

Acclimatising

The important thing was to stay awake. Staying awake by day would help Melissa snap into the new meridian and then she would sleep tonight. It was 7am local time. The sky was already blue and the air warm as she left the refrigerated clime of the taxi and fumbled with unfamiliar bank notes. She thought of the silver skies and frost-tinged trees she had left behind and of her argument with Steve.

‘You’re flying out Friday night?’ Steve had echoed back at her.

‘Well, yes. Twenty-four hours flight plus eleven hours time difference means I don’t get there till Sunday morning. I need a day to adjust. It’s an important project.’

He was carrying Ben at the time and hugged the baby closer. *More important than this?* he seemed to say.

Her body felt stale and sluggish after the long flight. In the hotel room, she shrugged out of her chinos and opened her case to rummage for her swimsuit. For the past few hours – the Pacific Ocean ruffled beneath her – she’d planned it, how a swim would cleanse away the sweat and cramp of flying.

The lycra stretched over her stretch marks, clinging tightly over bulges that had no right being there, the excess flesh at odds with the aura she needed to project of sharp-edged marketing consultant. Exercise would put that right. A swim morning and evening in the hotel pool. Perhaps she could fit in jogging too. She wrapped herself in the deep-pile dressing gown which had been left in origami folds on the bed. It smelt citrus fresh; not a trace of milky vomit. She made for the lift.

The pool was on the lower-ground floor. Foliage sprang from terracotta pots and drops glistened, like beads of sweat, on the rubbery-green leaves. The forecast was for 38 degrees, but the air down here was cool and her feet recoiled from the unheated water as she

sat dangling them over the edge. It would be 8:30pm back home. She pictured Steve giving Ben his whirl-bath – his luxury spa – Steve’s hands so wide and sure, the soft look in his eyes as he tried to hold Ben’s unfocussed gaze. The way Ben would gurgle and squirm as he entered the blood-warm water. Before his eel-like body starting to buck and tighten and he erupted into inexplicable squalls, despite the chromo-therapy and whisper-jets which promised to induce relaxation.

She kicked her legs a little and tried to steel herself against the immersion into cold. Locking into her efficient front-crawl would soon warm her up. She counted down.

Three, two, one.

Her muscles clenched but refused to act.

Three. The water was ice-cold. *Two.* Her skin was tight with goosebumps. *One.* She was so deeply tired.

Come on!

She failed to access the resolve.

Back in her room, the immaculate expanse of the wide bed promised immediate sleep. But if she slept now, she wouldn’t sleep tonight. She could not give in. *Not again!*

She dressed, pulling on voluminous knickers to which she applied an absorbent pad, biting her lip against self-pity. Things had to get better with time.

She headed to the lobby, where the hotel boasted an atrium cum restaurant, the lush images instantly recognisable from the website. Full size trees provided shade to shrubs, flowers and tables, while the whirr of air-conditioning kept the atmosphere ocean-breeze cool. Some sparrows had sneaked in, attracted by the greenery, the escape from heat, and by the wide array of croissants and seedy breads. A harassed looking girl shooed the birds ineffectually away.

Melissa poured herself coffee. She filled a bowl with artistically sliced fruit, added a swirl of low-fat yoghurt and sat at a table on her own. She spooned up her four-type mix of melon and absorbed the hum of adult chat. No kids. No crying babies.

Her phone rang.

Steve.

She let it ring, on and on, and took a large mouthful of fragrant coffee. Their argument had been muted and sustained. It had started with Steve's grumblings at what her return to work entailed. *Do they really expect you to still travel so much? To Australia?* It had developed with his conviction that what she felt was more than simply physical. Finally she had snapped.

I'm not depressed. Screeching it at him had been a mistake, seeming to concede something. But she was not depressed; she was simply not happy. And who wouldn't be unhappy, dealing day and night with a baby that never stopped its red-faced screaming and stubbornly refused to feed; dealing with the physical repercussions of a traumatic birth and follow-up surgery which had still not put the internal tearing right; dealing with a husband who claimed – all of a sudden – that he hadn't understood the deal, when the deal had been laid out clear and simple: primary childcare was *his* responsibility.

