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William's Progress

Written by Matt Rudd

Published by HarperPress

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MATT RUDD

WILLIAM'S PROGRESS

Another Horror Story



Harper*Press*
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

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First published by Harper*Press* in 2010

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Illustrations by Simon Spilsbury

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

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ISBN 978-0-00-730898-9

Set in Minion with Clarendon display by
G&M Designs Limited, Raunds, Northamptonshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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JANUARY

'Somewhere on this globe, every ten seconds, there is a woman giving birth to a child. She must be found and stopped.'

Sam Levenson

Tuesday 1 January

I am a father.

I have a son.

My son is alive.

My wife is alive.

My son and my wife are both alive.

I am alive.

We are all alive. Happy new year.

I am a father. Right now. As of forty-three minutes ago. For forty-three minutes, I have been a father.

* * *

It must have been the cold air hitting me when I stepped out of the maternity ward. Not just the cold air, of course. I am perfectly capable, under normal circumstances, of not fainting in the face of cold air. There were other contributing factors, too. Lack of food, for instance. I hadn't eaten for forty-six hours. You lose your appetite when your wife is groaning at you and the midwives are barking at you and no one's dilating quickly enough and everything's going wrong. For forty-six hours.

The only sustenance I'd had during the whole debacle was a gulped whisky during the small hours of the first night of the two-night labour when it was only me and Isabel (and the bump). The whisky was purely medicinal. We'd been 'in labour' for a good eighteen hours by then and I needed something to stiffen my resolve and prevent me from running, screaming, from the house. What a huge mistake that was. Running, screaming, from the house would have been a far more sensible course of action than staying for the full *Reservoir Dogs* experience. Isabel and the bump would have managed fine without me.

Lack of sleep: that's another of the extenuating circumstances leading to my fainting in a bush next to the ambulance bay. I have never stayed up for forty-six hours in my life. Hardened SAS men give up sensitive military secrets if they are kept awake for that long. But I'm not a hardened SAS man, and I wasn't allowed to sleep. Or I might have been allowed, but I never dared ask: one doesn't want to appear unsupportive during these (many) hours of need.

As it turns out, the first eighteen of the forty-six hours, the ones in the run-up to the whisky, weren't *actual* labour. They were only pre-labour, a sort of softening-up phase God threw in so that everyone would be completely exhausted gibbering wrecks by the time the proper labour began.

I didn't enjoy the pre-labour. I'm pretty sure Isabel didn't, either. She was having are-you-sure-this-isn't-the-actual-labour contractions every fifteen minutes or so. And when I say contractions, I mean

proper on-all-fours, groaning and screeching and spitting like the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*. With me, frantic, helpless, stroking her lower back like they encouraged in the prenatal classes. And her saying, 'What the fuck are you doing?' and me saying, 'It's okay, darling. Swearing is a good release. They said that in the NCT class.' And her saying, 'Okay, well stop fucking tickling my back or I'll fucking kill you,' and me saying, 'Yes, darling'. And then her head spinning around 360 degrees.

That was the pre-labour. Eighteen hours, punctuated only by a midwife coming round and saying, 'Well done, dear,' before leaving again. And me, about halfway through, saying, 'Are you sure you want to stick with the whole home-birth plan, because we could go to hospital like everyone else? They have nice monitors and tubes and drugs there and stuff.'

And then the whisky. Thank God for the whisky. For a minute, a beautifully precious minute, peace and quiet. Nerves settling. The clock saying 1.30 a.m. and me wondering whether I could sneak in forty winks since we all seemed to be relaxing into this whole giving-birth thing.

No. Oh no. The moment of tranquillity evaporated as soon as Isabel gave out a real, proper, blood-curdling scream. It was a new noise altogether, a noise that, if you heard it in the distance while you were sitting in a safari truck halfway through a night drive in the Okavango Delta, would prompt you to immediately ask the ranger to drive you back to the camp. It was a noise that would chill a man to the very core, make him drop to his knees and pray, even though he doesn't believe in God, to make this all stop happening.

MY PRAYER

Dear Lord,
If you can get us through this thing, this terrifying thing, I promise never, ever to have unprotected sex with my wife

or anyone else ever again. I promise to give my life to you and spend my days wandering the world preaching your gospel. Without shoes on and everything. Make the next few hours pass as quickly and painlessly as possible, oh, Mighty One, and I shall never, ever be a twat again, I really, really promise. And I'll bring up the bump in the Christian faith, rather than encouraging him down a more logical humanist path. I promise.

