

one

This story really begins at midnight one month after Aurora was born, the night of her due date, the night she couldn't wait for, such was her wish to rush headfirst into our lives.

I managed to arrive home just before Jason. I heard him come through the door and drop his keys on the walnut chiffonier, even though he knew I hated the way the metal scratched its polished surface. He almost fell into the sofa and then placed his hand on his right temple, pressing his pulse point as if the pain of blood pumping through his skull was too much to bear. In that gesture, I could see his failure. The heart he couldn't save. The heart that became flaccid in his surgeon's hands as a life passed through his operating theatre.

I shifted on the sofa opposite and his hand fell to his knee.

'Shit Gaelle, what are you doing in the dark? I thought you were in bed.'

'I couldn't sleep.'

He closed his eyes and in the silence I could almost hear a tear form in the corner of his eye, hear the pop as the surface tension broke and it slipped over his face.

‘You left early this morning,’ I said.

‘I went for a dive with Gus.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘Fairy Bower.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Fish, Gaelle. Fish and coral.’

‘Did you take any photos?’

‘I didn’t take the camera. It gets in the way. You have this crazy idea that I’m into photography because I’ve kept my old photo albums. The albums were just somewhere to put stuff. They were storage.’

I stood up, shivering. Jason had left the front door open and the breeze was pushing in and all I was wearing was a dress of transparent chiffon. No cardigan. No shoes. No underwear.

I picked up the photograph of the three of us that sat on the dresser beside Aurora’s silver Tiffany rattle. ‘What about this, Jason? Is this storage too? Do you just put us in a frame and then go off to work and think about hearts?’

‘I dreamed about Aurora last night.’

I walked away.

But he followed and continued to talk, like a high school girl babbling about her latest crush. ‘She’d grown up. She was about six and she was running away from me and smiling. Her smile was beautiful.’

‘Was I in your dream too?’

He did not answer with his voice. The answer sat between his eyes and mine, which were locked together, seeing what there was left to see, of us. What Aurora had not taken for herself. What we had not given over to her. And that was why I found his hand, directed his body against the wall and searched his mouth with mine.

I had kissed another man earlier that night and I wondered if Jason could taste this, whether he could tell that my lips had travelled the length of another man's back, whether sweat and sex were still there, corroding my tongue. I'd screwed the man whilst fully clothed; the clouds had curtained the stars and all I could see as I stood on his balcony were the stains left by boat lights on the water at Rose Bay and then I could see only the dark because I closed my eyes as I felt the man step up behind me, slide his hands beneath my dress and circle my skin through the silk of my knickers. Then my knickers were pushed down and the man's penis was inside me and his fingers were not circling any more but pressing hard against my skin and I thought I could feel someone watching so I opened my eyes but before I could see whether the shadow on the balcony opposite was a person or a pot plant the man came and then I could see nothing because it was time to go home.

But the sex I needed to have now with my husband was the naked sort. I needed to take off my clothes, take off Jason's clothes. If I could place all my skin alongside all

his skin then the chill would go away. If we could both be undone by one another in the way that we used to be before Aurora was born then I would stop.

So I opened Jason's shirt and tossed off my dress. Our arms curled around one another's backs and I could feel the warmth begin. But then I saw, in the slight light cast by the street, a blemish, like a scar, sitting next to his left nipple, resting between his ribs. As his fingers carved a line down my back, I wondered why I had never noticed the scar before. I traced its outline and Jason's hands moved to my buttocks, holding me close as if he was searching for something too. More flesh, perhaps. Or flesh speaking.

I wanted to taste the scar, wanted to roll it across my tongue and make it shine like silver. So I pulled him down to the floor, pressed his back along the cold marble, and lifted my hips over his. Then I lowered my lips towards his chest and paused—all I wanted was for us to stay like that, my mouth open, ready to taste the thick skin of a healed wound.

But then I saw his penis, resting against his groin, as flaccid as the dead heart. He turned his body away from me, away from the light, so that I could not see his face at all when he said sorry.

two

I found out that I was pregnant again about one month later, the night we restarted our Friday night dinners with Jason's friends and their wives. Our friends, Jason would always say when I described them as such. But this was a group of people who had been friends and lovers since university and for whom, as far as I could see, longevity was one of the primary reasons they were all still together. The men were stockbrokers, doctors and investment bankers and I knew which person had which label and which wife and which children but I did not know which person had seen a marriage counsellor and which person had cried when their daughter had a febrile convulsion and which person played the piano at night when everybody else was sleeping.

