screen says 2:13 a.m.

I stay as I'm sitting, too tired to move, listening to the faint high-pitched hum of the monitor. Eventually the screen saver starts and the room darkens in the fraction of black as it does. Straightening up I grip the mouse and google again.

I find a website called YourPregnancyDotCom. 'We cover everything' the homepage boasts above a photo of a cute dimply baby. I go to the forum section. Registering under 'Confused36' I click on the new topic button and type in 'Unhelpful Husband'. Underneath, in the dialogue box, I type:

My husband's trying to bully me into having a CVS. What do I do?

I press Send.

I sit staring at the screen. It starts going hazy. I scrunch my eyes, rub them, roll them, open them widely. I look at the mug of tea I'd drunk the morning of the ultrasound, the four-day-old tea tag stiff and crusted to its side. I go to shut down. I've poised the arrow over the X when, suddenly:

Re: Unhelpful Husband

pops up on the screen.

I lean forward and squint. Who else would be up and on this website at this time of night? Someone tagged 'PixieBump' apparently. She hasn't minced words:

Leave him :)

Despite myself I smile. I type back:

I was being serious.

A few seconds later:

So was I!

I'm wondering how to respond when another message from PixieBump appears:

Sounds like you're having a shitty time.

I type back:

Yes I am. Very shitty.

PixieBump:

Want to tell?

My fingers race over the keyboard:

We've been trying since the beginning of last year and it's been a long, long slog of ovulation calendars, healthy living, disappointing one-lined pregnancy tests and so many timed sperm deposits that I think even my husband was starting to lose interest. I had almost resigned myself to going down the IVF road when I finally found out I was pregnant. Got some bad news yesterday though – my first trimester test has come back as high risk for Down syndrome and my husband's pressuring me to have a CVS.

I press Send. Several minutes pass. I look at my *Koko Black* wall calendar. I get up and flip it over to February. When I get back she's replied:

Congratulations on being pregnant!! Sorry your husband's being an arsehole though. Ignore him. It's your choice not his. Men can't understand. They don't have the same bond with pregnancy that we do. Is this your first baby? How many weeks pregnant are you?

For a moment I'm tempted to crawl under the desk and unplug the computer. Instead I count backwards from thirty then type:

Twelve weeks and five days. That's part of the problem. Mark wants me to have a CVS ASAP so we can have time to "think about our options" before I start to show.

PixieBump:

Men can be so tactful. Sounds like he knows what he wants. But what about you?

I pause. Then type:

I don't know. To be honest I'm not sure if Mark definitely knows either. Unfortunately he's the sort of guy who can't tolerate uncertainty and it hurts me that he wants me to have a procedure that's a risk to our baby just so he can find out.

Her response:

It's hard when you're being pressured. BTW I know someone who had a CVS. It's kind of like an amnio isn't it?

My reply:

Yes. But the CVS can be done earlier (10 weeks instead of 15) and it carries twice the risk of causing a miscarriage. Probably because when the needle is stuck in, instead of sampling fluid from around the baby it actually takes a biopsy of the placenta.

It suddenly strikes me that I have no idea who I'm chatting to. I add another line before pressing Send.

What about yourself? How many weeks are you? Do you have any kids?

PixieBump messages back:

Just the one – Andrew. He's three. Plus current bump of course (24 weeks). Judging by the jumping it feels like she'll take after her hyperactive older brother. Speaking of which I'd better go and check on him. The playroom's gone quiet which usually = trouble.

Playroom? I type:

Andrew must be hyperactive if he's up and playing this early in the morning!

The minutes tick by. I sit with only the whine of a mosquito at the window for company. Great. I've just met an online stranger who sounds friendly and now I've gone and insulted her by implying that her son should be on Ritalin. My momentary lift from the unexpected webchat is ebbing away when her reply flashes onto the screen:

Early in the morning! LOL. It's 3:45 in the afternoon sweetie. Where in the world (literally) are you? Found out why the playroom was so quiet – miracle of miracles the little man was asleep!

I choose my words more carefully this time:

Glad to hear he's napping. I live on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. What about you?

PixieBump replies:

St Albans, aka outer northern outskirts of London, England. Sounds like you should go and have a lie down. I can only imagine what horrible time of night it is down there.

I've been dismissed. With good intentions to be fair but dismissed nonetheless. I can't blame her. She must have better things to do. I'm wondering how to say goodbye in a casual yet grateful kind of way when she posts me a final message:

BTW my email address is pwoodruff@yahoo.co.uk in case you ever want to chat or debrief about anything. It was great to meet you Confused36. Best of luck. And remember, the choice is up to you.

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Two days later I pull into the car park overlooking the dam. Apart from a white ute sitting sideways near the entrance no-one else is here. I drive past a set of splintery picnic benches and park at the end behind a green metallic pump shed. Faded yellow lines, crumpled beer cans on the verge, grass growing through bitumen cracks. Below, a crescent of still waters. Beyond, a ragged horizon of trees, a distant plume of smoke.

When I got into the car this morning I just sat there for ages. Windows wound down a few centimetres, keys in the ignition, garage door closed. Eventually I let go of the keys and got out and opened the garage door and got back in and reversed out the driveway. As I shifted into first I was shaking so much I found it hard to steer.

I sit here, engine off and ticking, gripping the gearstick and wheel. My hands start to cramp. I detach them, claw-like, and stretch out my fingers. I look at my indented palms. Trace the lifelines with my eyes.

I think of Darryl, Nicky's older 'little' brother, and how fascinated he was with other people's hands. How he'd try and 'trick' you by saying 'Hi Five'. How he'd grab your hands and measure his stubby fingers against yours. How he always wanted to play thumb wrestle. How he was sometimes too rough.

I remember back to that summer between grades four and five when me and Nicky were best friends. The times we'd push her bed across the door to stop Darryl from coming in. The way we'd keep quiet until the knocks and mushy-mouthed 'Nuckee's' finally went away. Later we'd sneak out to make ourselves Milos. Sometimes a Barbie was missing when we came back. She'd track him down. I'd follow. He'd always be in his same hiding spot, behind the stack of old pallets next to the packing shed. When he'd see us he'd grin and point at Barbie's chest and say 'Boobies', twist open the plastic legs and say 'Bum'. How loud he'd laugh, rivulets of snot. The dull-lidded hurt look on his face when she'd snatch Barbie back and hiss 'Retard'.

I sift through other memories, some vivid, some hazy.

The faces our classmates would pull and the noises they'd make whenever the special bus drove past. Nicky crying after being teased that their mum had had sex with an ape. The many times she wasn't at school because Darryl was in Cairns Base with his heart and kidney problems. That Sunday we were all out in Nicky's front yard and the tough boys from high school cycled past and yelled 'Mongo' at Darryl and flicked cigarette butts at him. Darryl laughing, loving the game. The tough boys laughing when they hit his face. The solemn promise I made when Nicky told me that the real reason Toby, their pet dog, had been moved to a farm was because Darryl kept pulling down his pants and letting Toby lick his bum.

I stare out at the glinting blue waters, watch the shadow of a cloud as it slowly passes over. The back of my throat tastes like how rancid coleslaw smells. I power all the windows all the way down. Lean out. Spit.

'At first you don't realise how lucky you really are,' a blogger on a Down syndrome support group forum had said. 'You can't imagine how much joy and love they'll bring to your life. We thank God for trusting us with His wonderful gift.'

I close my eyes and lean back against the headrest.

If there is a god and Down syndrome is so wonderful then how come we're not all born with it?

One in forty.

How convenient. How simple. The chance of your life altering forever. The chance of your life getting so much worse. All boiled down to a simple fraction.

Last night, after Mark went to bed, I took the ultrasound photo – the one Kate seemed so reluctant to print out – off the fridge and went into my office. I kept holding the photo up to the monitor, comparing it to internet pictures of first trimester foetuses with Down syndrome. I don't remember falling asleep, but I do remember dreaming. When I woke up my face was in the keyboard, my legs were totally pins and needles and the computer screen had frozen. I couldn't find the photo. I didn't look for long.

The sun's in my face now. Blood red vision through closed lids. I shade my shut eyes and listen to the corpulent hum of a blowfly. Smell the resin and dry grass.

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I wake with a fright, back twinging as I bolt upright, doona spilling off me. As I sit, neck quivering, T-shirt stuck to my skin, the room slowly forms in the fragments of moonlight coming through the trees. Chest of drawers, bookcase, cherry-wood chair in the corner. Mark's sleeping hump next to me.

I pinch the skin at the base of my throat. Squeeze hard until pain flares in my eyes. When my heart finally slows down I check the clock.

It's three fifty-three.

I know what I need to do.

I've already emptied the dishwasher, checked there's enough supplies and swept and mopped the kitchen floor when the alarm goes off. A few minutes later there's footsteps on stairs and Mark appears, lopsided hair and scrumpled boxer shorts.

I'm lining trays with waxed paper.

"Morning."

"Morning."

I see him raise an eyebrow at the bottle of corn syrup and the three blocks of dark couverture on the counter. I wait for it.

"I better go have my shower," he says.

I'm having mine when he leaves for work.

The morning sun is sprawling into the kitchen, burnishing the copper pots and gleaming off the aluminium trays, by the time I start tempering. It's dusk outside and the trays are almost full when Mark comes home.