What the hell right d'you have, telling me how I feel? Rethinking the argument, reconjured its heat. *Isn't it enough that I did what you wanted, I went ahead and had the bloody baby.*

She remembered Steve's look of open-mouthed disgust.

Things were not Ben's fault, of course they weren't. It wasn't the baby itself that she resented.

The phone stopped ringing; it buzzed to let her know she had a message. She refilled her coffee before pressing to receive.

‘Just wanted to know you got there. Hope you’re OK.’ His voice was tender and she almost wished for the harshness with which they’d parted. *Hope you’re OK.* If she didn’t ring back, he’d take it as proof something was wrong. She brought up his number.

‘Hey,’ she said, sure to inject some jauntiness into her voice.

‘Hey.’ He managed to sound worried with that single word.

‘How’s things?’

‘Good.’

‘How’s Ben?’ In the background she could hear the relentless two-pitch wail that would drive anyone insane.

‘Well he’s fine. Full throttle as you can hear. Don’t know how one baby can keep up so much noise for so long.’ He proceeded to deliver an hour by hour account of Ben’s wakeful night. She searched for some instinct, for a desire to be there, to pick Ben up and comfort him. But he didn’t need *her*; he was well cared for by Steve.

She carried on eating her yoghurt.

‘And you?’ Steve asked. ‘How are you?’ It was there again, that hush of concern, the voice which said no matter what her response, he was going to continue in his conviction that she was mentally unstable.

‘Well tired obviously. Always hard to sleep on the plane. And my body clock thinks it’s night-time, but if I give into that I’ll never adjust.’

‘Tell me about it. I mean being tired. All geared up for tomorrow then?’

‘Absolutely.’ Butterflies quivered in her stomach, stirring up the yoghurt, fruit and coffee. She could hardly admit to her misgivings and provide him ammunition. A sparrow hopped onto her table and looked at her from one eye, as if trying to make sense of her being here.

‘Any plans for today?’

She chatted through her planned itinerary. 'So basically hoping to enjoy the sunshine, then a bit of work and sleep. What about you?'

'The usual. Try and get Ben off, then grab something to eat. Bit of telly. Early night.'

It sounded drearily familiar. She thought of their former lifestyle as a *double income no kids yet* couple, and how on a Saturday night they would *do* things. Theatre followed by dinner. Meeting up with friends. Heading for a trendy winebar with ambience and river view. Nightclubs and jazz cafés. Tumbling into bed in the early hours, knackered, but still hungry for one another. She wondered if she would ever in her entire life feel like having sex again. All that prodding with body parts seemed distant, a bizarre and primitive ritual that surely civilised adults outgrew.

Silence loomed between them.

'Wish you were here,' he said eventually. She tried not to hear it as accusation.

'Likewise. I mean, you here.'

They were quiet for another moment, which probably wasn't all that long, but phone silence always multiplied time up. In that other life they had no end of things to say. Two different people avidly discussed world affairs, opinions on the latest films and their feelings about themselves and one another. These days, every single conversation revolved around the baby or how sleep deprived they were or her return to work.

She finished her coffee. 'I'd better let you get on,' she said.

'You *are* OK?'

'I'm fine.'

A wall of heat hit her as she left the controlled atmosphere of the hotel lobby. Like one of those sparrows, she wanted to sneak back in and take refuge. But sunlight would trigger changes in her melatonin level and help her to adjust.

She walked crisply. The briskness would jolt her body into feeling awake. First, she'd check out the location of the client's offices, not because she couldn't take a cab tomorrow, but the morning walk would help buck her into the working day. The wide, tree-lined streets were quiet. She looked up at the office blocks, great walls of glass, and reminded herself that this was Melbourne, the other side of the world to London, as far away as it was possible to get without leaving Earth.