The women were mothers, either full-time or part-time, and I could not tell whether I looked down more on the ones who stayed home to raise their children or the ones who left their children in day care to go back to work and spend two or three days trying to finish five days' work, never complaining because they did not want anyone to think that motherhood had rendered them incompetent.

I always invited Imogen and her husband to these dinners because, even though Imogen left her two children with a nanny three days a week to return to her job as a beauty editor for a teen magazine, I could never look down on someone who was the first friend I ever had.

I found myself stuck in the kitchen on the Friday afternoon making cassoulet for the dinner party, remembering how Jason had said he would organise it. I wouldn't even have to cook; he'd order in. Having everyone over as we used to, before Aurora, would help us get back into a routine. All the books and all the people we'd spoken to had said this was important. I was thinking about this and the sushi he'd forgotten to order and the ingredients for the cassoulet, which took several hours and required my full attention, so I did not answer Jason straight away when he said, 'I think we should move Aurora's cradle out of our room.'

Three months. We'd agreed before she was born that we would have the cradle in our room for three months. Only two months had passed. I continued to cut the salted belly of pork into four pieces, ready to add to the lingots boiling on the stove. But Jason stepped over to me, took my shoulders in his hands, swivelled my body away from the chopping block, tilted my chin up and said again, 'Gaelle, we need to move the cradle out of our room.'

My eyes were pointed in his direction but they did not see him; instead they saw me, my Hermès scarf knotted around my throat, my lips painted crimson and my hand

wrapped around a Laguiole knife, slippery with pork fat. My mind was running through the recipe—heating duck fat, frying sausages—but I'd forgotten to buy the Toulouse sausages the dish required and the barbecue sausages in our freezer were not up to the demands of a cassoulet. I put down the knife, picked up my keys and said, 'I have to go and buy sausage.'

'The sausage can wait,' Jason said.

'No it can't. It's two o'clock already. Dinner's going to be late.'

'No one will care. We can still order sushi.'

'I will care. And I don't feel like sushi.'

'What about the cradle?' He plucked the keys from my hand and I grabbed at them like a child snatching lollies. But he was bigger, stronger.

'There is no timeline or flow chart, Jason. We don't always have to move on to the next step in whatever baby process you've created inside your head.'

I'd wanted to say this to Jason since we came back from the hospital; every time I sat in the breastfeeding chair in Aurora's room and watched him put away the summer clothes because we wouldn't need them in such a cold spring or store the massage oil that was too strong and made the whole room smell like fresh baby, I wanted to say, *Stop. Leave everything how it is. I'm her mother. I will know when it's the right time to put those things away.* Instead I would wait until he went to work and

then I would go into the room and take the things out of the storage box and put them back onto shelves and into drawers. Massage helped babies sleep; sometimes there were hot days in spring, and the risk of SIDS was lower if the baby slept in the mother's room. I knew these facts. I knew we shouldn't put anything away.

Jason looked at me then and he did not see the mother who knew that nothing should be put away; he saw his wife with a knife in her hand and another quarrel clattering from her mouth. And so I did not see that behind his processes and timelines and flow charts there might be some other knowledge about Aurora, some other understanding. 'Fine, I'll move the cradle,' I said. 'When I get back from the shop.'

'I'll do it while you're out.'

'No.'

We were standing on either side of the island bench. I was gripping the marble top. Jason was too. But then he lifted his hand, stretched it out and laid it on mine. 'Ellie, we have to move the cradle some time. If we do it together, it might be easier.'

I pulled my hand away. 'I said I'd do it when I get back.'

Jason was back to gripping the bench. 'Will you? Or are you just saying that so I'll give you the keys?'

I picked up the knife and finished splitting the pork belly. Then I washed my hands, dried them and held them out across the counter top for my keys.

‘You missed a piece,’ he said and I looked and saw the creamy white slice of pork fat stuck between my fingers. It looked opalescent, almost precious, not at all like the remains of a dead creature. I think Jason was struck by this too, because he stared at it for some time before dropping the keys into my palm beside that piece of dead flesh come to life. Then he left the room.

The cradle was never moved.

