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The Rise and Fall of a Yummy Mummy

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Extract

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Prologue

As catastrophes go, it was a quiet one. You wouldn't have known that my world had imploded. I didn't talk about what happened, I stitched it up inside. A single girl might have sulked over a few cocktails before dieting defiantly and declaring 'Next!'. My affairs were more complicated. I was eight months pregnant. And Joe remained the proud expectant dad. He'd still trace my hard bump with fascinated fingers, kiss the heat off my bruised breasts. I was his, impregnated, fat and cosseted. But I wasn't enough.

It was an unseasonably warm autumn. An 'Indian summer' the breakfast TV weatherman crowed as if he'd divined it himself. That particular September morning I was awoken early by the baby pushing out its tiny palms like pastry cutters under the skin. Too tired to feel enchanted, I gracelessly levered myself out of my enormous bed. (Bought for sex when I was single. Look where it got me.) Pulling up the blind, residential Kilburn revealed itself in slices. The taste of next door's bacon slithered in through the gap in the window frame.

Another day, hungry, drunk on hormones. Another day being Amy Crane, celebrated Pregnant Person. Strangers

smiled at me then. Needless to say, they don't any more. My mother says that this is because I sport a scowl. I say I'm just squintily short sighted and don't like wearing glasses. And in any case, Mum knows how to extract a scowl better than anyone.

Joe smack-kissed my tummy. 'Must go,' he said. 'Meeting. Out of the office. You have a lovely day.' He was dressed in a tan linen suit, an artfully crumpled good one. Birkenstocks. All dangerously Soho. But his great size and unselfconscious lollop – his head arrives a few inches before the rest of him, not because of a stoop, but rather due to an eagerness to get behind his Apple Mac – stop him from looking camp. The door slammed. Clump, clump down the steps – he used to jump every other one, doesn't now – and then the dry drag of his sandals on the pavement. Why is it that things sound different in the sunshine? You can hear the weather.

I lay back on the bed but a pile of bricks weighed down on my spine. Besides, croissants called. Five, perhaps six. Barely touched the sides. The best thing about being pregnant was the licence to eat with complete impunity, like a naturally thin person. Once I gave birth it transpired that the baby only accounted for a fraction of my pregnancy weight. Only Joe thought this funny.

Beep! A text. Joe.

Mt regents pk boat lake caf 12

Sweet. We hadn't arranged anything. But it was the first week of my maternity leave and Joe guessed I didn't know what to do with myself. After years of moaning about the nine-to-five I felt vaguely lost without its scaffolding. My intention to use that precious last bit of 'free' time productively – art galleries, foreign film matinees and girlie lunches –

had yet to be realised. No, I preferred cool, private, unsociable baths. I needed to wash all the time that summer. Pregnancy made me secrete hot sticky female stuff, like sex juice, but not. That was the last thing on my mind.

Flumping in, I displaced half the bath water. An archipelago of fleshy islands that broke the filmy surface, my shape barely human, nothing like those neat celebrity pods you see in magazines. After drying myself down – each pat indenting my waterlogged skin like a footprint – I squeezed into a tube of maternity Lycra and covered the mud splatter of pregnancy pigmentation marks on my forehead with a layer of thick foundation. A squirt of useless non-toxic deodorant and I was off, thudding forth on cracked heels.

The tube made me anxious. I knew I'd be the last person to escape through the cramped emergency exits should an emergency arise. I'd never felt so vulnerable. Protesting at the flood of adrenaline, the baby corkscrewed inside. The carriage smelt. The man sitting next to me scratched his scalp noisily. Then he sniffed his finger and I thought I might swoon with disgust. Surfacing at Baker Street I breathed deeply between cars to avoid asphyxiating my baby with exhaust fumes and, following the loop of the lake, walked through Regent's Park, slowly, like I was wearing one of those Hollywood fat suits.

Chinese ducks with calligrapher-drawn faces, moorhens, drab brown females and a heron, one leg bent back as though assuming a particularly punishing yoga pose. Bucolic, for the city. I waddled breathlessly up a small arched bridge to get a better view. To my right, through the horse chestnuts, rose the bronze dome of the Regent's Park Mosque. Behind the willow tree, to my left, was the boating lake, bobbing sky blue rowing boats. On the other side of the bridge, the café. My phone beeped.

