



BY MAX BARRY

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MET

MY

DAUGHTER

FICTION

THEY DRAGGED this bloody, howling thing from my wife's abdomen, its limbs twitching and clawing, its face like an angry pumpkin, and asked me, "*Do you want to take a photo?*"

Yes. I want to take a photo,
so I can look back on the end of my life.

Well, that's not accurate. My life had been ending for nine months. No, longer: since the moment on our third anniversary when, over oysters and champagne by the bay, Lisa said, "I think we should have a baby."

I said, "I think we should, too." It was so romantic. She was so beautiful. We were drunk and guilty with joy, like kids on Christmas morning: we were this happy - and we hadn't even opened the big one yet.

Her eyes shone. We held hands across the table. Somewhere on the water, a ferry sounded its horn.

That was the beginning of the end.

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I'd heard about couples who had trouble conceiving. It sounded funny. How they had to rush home for sex at particular times, have more of it than either wanted. It was practically a romantic comedy. I discovered the truth over most of the next year. When you *have* to have sex - even though you already did earlier that day, and the night before, and the night before that - even when you see distaste in her eyes, resignation as you grind uselessly away, ignoring the crick in your neck and the sweat winding down the cleft of your arse and the friction burn that is your so-called manhood - you can't help but hate her.

Our jokes - *oh, God, not again* - became half-jokes. The half-jokes dried up, like my sperm, or her ovaries; whichever it was. We weren't lovers. We were pugilists. On days 8 to 17 we bodily assaulted each

other, twice daily on days 11 to 16. Day 18 was blessed relief. By day 1 we could enjoy each other's company again. But only briefly. Day 6 and 7, she went to bed early and I stayed up late, watching whatever was on TV, quietly desperate to savour these disappearing moments I didn't have to try to punch a baby into her.

Our doctor said to look after our marriage first. She said if we felt worn down, we should take a break: leave it a month, come back with recharged batteries. Neither wanted to be the one to say it. Not having sex – for a whole month! – oh God, it sounded wonderful. The doctor read our mood. “I think this would be a good move for you.” Well, okay, doctor. If that's your medical opinion. We held hands as we left the clinic. We rented a DVD and ate fried chicken from a bucket on the couch. We began to make love over the closing credits. It was the first time I'd genuinely wanted to kiss her. Then she slid onto her back. Her hands tugged at me to follow. “What are you doing?” I asked. I already knew. The missionary position was recommended for optimum fertility. She said, “Since we're doing this anyway ...”

It was like plunging a blocked drain.

My office held a three-day conference at Thredbo. My first day away was a day 17 and we agreed to have sex on the morning, to make up for the missed night, but when the time came we both pretended we forgot. Driving away I turned up the radio and sang along at the top of my voice, slapping my hands on the steering wheel in time to the music.

At the party I got drunker than I had been in a year. The new rep from direct sales, Karen Hengrove, dragged me onto the dance floor and then later to her room. She was tall, with carefully tinted blond hair and eyes that never missed a sales opportunity, and I didn't find her attractive until she kissed me. Then it was like a door

how that trumped everything, including the vows we'd made.

We no longer lay in bed talking; now Lisa sat propped on pillows and read baby books. Sometimes she marked pages and passed the books to me. The pile grew on my bedside table. Her belly grew like a bomb. Soon this thing would explode and destroy everyone in the vicinity.

She went into labour at 11:30pm. They performed an emergency Caesarean at 7:15am. “Do you want to cut the cord?” the midwife asked. It was crunchy. It was a girl. Lisa said, “Give her to me.” I stepped out of the way. It was all over, I knew it.



EVEN RECOVERING from surgery, Lisa wanted to do everything. I'd been told to carry the bulk of the workload for the first three weeks, but my duties were limited to carrying Sarah to and from Lisa. Honestly, I was relieved. The child intimidated me. When I held her, I felt Lisa watching me for mistakes. It was easier to hand her to Lisa. Soon it was impossible not to: Lisa could change a nappy faster than explain it to me, stop her crying, dress her.