The roads turned and criss-crossed as per her Google-map. She stood for a moment staring at the office windows which were clad in marketing images: improbably thin and glamorous women nudged noses with cutely dimpled babies. The client had previously built a strong local brand in baby products, from logoed fluffy socks to state-of-the art strollers, from plush cuddly toys in limited edition to brain-boosting visual stimulation. The baby market was vast, and global. The client's market share had slipped, as newer, smaller, smarter firms outpaced them, as fewer women had babies. They needed a brand makeover; they wanted to expand their reach into the European market, starting with the UK.

She thought how she'd be here tomorrow morning, dressed smart and projecting dynamic energy. She was facilitating a three day brainstorm on strategic positioning, on transforming brand identity and value perception, on balancing local and global issues.

Her head felt muzzy. She could feel the seeping dampness between her legs, oppressing her, along with the minor failure of her abandoned swim. In twenty-four hours time, she'd be presenting to a high-powered group – upper-management types whose time was weighed in platinum – who would cut her little slack if what she delivered wasn't fresh, instructive and compelling. She would need to be fervent, agile, innovative, all those things she used to be and which seemed so elusive right now. Confidence had leaked away so quickly with her four months maternity leave, as if giving birth to a baby had caused time to rewind and she herself was starting out in life again. The first week back in the office had

floated by in a haze, her brightly lip-sticked smile providing cover for her sense of not quite being there. She read and reread the background briefing, each time failing to properly engage with the product-set, to enter the company mind-set, to generate ideas. ‘All seems pretty straightforward,’ she had told her boss.

Just now, switching into the mental frame required for inspirational talks felt impossibly remote. But give her a day of exercise and sun, a session mugging up on her files, followed by a good night’s sleep and she’d be all set.

She retraced her steps partway, then turned towards the river and onto the bridge, where she stopped to watch the churning energy of the water, the smooth progression of the rowing eights, checking out the towpath that would be ideal for jogging.

The sun burned ever hotter by the time she reached the botanical gardens. The pathways here offered shade, if not exactly coolness. A bird, sparrow-sized but brilliant blue, hopped out from beneath a bush. *Pretty*, she thought, without feeling the pulse of pleasure that ought to accompany the word. She breathed in the scent of pine.

A signpost signalled the café and she headed there, ordering Earl Grey tea for its Englishness and caffeine boost. Her watch told her it was 11am here. Steve and Ben would be in bed by now. Her eyes dragged closed; she imagined herself lying beside Steve, could feel his body warmth spooning close as she drifted...

She jerked awake. A baby was crying.

Not *her* baby.

She looked around at the smiling people, the grown-ups, the children and the babies, all of them enjoying the sunny day. The white light seemed to bleach all colour from the scene, like an old-fashioned photo left to fade. A woman on the next table cheerfully wiped an ice-cream smeared mouth whilst joggling a baby on her shoulder, providing a sepia advert for robust motherhood.

Despair drenched through, terrifying in its purity.

Postnatal depression was very common. Everyone kept telling her that.

‘Nothing to be ashamed of,’ her sister had said.

‘I’m not ashamed. Not depressed. Just sick to death of being cooped up with a screeching baby and not using a single brain cell.’

Sick of the infected milk ducts and never getting enough sleep. Of leaking body fluids and the uneasy sense of wrongness *down there*. Tired of the way that the sharp workings of her mind had turned to mush. Of the constant wailing. The crying might be tolerable if it indicated need, if it was simply an alarm system which informed her of the correct timing for a feed or nappy change. *That* she could understand. It was the senselessness of it all. The out-of-control-ness. The endless hiccuping misery when there was absolutely nothing wrong and nothing she could do to halt it. The way everything was a battle. Ben’s refusal to latch onto her nipple. The way he fought, his tiny limbs discovering surprising strength when engaged in the purpose of thwarting her.

I’m only trying to feed you. To change your nappy. To clean you up. To dress you.

How could he rebel so utterly against those things?

Melissa Myers was not the type of woman to be depressed. A trying four months. A tiring week back at work. A long-haul flight and jet-lag. Add it up and anyone would be left feeling low.

Movement was the key; if she could just keep moving. She stood and started walking.

Beautiful, she thought, as she took in the vivid colours of exotic blooms, experiencing them as if printed in a glossy magazine, second-hand and two-dimensional. