



## MISCONCEPTIONS

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I was conceived in the shadow of my uncle's death. He'd left a void in my mother's life, a sucking vacuum that could only be filled by me. If I count back from my birthday, it was less than two weeks after this loss I came to be, tucked deep inside my mother.

There is a long list of things pregnant women are supposed to avoid in case their babies absorb something harmful. Everyone knows they shouldn't smoke or drink alcohol and have to avoid certain foods. But there are other things you'd never think of. Like not to empty cat litter trays. Not to touch lambing or milking ewes or newborn sheep. My mother did none of these things but she did give me her grief. It flowed through her body, carried by her blood. Every one of her cells was full of it and so was I. I think this is why I cry so easily.

My Uncle Richard was sixteen years old when he died, snatched from the world by a faulty heart. Sweet sixteen then tick, tock, tick, tock, gone, no one was expecting it. My mother was in pieces. My dad

was probably trying to comfort her just before they made me. And so I came to be, a splinter of my dad and a splinter of my mum joining to form me. One sperm left alive, a little swimmer with a certain raw determination. An egg, waiting. Jackpot. A spark of trouble glowed for a tiny moment, then split. And split and split and split, out of control, until this wild thing came kicking and screaming out into the world. And crying.

Of all the names they could have chosen, they called me Joy.

I used to hate my name. I blamed it for the type of man I attracted, the ones who were looking for Joy and didn't care what I wanted. Several of these men later, I can see it is not my name that draws in the bad ones, but choices I make.

My father picked me up as soon as the midwife had cleaned me. I'm told he was grinning like his face would split open and said, 'She can do anything she likes.' Those first few moments are important. I can't claim to remember him saying this, but I've acted on it ever since. At some level, deep down, I must have taken it in, even if I can't recall it.

For years I told people I was born in a house on Huntingdon Street and I thought I was telling the truth. But it was my mum and all her siblings who were born there, I used to mix it up. It is true that I was born at home though, my mother couldn't face giving birth in the hospital where she'd just lost her brother. She has to face that hospital now, twice a week for chemo, because my mother is the one dying this time. Unlike her brother, she is not going out like she's been switched off. Instead she is slipping out of this world, leaving us piecemeal. She has been rebelled against by her own DNA, forty-six dissatisfied

chromosomes turning on her and bending out of shape, growing into something that is eating her alive. It is the worst kind of treachery, her whole body held tight and squeezed by a Judas kiss that crucifies her and hangs itself.

It has brought me back though, the estranged daughter. I looked up estranged in the dictionary. Made a stranger of. That's misleading, like I am a victim. But this estrangement is something I did to myself. I've kept away from my family for a long time now. 'She thinks she's the big it,' my brothers and sisters say. 'Miss Big Swinging New York Artist. Nottingham's not good enough for her any more and nor are we.' They're half right. I've lived in London and Paris and Chicago and New York, in that order. Nottingham just doesn't do it for me anymore. I'll admit, Hockley and the Lace Market look pretty good these days. There's this one bar in particular that has candy-striped walls and serves Cosmopolitans. If I look at the wall, and the drink, and whichever cool as shit friend I am drinking with, I can pretend I'm in New York. Then a group of girls will walk in, wearing tight clothes, just a little overweight, bulging under the armpits and out of their waistbands. Their hair is bleached and a factory's worth of hairspray holds their heads at an awkward angle. This is Nottingham.

We are sitting in the living room, my mother and me. She asks me to fetch her some water and I do. I want to take as much as I can from her while it's still possible. I try to move back into the past, trying to be as close to her as I used to be before I made a stranger of myself.

'What's the first thing ever you remember?' Mum asks me. I am unsure. Memories from a long way back are fuzzy, blurred at the edges

like bad wedding photos. It is easy to get the order mixed around. For instance my dad, there are a pile of snapshots that belong to him. They start with him as a huge giant, tucking me into bed. Bringing chocolate home from work on a Friday. There is a stack of memories labelled 'mother' too. I think about them while I can, while it is not too painful. Sitting on her knee being read too, warm and safe. Putting my head against her chest and listening to her heartbeat. For as long as I can remember, I knew she had lost her brother because of a bad heart and I feared her bad heart meant she would lose me too, misplace me on the stairs or at the back of a bus. I watched for it.

As I pull these blocks of nostalgia in and out of my consciousness, there is one that makes obvious sense as the first, although it is the twenty-five year old me that places it there, not the baby it happened to.

'I remember going to see Kerry, when she was first born, at mamma's house,' I say.

I can remember it clearly, even though I'm only a year older than her. My dad held my hand and talked the nonsense he loved to talk about the screaming abjabs and the doofen be an ocken jock and a misquoted version of Jabberwocky where 'twas brilliant and the slimy toes did gire and gimble in the bath. He squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. We're going to see your new baby cousin, he said. Do you remember her name? I didn't. Kerry, he said. Kerry, I said, back. That rhymes with berry. And he said, that'll help you remember it.