Work got busy. I left too early to see Sarah in the mornings and arrived home when she was already in bed. For the next two years, I saw her mostly on Saturday afternoons.



ON OUR FIFTH wedding anniversary, I booked a table at Romano's. Margaret, Lisa's mother, would babysit. I told Lisa to keep Friday night free. As the day drew closer, she became anxious and irritated. That afternoon, she said she might be getting a cold. We weren't

"LISA MARKED PAGES AND PASSED BOOKS. THE PILE GREW ON MY BEDSIDE TABLE. HER BELLY GREW LIKE A BOMB"

blowing open. Somehow until then I hadn't realized what Lisa and I had lost: desire.

Karen smiled and began to unbutton her shirt. I took her hands and told her I couldn't do this, I was very sorry. She said it was all right, it would have been a mistake anyway, and we talked for another three hours. When I got back to my room I curled up in bed and cried, because I missed my wife, not the woman I serviced 16 times a month, but the woman who had once wanted me and whom I had once wanted.

I stopped on the way home to buy roses. I told Lisa, “Let's go back to the way we were.” She cried. She said, “I've been so unhappy.” We hugged. We swore to never do this to ourselves again. We didn't need a child. We didn't need anything but each other. I wanted to inhale her. I felt reborn. Twenty-seven days later, she told me she was pregnant.



LISA VOMITED for 230 days straight. Our obstetrician said it was a record. I thought it was a sign. This thing was hostile. It was actively attacking us. It was insidious and subversive. “But I'm pregnant.” This became Lisa's answer to everything. Why we shouldn't take a vacation this year. Why she was too tired to go out for dinner. “We're having a baby.” Like it was obvious. Like only an idiot wouldn't understand

going anywhere outdoors, were we? But when she saw our destination, she smiled. I felt some of my tension dissolve. “The same table!” she said. It was where we'd agreed to try for a baby.

“Well,” I said, once the waiter left, “Just like old times.”

“Yes.” But she wasn't looking at me. She was checking her mobile, for messages. I'd felt stupid. I'd thought I could find my wife again, but the parasite, Sarah, had burrowed too deep. There was no way to separate them.



WHEN I CAME OUT of a quarterly review meeting there were three messages on my voice mail from St Vincent's Hospital. There had been an accident. Lisa and Sarah were injured. It was serious. I was to come as quickly as possible.

It felt like a transmission from another planet. I couldn't understand it; this news belonged to somebody else. I walked to my car like a puppet, following instructions. I was driving to the hospital when my brain said: *Maybe it's Sarah*. Lisa would be alive, bereaved. We would be united in grief. The two of us.

I thought I would vomit. I dragged the car into the emergency lane and took my hands off the wheel, horrified. What kind of person was I? I had a beautiful wife and a daughter and had spent two years working nights at the office. I had isolated myself out of

a petulant demand to be loved best or not at all. It was monstrous. I felt choked with waste to realise it only now, when faced with the possibility of losing everything.

It had been a head-on, the doctor explained. A four-wheel-drive had crossed the dividing line and pushed the engine of Lisa's car into the front seats. Lisa had suffered terrible injuries to her head and torso. She was in a coma.

"Your daughter," said the doctor, "was much luckier. She has a few superficial cuts to her right arm. They're looking after her in day care. Level four."

I wanted to see Lisa. The doctor warned me about her appearance. Her face was black, so lumpy I barely recognized her. There was a tube taped to her mouth and another to her nostrils. The left side of her head had been shaved. I held her hand and rocked back and forth, crying silently.

Her mother arrived that night from Auckland. "You should go home," Margaret said. "Your daughter needs you." She was right. I still hadn't seen Sarah. I kissed my wife's violated cheek and caught the lift to level four. Sarah was reading *Winnie the Pooh*. "Hi, Sarah." Her head lifted. "It's time to go home."

"Mummy?"

"Mummy's staying here tonight. Okay?" She didn't answer.