Already? I glance at the clock. I'm in the middle of dipping truffles. I dunk one into the melted chocolate. Hold it under till it drowns.

"Hi."

"Hi."

I look up as he appears around the corner. His dark hair's flattened, the top button of his Baurbridge & Kay shirt undone, tie missing in action, smile a little forced.

"Someone's been busy," he says, looking around the kitchen.

Almost every square inch of the benches and island top are covered with tray after tray of chocolates. There's shiny half globes of pralines, miniature gourmet cups, neat lines of logs in a variety of flavours, crispy clusters of brittle, decorated hand-dipped squares, and a plague of chocolate mice both brown and white. There's also the inevitable mess – a sink overflowing with moulds, spatulas, mixing blades, and whisks and a pile of dirty bowls balancing precariously next to it.

"Should we get take out tonight?"

"It's Wednesday," I say, picking up a sticky ball of ganache and pressing it onto the dipping fork with a little more force than necessary. "We don't eat take out on Wednesdays."

He stands there watching me while I dip the ganache into the bowl of melted chocolate and take it out and let it drip. I drop the truffle into the topping pan and roll it back and forth in the cocoa. He keeps watching. I keep rolling.

"What!" I glare at him.

The lines under his eyes are deep, the room behind him dim.

"We need to talk about Friday."

The cocoa powdering my hands starts to muddy.

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

Another one of his pauses. He glances sideways, exhales slowly through his nose.

"So you've made up your mind then."

I pick up the tray of lemon mint squares, open the cupboard door beneath the island and slot the tray into the drying rack. I stay squatting for a second, admiring the neatly lined squares of chocolate, the thin slivers of sugared peel set diagonally across each one.

"It's a one in forty chance for goodness sakes," he says behind me. "Don't I get a say in this too?"

My knees pop as I stand. I look my husband in the eyes. "You've already had your say."

They harden. "We haven't talked properly and you know it."

I stare at him. He stares back. He turns and gestures to the couch. "Can we at least sit down?"

I hesitate.

"Please?"

We go over to the TV nook and sit. Two vague reflected humps on the blank plasma screen. Despite myself I start giggling.

"What's so funny?"

I stop. I bring my feet up and twist around to face him cross-legged. "You brought me here. You speak."

"Okay then." His features smooth out in the light from the kitchen. "If the baby has Down syndrome I think we should try again."

"Which means?..."

He flushes. "You know what it means."

My eyes start pulsing. "Say it then!" I yell. I slap his thigh so hard it hurts my hand. "Say it you coward."

He recoils. I go to leave. He catches the back of my smock. I claw at his fingers.

"Abortion."

I stop twisting his thumb.

"There," he says. "I've said it. Now sit back down."

"Not until you let go of me."

He does. I balance my bum on the armrest and look down at him. He's sitting in my shade, shoulders slumped, head tilted down a fraction.

"If the baby has Down syndrome, then yes, I would prefer if you had a termination."

"Abortion."

"Abortion. But I wouldn't pressure you into having one."

"I don't believe you."

He looks up at me, eyes surprisingly white. "Have you really thought about it Dan? Have you thought about how hard it would be? I mean do you really think you could handle it?"

I hop off the couch. Fists clenched.

"Of course I know it would be fucking hard. That doesn't change the fact that it's still our baby." I point at my belly. "It's already in there Mark. Don't you feel anything for it for arse sakes? It's as much a part of you as it is of me!"

He leans forward and smothers his face in his hands. "I know." Voice muffled. "It's just ..." He looks up, bleary eyed. "A child with Down syndrome. I'm not sure if I could do it."

I feel numb. This isn't my husband.

"Yes you can," I say. "If you have to you will."

I stare at him defiantly. Out of my shade he's different. It's night now, and the glow from the

kitchen lights illuminates the right side of his face Phantom of the Opera-like. The left side of his face is in darkness.

"I think I know why you won't have the CVS", he says softly. "It's not the small risk of miscarrying that's stopping you. I think you'd prefer not to know because if you did find out that the baby has Down syndrome, you'd want to terminate as well."

It's easier to get angry again than try and deny it. I go to the TV cabinet, pick up a DVD and frisbee it at him.

It misses.

"Fuck off!" I scream. "That's not the issue is it? The issue is you've never really wanted to be a father and you're looking for an excuse to get out of it again. Fine then. Fuck off. If you're not going to be part of all this you can fuck off and leave."

I stride into the kitchen and snatch the handset from its wall-mounted base.

"What are you doing?"

My fingers are shaking so much I have to hang up and redial twice.

She picks up on the fourth ring.

"Hi Mum," I say. "Guess what. I'm pregnant!"