Sent while I was underground. Great. I leant my cargo against the wooden handrail and considered a compensation prize from the café. Bagels? Magnum? A flapjack would be nice. Suddenly I heard a laugh, nasal, screechy, like a parakeet. I looked to my left. And that's when I saw him, from behind, in the umbrella of shadow cast by a willow tree. If I'd looked two seconds later, or shut my eyes in rapture over flapjacks, I would have missed him. I really wish I had. But he is unmistakable from behind, even at a distance. Who was he with? Cursing my short sight, stomach on spin cycle, I gripped the handrail of the bridge. Damn my impressionist vision! Then they walked away, into the light. And what I saw ruined everything. So I ran. Not terribly fast, obviously.

One

It's just as well that I stopped caring whether men looked at me after that because now they don't, not even a quick double-take. I can weave through crowds without the slightest sexual ripple. Like a woman in her sixties perhaps, or in a burka. Of course, there's no reason why anyone would look. I'm no longer a blooming Pregnant Person. Nor am I sideshow ugly, comically obese or in any way beautiful or striking. No, I'm five-foot-four-and-a-half inches, thirty-one years old, ten-stone-six, with dyed blonde hair (two-inch mousy roots) and washed-out-denim eyes. The lashes I used to get tinted are now pale as a pig's. After years of blasting my salary on blow-dries and beauty counters, my monthly grooming budget – mostly products for thinning hair and breast pads – now amounts to little more than the price of a Chanel nail varnish. No, I'm not one of those women who pinged back to their pre-baby selves, not in any way. I'm irreparably changed. And I dress accordingly. Today: three-year-old Nike Airs, drawstring M&S khakis and a blue T-shirt that slips off my shoulders to reveal feeding-bra straps sprouting elastic. My other clothes, from my pre-baby life, no longer fit.

So no wolf-whistles and, a little more crushingly, no competitive size-ups by other women. (It's funny the things you miss.) Only the care-in-the-community loons and charity chuggers note my passing. Which made the following incident all the more extraordinary.

Last Wednesday, on the Salusbury Road, Queen's Park, 3.15 p.m. Handsome and surf-dirt blond, he was wheeling a hand-painted, rainbow-striped mountain bike along the pavement. Taut brown legs scissoring in neon yellow cycle shorts, he was muscular, short, built like a hammer. I'd just nipped into the pub, pretended that I was looking for someone so that the landlord thought I was a customer before stealing into the Ladies. My bladder isn't quite what it was. On my way out I walked straight into him, grazing my knee on his pedal. I said sorry. He said sorry. He flirted his eyes up, then down and grinned shyly. Jolting with embarrassment, I walked away, a sharp trot, past the Queen's Park dads – accessorised with baby slings and expensive trainers – browsing the estate agent's windows, the cappuccino drinkers at the pavement café and the low plateaux of jostling heads that made up a crowd of school children. I was aware, even then, that the fleeting flush of attention changed the way I walked. My spine lengthened in a supermodelish kind of way. My head craned up so that I looked straight ahead, on an eye level with others, rather than at the unfolding grey landscape of pavement. Of course, with hindsight, this exacerbated the situation. It took me until I had passed the third avenue (about six minutes) before I realised I had four sheets of white loo paper flagged to the sole of my left trainer.

No such delusions today. A twig is caught in the back right wheel of the pram, ticking time with each rotation as I walk along Brondesbury Road (unnoticed). It's breezy but unusually warm, like the low setting on the hairdryer I haven't used for

months. Blossom, dense as broccoli on the trees. Shit, there I go again, already thinking about food and it's only six o'clock. There's a buzz of people escaping work, impatient to get home before the last of the sunshine slopes off into the chill of the May evening. I love London like this. It reminds me of when I was single. That exciting smell of spring – cigarettes, beer, camellia blossom, low-hung pollution – is the smell of libido rising, the promise of skimpy dresses, damp knickers and brown feet. It means everything when you're single. Now what does it mean? A parasol on Evie's pram. A tooth. Solids.

'Honey, you're home!' Joe's attempt at an American accent.

He opens the door as I twiddle the key, so I fall forward. He catches me. Whoa! I get a double-take flash – I've been getting these a lot recently, still a little startled that this life is mine – and see Joe distinctly, as if for the first time. Not bad looking, not at all. A big man. Over six foot, coat hanger shoulders, a smile wide enough to glimpse the mercury fillings in his molars. Eyes, Atlantic blue, feathered with ink-black lashes. He's by far the most attractive one in this relationship now. The power has shifted.

Joe stumbles, tripping on a plastic brick. While this would make me curse, he tuts affectionately. He loves our baby's imposition, the clues to her six-month-old existence. A contented father. A good catch. Still, most women would have confronted him, I know that. But if you absolutely can't risk losing, you don't play, do you?

'Got off early,' he says.

'That makes a change.' Joe is usually home late. He runs his business hours infuriatingly erratically. I never know where he is from one day to the next, which leaves me wondering.

He ruffs up his sleeves exposing wide freckled forearms. 'Thought I'd come and see what mischief you two got up to when I'm not here.'

'Now you know. Wild Bacchanalian sex orgies, blizzards of cocaine . . .'

Joe grins shyly. 'Er, I've got something for you. A present.'

'Oh fab. No birthday required.' My last present involved a travel bottle steriliser and a recent photograph of me which he'd doctored in Photoshop, removing the bags under my eyes and my post-partum chins. (He didn't understand why I was offended.)

Joe peers into the pram. 'Asleep, good.' He wheels it into a nook of the hall and swivels it to face the wall. 'Amy . . .'

Joe lunges for my hand and folds it into his, digging his fingers into my palm. When we first met I loved his big hands, like the Green Cross Code man, the way they made mine look so pretty and doll-like. We haven't held hands for a long time.

'I just want you to know that . . .'

I brace myself. What have I done wrong now?

'. . . You're an amazing mother. Maybe I don't say it enough.'

We stare at each other, slightly embarrassed. We don't operate in this gear. We don't do soppiness. Life with a baby requires practicality, organisation, a delegation of tasks. Romance is too time consuming and susceptible to awkward misunderstandings.

'But there *has* to be more to our relationship than parenting.' He looks down, slightly embarrassed by his own sincerity. 'We must not forget about us, Joe and Amy *the couple*. It's been tough. But a happy couple make the best parents.'

I recognise this line from the 'The Shock of the New' chapter of his well-thumbed baby manual.

Joe whips out a bag from behind his back. 'So I got you this.' The box is nipple pink and long and flat with the words Agent Provocateur scrawled across it in bordello writing.

'Wow, thanks.' Paroled from his grip, I open the box and peel away the layers of tissue paper. Oh! A froth of pale pink and black lace. A bra! After all my industrial strength maternity bras I'm stunned by its gossamer lack of substance, its defiance of function. 'Oh Joe, so beautiful.'

'Obviously you can't wear it yet, it's got underwiring,' he says authoritatively. 'Something nice for when you finish breastfeeding. I intended to just get you the knickers but it matched and the lady in the shop said . . .'

'Shush, I'm impressed.' Joe's never bought me lingerie before. But it hadn't been needed. Didn't matter what knickers I was wearing, they came off. But that was before my life was measured out in fluid ounces.

'I did my homework,' he says quietly, eyes fever bright.

I try not to dwell on the nature of his homework. There is more! I rummage into the tissue paper. Lacy knickers! 'How pretty!' How alien. (I still wear my maternity knickers a lot. They're very comfortable.) I hold the knickers up. Oh Christ! The gusset splits in two. A ribbon-seamed hole where my bottom should be hidden. 'My bum isn't up to this.'

'Don't be silly, you've got a great bum. Put them on. Go on. Evie's asleep.' Joe's big frame is silhouetted against the wall lamp. He is the shape of a men's lavatory graphic.

'Later. After supper.'

'You always say that. Let's seize the moment . . .'

I flip through my excuses. Tired? It's only six thirty. Period? Duh! I'm breastfeeding. There are none. Apart from the obvious, and I can't go there. So I carry my pretty pink box upstairs and peel off my big nude pants (where did I get these from? why?!) and M&S maternity bra. Gawd! My

matted triangle of pubic hair is like an illustration from a seventies print of *The Joy of Sex*. I haven't trimmed it since, well . . . I can't remember. I grab the sharpest thing I can find, a pair of blunt nail scissors, and snip manically at my pubic mop until it resembles a badly mown lawn, then pull the underwear on in a fast, functional way, as if I were in a changing room full of lithe teenagers slithering into size sixes.

Lo! The bra manages to compensate for my lost oomph with some clever architecture, but the knickers pinch the pancake of flesh that folds over my wonky caesarean scar, my 'crooked smile' as Joe calls it. (My bikini line clearly wasn't the surgeon's priority.) Pubes spike out of the lace. When I open my legs there's a draught. And when I turn? Oh dear. A hole showing my bum cheek cleavage, tied with a bow. A bow! God. I don't look sexy. I look ludicrous. I look like a reader's wife.

'What're you doing in there?'