My car didn't have a car seat. We caught a taxi. When we arrived home, I set Sarah down and watched her run into the lounge room. It was the first time we'd ever been alone together.

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DINNER FOR SARAH was microwaved baked beans, toast, and slices of cheese. I set it in front of her with trepidation. There were so many ways I could do it wrong. She poked her finger into the beans. "Hot?"

"Is it?" I jabbed my own finger into the bowl. "No, that's okay. Not hot."

She looked at me with interest. "Spoon?"

"Spoon!" Stupid me. I retrieved a bright pink spoon and handed it to her. She carefully scooped up five beans and piloted them into her mouth. She chewed. Swallowed.

"Is that all right? You like it?"

"You like it," she agreed.

I read her *Maisy Likes Driving* and she turned the pages. When I finished, she said, "More stories?"

"All right." I reached for *We're Going On a Bear Hunt*, but she said, "Not My Puppy?"

"That's Not My Puppy. Okay." I read her the book.

"Bear Hunt?"

"I thought you didn't want *Bear Hunt*. You said no to that a minute ago."

"*Bear Hunt*, please?"

I read *Bear Hunt*. She said, "*Maisy Likes Driving* again?"

"Sorry, honey. That's enough stories for tonight."

No tears. No wailing. It confounded understanding. I tucked her into her cot and kissed her good night.

I reheated leftover baked beans, made more toast, and ate at the table. It was the strangest feeling; alone, but not.

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I MET MARGARET outside Lisa's room. "You're not taking Sarah in," she said. "It's too much. She'll be frightened."

"It's her mother." I carried Sarah inside. "Mummy. That's mummy." Sarah squeezed close to me. "She looks different because of the accident. Mummy was hurt."

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"Mummy sleeping?"

"Yes. She's sleeping so she can get better."

Sarah twisted in my arms. Margaret was right; it was too much. I took her outside again.

"I'll take her for a couple of hours," Margaret suggested. "Give you some time."

I sat in silence by Lisa's bed. Her chest rose and fell.

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WE FELL into a routine. Each morning at 6.30, Sarah woke and called for her mummy. I feared disappointing her, but when I entered she exclaimed, "Daddy!" My presence was magical, astonishing. I would kiss her and lift her out of her cot; we would play or read a story, then have breakfast. Dressing was an adventure. Some drawers seemed filled with clothes that no longer fitted Sarah, others to clothes she was yet to grow into. Several different outfits required testing before an appropriate ensemble was found, which Sarah found hilarious and thrilling. I would barely have time to finish doing up the studs before she'd slide off my lap to run to the mirror.

On the fifth day, with Sarah dressed in pink leggings, a blue denim skirt, and a frilly white shirt, Margaret said, "It's just as well Lisa's not awake. If she could see what Sarah's wearing, she'd be horrified."

The comment stayed with me all day.

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ONE MORNING I woke to Sarah calling my name. It was so wonderful that for a few moments I simply lay there, bathing in her voice. When I finally came, she said, "Daddy," not amazed, but rather pleased to have confirmation.

"Hi, sweetie." I kissed her and lifted her out of her cot. She wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my neck. It was a moment of purest joy. And it was so clear to me: how wrong I had been, how pure and primal love could be.

Sarah sat up in my arms, grinning. "Daddy." She poked my cheek.

"Yes," I said. "Daddy."

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A NURSE stopped me as I was about to enter Lisa's room. "Has Doctor Horsham seen you?"

"No." Halfway down the corridor, Margaret led Sarah away by the hand. I wondered if I should chase after them, if Margaret should hear this.

"He wants to speak to you. About your wife's condition."

"Has something changed?"

"Yes. Doctor Horsham will discuss it with you."

I pulled my usual seat up to the bed. While I waited, I searched Lisa's face for signs of calamity or miracle. I listened to the machine rasp of her breathing. It seemed beyond coincidence, this happening on this particular morning. It felt deliberate. I leaned closer. "Die," I whispered. "Die." ●