'What else?' she says. She is greedy for it now, the past, that time when she was planning to live forever. I've given her a taste and it is opium to her, makes her hurt less.

‘I remember going in Granddad’s lorry,’ I say. ‘We stopped at a transport café and he bought me a drink and a little packet of chocolates that opened down the side. In a yellow wrapper.’

A look crosses my mother’s face that I mistake for pain. ‘Do you need more morphine?’ I ask her. I want to make her feel better anyway I can.

‘No.’

‘Then what?’

‘You cannot possibly remember that. It didn’t happen. Your granddad had a leg amputated before you were born and had stopped driving the lorries.’

‘But he was a lorry driver?’

‘Yes. I must have told you that before though.’

I nod, but I can’t remember that she has. I think about this memory. I can play it back, frame by frame, as if it happened in the last few weeks. I look at my mum and say, ‘But I was tall enough to see into the glass counter. At least five.’

‘You were eighteen months old when my dad died,’ my mother says. She starts to cough, that wheezy, rat-a-tat-tat of a cough my dad tells me means she doesn’t have long. I pass her the little plastic cup she coughs blood into and pull it back immediately so she can’t see the colour of the liquid her lungs have produced.

‘What did the lorry look like?’ my mother asks as soon as she can speak again.

‘It was asymmetrical, with a large grille at the front, like the one on that road safety ad they used to show on the TV when I was little. The one where the car ate the children.’

My mother looks into my eyes.

‘Joy, are you making this up?’ she says. ‘Is this a story one of your aunts has told you?’

I shake my head and my eyes start to get wet. But I refuse to cry. All the idiot men I have shed tears for, cried myself dry over, and here, on my mother’s deathbed, I refuse to cry. I do it for her.

‘That’s my dad’s truck,’ she says. My nervous system sends a shiver of electricity through all my limbs and joints and I jolt slightly. My mother looks pale as an egg’s shell. She looks delicate as the skin on spider eggs. See through, like dragonfly larvae. I can almost see her heart beating. I can almost hear her soul shifting.

‘Did I ever tell you what happened the night Richard died?’ she asks me.

‘You’ve hinted. Dad said you knew he was dying.’

Mum sighs. ‘Not that he was dying. You don’t appreciate it right now, but it’s a blessing to know someone’s dying and one I didn’t get the benefit of with either Richard or my father. I knew he’d died though, straight away.’

‘How?’ I ask.

‘I woke up. At the exact instant he died. I woke up and sat bolt upright in bed. It felt like I’d been struck by lightning. Your dad woke up too, and he asked me what was wrong so I told him our Richard had died. Don’t be daft, he told me, he’s a big strong lad. I looked at the clock to check what time it was, because I wanted to prove I’d been right. It was three thirty. It looked like the clock had stopped too, but the alarm went off the next morning as if nothing had happened.’

‘And Richard died at three thirty?’

‘Yes.’

Three thirty. Tick tock stop. Dodgy ticker, blown out like a bulb, like it had a switch. My mum’s clock stopped too, if only for a moment.

‘Does Dad remember this?’ I say.

‘Yes. Ask him.’

My mother starts coughing again. It sounds so terrible, I have to look away and hold my breath to stop from crying. It is a woman on the edge of life, sucking desperately at her last air. Her breathing returns to a heavy version of normal and I look into her fading grey eyes, life visibly leaving them with every breath out.

‘I have to go,’ I say. I want to tell her I love her. I have told her this, once, the day I came back into her life and held her hand. She’d been very weak and had looked up at me and I’d thought she was going to pass away from me there and then.

‘I know you do,’ she says. And I am not sure if this is in answer to what I said or what I thought.

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My mother dies, that night, and I sleep through it all. Not for me the dread certainty she has gone. If the liquid crystal display on my alarm clock slips for a moment, I do not know because I do not wake up and sit bolt upright in my bed. She slips away and I do not notice.

My father calls me in the morning and tells me. I do not wish I’d told her I loved her again. She knew I loved her. If I’d kept telling her it would’ve reminded her she was dying. I dash around to be with my

dad and he hugs me, we cry together. I am still his little girl, the one he said could do anything.

I remind my dad of the night my uncle died, ask him if he remembers it.

‘I think I remember it,’ he says. ‘But I can never decide if it really happened or if I persuaded myself it did just to keep your mum happy. Memory’s funny like that, isn’t it?’

I nod because I know what he means. I have the memory of the transport café to prove he’s right, sitting in my head pretending to be mine, except it can’t be. And there are other things. Telling people I was born on Huntingdon Street, dreams I have about a school with the playground on the roof. This is not the school I went to. It is a school that closed before I was born.

I play back the scene in the transport café. I am there again, getting out of the truck with the grille. We are at the counter and my granddad is asking me what I want. I choose the chocolates and a drink of juice and he pays. I cannot be sure if this is a real memory or a dream. If it is real, my mother says it doesn’t belong to me. I wonder if it belongs to her brother and, if it does, what it is doing sitting there in my head, pretending to be mine.

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