I can't walk down the stairs like this, bottom wobbling, so exposed. What if Joe compares me to other women? (*His* other women?) And more to the point, why is he doing this? This is humiliating, sadistic behaviour.

'Wah, wahhhhh, wahhhhh . . .'

Impeccable timing. Saved! I throw on my towelling dressing gown (towelling is milk-absorbent, my silk one is ruined) and stomp downstairs. Joe has Evie in his arms and paces the stripped wood floor in the living room, singing 'The Wheels on The Bus' under his breath. The answerphone light blinks. Two messages. Thankful for something to do, I depress the button.

'*Hi-yahhh!* Sue here. I'm organising a group rendez on Monday, 10.30 at Teaz Time, Willesden Lane. All the girls should be there. Oh, by the way, Oliver has a new tooth! It's the sweetest. *Bye now!*'

Every development of Oliver's is 'the sweetest'. Sue is the sweetest too. Sue is what's known as An Amazing Friend. There's nothing she likes better than discussing birth stories. She phones all the time, offers information on inoculations, commiserates about the disturbed nights, offers to take the baby for a couple of hours, an offer which, to my knowledge, nobody has taken up because you don't want to get into an exchange situation with her. You don't want to be beholden somehow.

Beep beep beep.

'Amy, Alice. Done our duty, we're going dancing. I'll pick you up Friday at eight. Glad rags on! Call me if a problem. Later.'

Alice! My new friend Alice. We were 'put in touch' by Sophie, a workmate at Nest PR – where I worked in my pre-baby past life – because we live close-by and both have babies (although Alice's is almost a year older, so in baby terms, a different species). I think Sophie thought I might be lonely. Having a baby is like belonging to an exclusive dating club, or being Jewish. You get introduced. Just not to women you want to date. Most of them you've got nothing in common with bar exhaustion, which limits conversation rather. But it was different with Alice. We met a few weeks ago at the Porchester Baths, Bayswater, by the shallow end with our babes in armbands like Bertie Bassets. She said she'd be the one in the bikini. It was lip-gloss pink with shells on the ties. In a pool filled with mothers in M&S navy swimming costumes with low-cut legs, Alice stood out.

'How rude is she? So bloody presumptuous.' Joe is angry because I've ruined the mood by opting to press the telephone's buttons, not his. But then I don't seem to do that anymore, with or without expensive underwear.

'Oh it's fine. She's a bit of a character.'

'But she hardly knows you! What makes her think you'd want to go out dancing when you've got a six-month-old baby and you're not getting any sleep and you're breastfeeding? The whole point of you two meeting up was to have someone to go to play groups and things with, not—'

'Sadly, I've got absolutely nothing to wear. Any half decent items of clothing are three sizes too small.'

'Exactly,' Joe says, visibly relieved. 'Besides, Evie's too little. I really don't think you'd enjoy it.'

This gets me. Joe presuming what I'd enjoy! Like everything at the moment, my instinct is just to oppose him. Pulling in the opposite direction is a way of creating space in our newly shrunken life.

'On second thoughts,' I clear my throat, 'maybe a night out would do me good. I haven't been out for months. I must have *something* that won't get me turned away at the door.' Joe's face sags with disappointment. 'You'll be fine here with Evie, won't you?'

Joe looks doubtful. It's all very well me living under a six o'clock curfew, different for him. 'I was planning . . .'

I push hair out of my eyes to give Joe a don't-go-there glare. As my arm shifts, the towelling dressing gown gapes open to reveal a frothy flash of pink lace. Joe stares, shocked. My newly packaged flesh seems wildly inappropriate here, in the chilly hall, caught in the crossfire of the unsaid. He looks away, ignores it.

'. . . We were hoping to go out for dinner this Friday. Remember? You did ask your mum if she could babysit?'

'I did. She can't,' I lie.

Later that evening, after Evie's bath and putting her to bed – listening to her scream, getting up, stroking her head, trying to remember what that supernova nanny preached on TV, letting her scream and feeling horribly guilty – I collapse

on the sofa. Joe sits down heavily next to me, beer in hand. A repeat of *ER* is on. I'm so tired I can't follow it. I just watch the mouths move, like bad dubbing. Joe's ham hand worms its way under the towelling, on my knee.

'Darling, you look so sexy in this.' He rubs his hand between my legs.

Nothing. I feel nothing. It's like trying to strike a damp match. I curl up, squishing his hand and restricting its movement. 'Not now, I'm so tired.'

'Suppose you must be,' he says, hand quickly retreating to the easy predictability of the TV remote control.

Gussetless on the sofa, sleep seduces instead.