Amen

… and that was it: the start – only the *start* – of the 'real labour'. All systems go. 'This is Houston, you are cleared for liftoff,' I said to Isabel in an attempt to sound excited and positive.

'If you say anything else that makes me feel like a space shuttle, I will kill you,' she replied. 'Now call the midwife back and tell her to get round.'

The midwife arrived. Four centimetres dilated, she said. Only four? Six whole centimetres to go. *Six!* Jesus. I mean, blimey. Sorry, God. I started another prayer, but the midwife interrupted, telling me to make myself useful by pumping up the birthing pool. Yes, of course, the birthing pool. Must pump up the birthing pool.

BIRTHING POOL: INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

1. Important: make sure you unpack the birthing pool and inflate it prior to use to ensure that you are familiar with the equipment and there are no faults. Aquasqueeze Ltd will not offer a refund if any pool malfunctions are only discovered during the birthing procedure.

(Frankly, it was a miracle I even read the instructions on the day, let alone prior to use. I mean, seriously, as if it's necessary to have a trial run of a glorified paddling pool.)

2. Plug in pump.

3. Pump.

Why didn't I do a trial run for the paddling pool? It's childbirth, for goodness' sake. You don't muck about with childbirth. But it was one of several things I hadn't done. I hadn't read any of the baby books Isabel had asked me to read. I hadn't got in an awful lot of lie-ins. I hadn't painted the bathroom, the horrible old bathroom with its horrible old paint. I *had* painted the nursery, but badly. The birthing pool was the least of my worries. Except, it wasn't.

It took forty minutes to inflate the pool, during which time the foot pump and I fell out on several occasions. I twisted one ankle and had room spin twice. Shouldn't have had the whisky. It took another ninety minutes to fill the pool with water using a complicated, improvised, ever-so-slightly panicky siphoning system I devised with the garden hose, a colander, a plastic bag and the bath. Why hadn't I worked this all out earlier? Idiot, idiot, idiot.

The leak was discovered at approximately 0400 hours, long after the helpline at Aquasqueeze Ltd had closed. Mind you, they were probably closed for the entirety of the Christmas period, anyway. That's the trend these days, isn't it? No one's going to turn up for work at a birthing pool company on New Year's Eve, even though it's a Monday. Even though people still might be giving birth. That would be far too much to expect, now wouldn't it?

Only once the pool was full did the pressure begin to force water through the until-then-unnoticeable tear right at the base. From then on, it was like a crack in a dam in a 1970s disaster movie. It got bigger and bigger and bigger. I was already too tired and dehydrated to cry proper tears, and Isabel and the midwife were too busy doing grim things in the front room to notice.

I put a finger over the hole and looked around the dining room. Why we had decided that Isabel should give birth in the dining

room and not somewhere one might find the necessary equipment to mend a leak, I have no idea. Next time, we're doing it in the garden shed. Plenty of appropriate mending equipment in there. Back in the dining room, all I could reach was masking tape. Masking tape is porous, but it bought me enough time to find the Sellotape. Which bought me enough time to explain to Isabel, between contractions, that the pool was ready, but that she couldn't bounce around in it or anything because, well, it was a touch, erm, faulty, darling …

She didn't like this idea.

'I told you we should check the effing pool out before I—bbleeeaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrgggggggggghhhhhhhhh'.

There are at least some advantages to regular strong contractions. You can only get shouted at for the ever-decreasing periods in between.

7 a.m. Six centimetres dilated. Could it go any slower?

10 a.m. Seven centimetres. But maybe still six because things are getting a bit swollen down there.

'Keep going, darling, you're doing wonderfully,' I told her, while reflecting that God really could pick up a bit more support if he answered the odd agnostic's desperate prayer every now and again.

By midday, we were on to our third midwife and the pool was starting to sag. Sellotape can only go so far.

By 4 p.m., I had given up trying to keep the water in the sagging pool at a comfortable temperature because Isabel was now roaming around the house like an injured animal. Absolutely no point sitting in the dining room with a thermometer and a kettle when your wife is in a dark corner of the bedroom growling at anyone who tries to offer her a biscuit. And then it was 10 p.m., and the two latest midwives had decided that she was eight centimetres, but Isabel had had enough.

'I've had enough,' she said quietly and I had to look away because I didn't want her to see how frightened I was.

So we went to the hospital … her in an ambulance with blue flashing lights and everything, me following in the Skoda without blue flashing lights, the baby bag, a change of clothes or anything. Idiot.

Drugs, gas and air, epidurals, something that sounded like Sanatogen, more slow progress, baby in distress, mother in distress, me shaking my fist at bloody non-existent God for the ridiculous, stupid, impossible nature of childbirth. And then, suddenly, at 5 a.m., I hear the phrase 'fetal distress'. Isabel is barely conscious. The bump is in trouble.

'We have to get this baby out. You've been going long enough, dear,' said a no-nonsense midwife with arms like beanbags. And Isabel burst into tears of sheer exhaustion and resignation.

I can't remember much about the Caesarean, except that it was quick and there were slurping noises like when you're at the dentist and the assistant sticks the vacuum cleaner down the back of your mouth and you try to keep it away from your epiglottis because you were already very close to gagging but she's not paying attention because it's almost lunch and she's bored, and, oops, a little bit of breakfast has come up and now the dentist doesn't like you, which is annoying because it wasn't your fault, it was the bored assistant's.

At the point of incision, Isabel had to tell me to stop squeezing her hand so hard because it was hurting. Then the doctor made a joke and I made a joke and Isabel had to tell us all to stop joking. 'Gallows humour,' I said and immediately regretted it. Three or four seconds or minutes or hours later, there was a piercing, gurgly scream from behind the turquoise curtain: our boy, beautiful, grumpy from all his efforts to escape Isabel. My turn to burst into tears.

And that was forty-three minutes ago. Now I am lying in a bush and an old lady is prodding me with her Zimmer frame and I'm laughing and crying at the same time.

I phone the families. They are equally pleased that we are all alive.

Isabel's dad says, 'Bloody home births. Bloody ridiculous. This isn't the Crimean War.' And I have to explain, not for the first time,

that these days women are empowered to make choices and that Isabel didn't want to give birth in hospital. He points out that she did in the end. I point out that he's right and I don't care … the main thing is that everyone's alive and he is now a grandfather.

'A grandfather? Yes, I suppose I am,' he replies more warmly. 'About time, too. I was beginning to think Isabel was past it. Everyone leaves it so late these days. I mean, in my day, you got married and you got on with it. None of this work–life balance nonsense. As slow as a giant panda, but you got there in the end. Well done, my boy.'

I then have the same conversation with Dad before he puts on Mum, who is immediately hysterical and then tells me her birth story, which I've heard a thousand times before and don't want to hear this morning. Not now that I have my own which is just as gory.

'I have to go, Mum. I need to check on Isabel and the bump.'

'You can't call him "the bump" any more. Doesn't he have a name? Please tell me you've decided on a name. Please tell me it's not something trendy.'

'Not quite. But you'll be the first to know.'

THE HORROR OF NAMING A CHILD

There is much responsibility attached to having a baby. This much we know. But by far the worst aspect of it is giving the child a name, particularly if it's a girl. Every girl's name that Isabel thought was sweet was a porn name. Chloe. Jessica. Ella. We may as well just call her Pamela. Or Paris.

'What about Sarah?' Isabel had suggested, reasonably.

'No, I snogged a girl called Sarah. We were only fourteen and she let me touch her breast. Not appropriate.'

'What about Susannah?'

'Everyone snogged Susannah.'

'Maybe you could give me a list of girls' names that have no sexual connotations for you.'

'Okay, Beatrice.' Because Isabel isn't the only one who can make reasonable suggestions.

'*Beatrice?!*'

'Yes, or Bea for short.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

This went on for months and all we agreed on was that we shouldn't go for an 'interesting name', like Apple, Moon Unit or Prince Michael II. You are not, as the axiom goes, more interesting because your children have interesting names.

'What about Electra?' she suggested while we were failing to choose a pram at John Lewis.

'Are you making these preposterous suggestions simply so I have to say no a lot so that when I make sensible suggestions in return – like Mildred – and you say no, you don't appear unreasonable?'

'Electra was my grandmother's name.'

I only realised she was joking when we got back to the car. You can lose your sense of humour with the whole girls' names fandango.

On boys' names, we had narrowed it down to thirty. My favourite was George, but because her favourite was Albert, which is French and makes me think of pierced foreskins, I had to agree that we would cancel out favourites. Next was my Kit (after the car in *Knight Rider*, thereby guaranteeing my unborn child a life of success and coolness of which I could only ever have dreamed), knocked out by her Finbar. Neo and Ralph went the same way, but for a long time we found common ground on Elijah.

'Elijah,' I had announced proudly to Johnson in the pub. 'Elijah Walker.'

He'd looked at me coldly, looked at his pint forlornly and said, 'Poor kid. Poor, poor kid, with his poncey parents and his ridiculous name that will follow him through life ruining any chance he ever had of not being judged. Another pint?'

That left us with deadlock, so we decided to put the whole terrible matter on hold until nearer the time. And then we got nearer the time

and were no closer to resolution. Then the time came and went. And now we are the proud owners of an unnamed child and the grandparents are appalled.

Back in the ward, Isabel is sleeping. So is Bump. Ahhh, they are so sweet. Look at him with his little head. His tiny little head. Is it *too* little? It looks very small. So do his arms. His arms are too short. Oh, God, a short-armed son. Didn't Hitler go off the rails because of his short arms? I can't remember. I'm so tired.

'Darling, you're hurting my stomach.'

'What? Who? How? Oh, God. I'm sorry.' I had nodded off on the chair and slumped forward on to the recently dissected stomach of my wife. 'I'm so, so, so, so, so sorry. Are you okay? Should I get the doctor? Shall I press that emergency button?'

'It's fine. I'm fine. Look at your beautiful son'.

And there he is, looking straight at me. Possibly. Hard to tell, though. He has a glazed expression. He looks a bit dopey. Oh, God, is he simple? Will he still be living with us when he is forty, in an anorak, untouched by women, untroubled by a career, enthused by nothing but trains and their sequential numbering system. Oh, God.

He hiccups and there is a flicker of alertness. No, it's fine. Everything is fine. And we are all alive. 'I love you, darling. Happy new year.'

'Darling? Darling? DARLING!'

'What? What happened?'

'You fell on my stomach again.'

'Oh, God. I'm so, so, so, so—'

'Why don't you go home, have a rest, get the bag of things I told you not to forget last night and come back? Bump and I will be fine.'

She's right. I must stop falling on her recently severed stomach. I must go home and hunter-gather. I shall return in no more than two

hours with clothes and Innocent smoothies and flowers. A thousand flowers for my amazing wife. Fear not.

And I was gone.

Our front door. I'm standing looking at our front door. Marvelling at it, at its familiarity. It looks the same, but everything is different. This house is now a family house. My family will live here. Nothing will ever be the same again. The thought – combined with a new wave of tiredness and hunger – overwhelms me. I can hardly find the energy to fumble through my coat pocket for the keys.

Inside, it's *Reservoir Dogs*, the leftovers. There's the birthing pool, its water congealing nicely. I take a closer look and remember the moment, the very specific moment, when the pregnancy ceased to be fun.

THE SPECIFIC MOMENT WHEN HAVING A BABY CEASED TO BE FUN

October 27. 10.44 a.m. Second baby-group meeting. Isabel was excited but nervous. I was nervous but excited. We were running through the list of things we'd need for the birth: the nappies, the breast pads, the wet wipes, the snacks for daddy, the sanitary towels, the pumps, the nozzles, the pointless homoeopathic pills and the million other items that were all absolutely essential if things were to go smoothly. The longer the list went on, the less excited and more nervous Isabel looked and the more strongly I felt like hugging her and telling her everything would be all right, list or no list. Hugging didn't seem appropriate, so I gripped her hand and gave her a reassuring smile. She smiled back and if, at that second, a lion had jumped over the hedge and attacked her, I would have fought it off with my bare hands. Or at least had a jolly good go. I felt like I would do anything to protect her, anything at all.

But then we got to the very last item: an old sieve.

That's what it said. Not simply, 'Sieve', but 'Old sieve'.

'Why old?' asked one of the more inquisitive mothers-to-be.

'Because you don't want to use your newest sieve to get all the bits out of the birthing pool, do you?' came the matter-of-fact reply. And in that instant, I didn't feel like everything was going to be all right and I didn't feel like I could protect Isabel from anything at all. I wanted to smile and shrug calmly at my wonderful, brave, nervous, pregnant wife – but I couldn't. I needed fresh air. It wasn't so much that I was squeamish about bits in a birthing pool. It was more that it was going to happen to Isabel, and there was nothing we could do about it. In fact, it was normal. Having an old sieve on a list of things you need for a water birth was normal.

'Are you sure you're okay?' she asked during the break. 'You look a bit pale.'

'I'm fine. Absolutely fine. Just a bit airless in here.'

That is all over now. Now we are postnatal. We are, as I have mentioned, all alive. And now I am here, looking at the birthing pool that never was, thinking about the old sieve we never needed. I make my way upstairs, finding more detritus of the previous two nights: half-drunk cups of camomile tea ('It's making me feel sick'), wet flannels ('Get that flannel away from me'), massage oil ('Stop rubbing me'), CDs of whale music ('William, will you turn that racket off? I already feel bloated enough without having to listen to the mating rituals of a blue whale'). In the bedroom, I find the bed. Which I shall just lie in briefly. Forty winks, as instructed. That is all …

Wednesday 2 January

'I can't believe you left us for a whole day. I'm still wearing the same nightdress I came to the hospital in. I've had to borrow some sanitary towels from the nurse.'

'I'm so, so, so, so, so, so, so sorry. I got home. I had a quick lie-down. The phone was still unplugged from when you told me to unplug that ("fucking") phone. Then it was 11 p.m. I called the hospital. They said you were asleep. I called your mobile. It was off. I'm here now. I'm so sorry. Look, I bought a cranberry, yumberry and blackcurrant smoothie. It's very high in vitamin C.'

'Thanks. Now, go and change Jacob's nappy.'

'*Jacob?*'

'Yes, he's called Jacob. I had to call him something because the midwives were about to call social services and report us for neglect. You had gone AWOL. So I decided on Jacob. We can always change it later.'

Ahh, the old we-can-always-change-it-later trick. Isabel has been using this all year. We can't agree on a colour to paint the baby's room. I want a good, honest, sensible yellow. She wants a pinky-white, which is ridiculous if it's a boy, but she says, on the contrary, it's perfect because she intends for our child to have a non-gender-specific upbringing. Halfway through the standoff, she paints it pink while I'm at work. I come home and look angry. She says, 'We can always change it later.' *Kapow!*

Also while I'm at work, she pays a proper handyman to come round and hang pictures where I don't want them on the grounds that we've been in this house for over a year and she's tired of looking at bare walls. The same happens with the placing of plant pots, the reorganisation of the kitchen and the moving of all my clothes to the bottom drawer of the small cupboard in the spare room (to make room for all the cloth nappies). But it's okay, we can always change it later …

We will *never* change it later. We could barely be bothered to change it in the first place.

This is fine when it comes to the feng shui-ing of a living room or the buying of a girly tree for the front garden, but not so fine for the naming of a first-born.

Jacob.

I'm not sure. I knew someone at university called Jacob. Did philosophy. Smoked drugs. Now lives on a beach in Bali. How much of that is because his parents called him Jacob?

It does have a ring to it, though. Jacob Walker. You probably wouldn't get an astronaut called Jacob Walker, but equally, you wouldn't get a shoplifter. It didn't sound prime ministerial, but there was a certain gravitas. Broadsheet newspaper editor, perhaps. Barrister. Surgeon. Discoverer of (a) the cure for old age, (b) life in another solar system or (c) the ark of the covenant. If they haven't discovered that already. I can't remem—

'William! The nappy.'

THE DADDY NAPPY

Well, I missed that one. We had given over ten minutes of the prenatal classes to the treacly first nappy. Turns out I could have skipped that bit on account of having rather tactically skipped the whole of day one. I got day-two nappy instead and, frankly, I don't see what all the fuss is about. It went absolutely fine until Jacob (see, I'm already calling him that) decided to have a wee the second, the very second, I'd finished cleaning him up. No drama. I changed him again – and that was less fine because he was screaming. And the screaming is very hard to cope with when you're trying to work out which way around the nappy stickers go and how you wipe the poo off without getting it on the (pink, why is it pink?) babygro. Still, the smell was bearable, the trauma minimal. All trauma will appear minimal now that I have witnessed the miracle of childbirth.