Jason went to work after that discussion and, instead of coming home to greet everybody, to pour drinks and to keep the conversation flowing, he sent me a text message five minutes before the guests arrived. *Baby needed a septostomy. Still in theatre. Be there soon. J.*

As I looked up from my mobile, my eyes caught a slant of pink light that fell from the setting sun onto the surface of Mémé’s copper pots. I knew I had seen something like it before and my mind shifted through time, trying to reconcile image and memory. And then I knew.

A pink line on a white plastic stick.

My hands moved to my breasts, which I had thought, without really stopping to *think*, were fuller and more tender; it had been easier to ignore the tenderness because I’d assumed it was my milk ducts shutting down as they understood that their services were no longer required, that I was the kind of mother who couldn’t even use the milk in her breasts. How was it possible that I could be

a mother again? My intention had been something else entirely.

The first and only person I told was Imogen. She had let herself into the house and found me in the kitchen, transfixed by the line of light.

‘Are you okay?’ she said. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘I have.’ I turned away from the shaft of sunset, towards Imogen. ‘I’m pregnant again. It’s too soon.’

Imogen touched her own just-pregnant belly, as though it were a charm. Then she hugged me. ‘It’ll be all right, Gaelle.’

Then the doorbell rang and I didn’t even have to ask; Imogen stepped out to open the door and let the guests in. I stayed in the kitchen minding the cassoulet.

I heard four voices in the hall: Melanie, a former accountant, now stay-at-home mum to three boys; her husband Tony, a stockbroker for whom the word BlackBerry was invented as his every step was echoed by the electronic beep of incoming email; Gus, the only one of Jason’s friends I could ever imagine sleeping with because he seemed as though he would never stray; and his wife Geraldine, a journalist (part-time, between children) who thought that beauty editors like me did nothing but attend lunches and launches and thread strands of adjectives together. Jason always said she was jealous but I thought she was snide.

‘Hon, can you pour some wine,’ I heard Imogen say to Alex, her husband. ‘Gaelle’s just finishing dinner.’

‘We’ll come and help,’ Melanie replied. ‘I haven’t seen Gaelle for ages.’

I pulled my compact out of the bottom drawer and checked below my eyes for mascara pools but there were none, just clear tears, and so I blotted them away, hid the mirror and picked up two caipiroskas.

‘Hi Gaelle.’ Melanie swooped in for a kiss but I blocked her with the cocktail glass. ‘Ooh, yum,’ she said, taking a sip and turning to Geraldine. ‘It’s got mint in it.’

I handed Geraldine a glass.

‘Cheers,’ she said. ‘You look great, Gaelle.’

‘Not everyone keeps on an extra ten kilos after they’ve had a baby,’ I said. I picked up my champagne glass and smiled. ‘*Salut.*’

If only you had said something about Aurora, I thought, then I wouldn’t have been so rude. The last time I’d seen Geraldine I’d been heavily pregnant; surely an enquiry about the baby was required. It was as if I had not become a mother, as if even after having a baby, I still did not belong.

The silence was broken by the trotting sound of stilettos and Imogen stepping forward to say, ‘That’s got to be Rehana.’

And it was, the other friend of mine I’d invited, gorgeous Rehana, French also, like me; a cosmetics executive

and the only single woman left in this world it seemed. She kissed both my cheeks and said, 'But you do look *magnifique, chérie*. I can never decide if it takes you hours to put yourself together or if you just fall out of bed looking perfectly groomed with all the right accessories.'

I laughed. 'Well if Jason was here you could ask him.'

'Still at the hospital?' Geraldine asked.

I didn't reply because Rehana was examining my cheekbones. 'That rouge is so light it looks like sunshine,' she said.

'It's your competition.' I pulled a silver case out of my bag and passed it to her. 'They sent me a load of stuff after Aurora was born ...'

'Look Gerry, cream blush,' Melanie squeaked. 'I haven't worn that since high school.'

Geraldine reached out a hand towards the compact at the same time as the cassoulet began to bubble so I said to Melanie, 'Keep it. I've got a dozen more in the bathroom cupboard.'

I walked between Melanie and Geraldine towards the stove and rolled my eyes at Imogen in the direction of the door. As I began to stir the pot I heard her say, 'Let's take our drinks outside and see what the guys are up to,' and I watched them file out, Melanie clutching her new blush, Geraldine empty-handed and Imogen and Rehana looking back towards me until the door closed behind them.

Jason was two hours late for dinner so I did not tell him about the new baby. He arrived with a box which he handed to me in the kitchen at the same time as he said, ‘Ellie, I thought you would have eaten by now. But no one’s had anything. Have you been out to say hello to anyone?’

‘Dinner’s not ready. Imogen’s looking after everyone. I’ve spoken to the girls.’

‘I bought this for you but it’s too late for tonight; you’re already dressed.’ He gestured to the box.

I took off the lid and pulled out a dress. I frowned at the plunging neckline. ‘This dress requires cleavage. I can’t wear it. You’ll have to take it back.’

‘You haven’t even tried it on. I just wanted you to know that I think you’re beautiful.’

‘I don’t need a dress to tell me how I look.’ I passed the box back to him.

‘Sorry I’m late.’

I turned to the stove and tasted the cassoulet. ‘It’s ready.’

‘I’ll carry it.’

‘I’ve got it.’

I was just about to push open the door when Jason said, ‘I shouldn’t have invited everyone.’

I could almost feel his flow chart terminate. He’d followed the *yes* arrow to this dinner party when he should have followed the *no*. I let the pot rest on a towel on my hip

and turned back to look at my husband. We were standing in opposite corners of the kitchen, me cradling a pot whilst he had just picked up a bottle of wine and tucked it into the crook of his arm. I could hear Melanie laughing in the dining room and then Imogen's voice saying, 'She'll be out soon.'

'If we take this out,' I gestured to the food and the wine, 'then everybody can eat and then they'll leave.'

Jason's smile flicked on and I wanted to kiss his beautiful mouth. I felt as though we were almost back, as though perhaps we could get back to how we used to be. 'If we forget to serve wine they'll leave even quicker.'

'They know where the wine is. They'll just help themselves.'

He crossed the kitchen floor and brushed his hand across my ear lobe and around to the back of my neck. 'I'll get the door for you.'

And so we walked out to the dining room together. There were two empty chairs left, at opposite ends of the table.

'Jase,' Gus called. 'Empty glasses all round.' Jason stepped over to his friends and I could hear Gus continue. 'Haven't seen you in ages, mate. How're you doing?'

I put the pot down and it seemed as if the bang of the pot onto the wood fractured the women's conversation. I picked up a bowl and began to ladle cassoulet into it, then said, 'What did I interrupt?'

Everyone looked at Imogen. She sipped her drink and said, 'Gerry was just telling us about Felicity; she had her baby on the weekend.'

I picked up another bowl and filled it. 'What did she have?'

'A girl. Georgia.'

This time I looked at Geraldine; after all it was her story. 'Stitches? Vacuum? Epidural? I'm sure you've got all the details.'

Geraldine glanced at Melanie, then back to me. 'I don't know ...'

I placed a bowl of food in front of Melanie. 'Really?'

Melanie put a forkful of cassoulet in her mouth and shook her head. It was Imogen who stepped into the role of spokesperson for the group. 'She had a natural birth. No stitches. No drugs.'

I laughed. 'Natural birth. With scented candles, I suppose. It's such a ridiculous phrase. There's nothing really that natural about having a baby in a hospital.' I could hear my voice becoming higher and louder so that Jason and then Gus and then everyone was looking at me. I plonked a bowl of food in front of Geraldine, another natural birth advocate who told me when I was pregnant with Aurora that all I had to do was drink raspberry leaf tea for the last eight weeks of the pregnancy and I would have a quick, easy birth. 'I've yet to meet anyone who can have an emergency caesar without drugs.'

‘But no one gets a choice with an emergency caesar, Gaelle,’ Geraldine said. ‘Obviously that’s not a natural birth.’

Silence spread across the table like an infection. Then Jason leapt up. ‘Gus, pass your bowl over.’

I sat in my chair as Jason took the ladle from me and finished serving the dinner. He touched the back of my neck again as he passed but this time it was not like that tiny, shared moment of intimacy in the kitchen. I thought for a second about the baby I was supposed to be breastfeeding and the new baby inside me but reached for the champagne anyway and filled my glass. Then I frowned at Imogen and whispered beneath the clatter of cutlery, ‘I’ve listened to all their labour stories. Why can’t I talk about mine?’

‘They’re just afraid of all the stuff that no one likes to talk about.’

‘But what if that’s all you have?’

She did not answer because she could not.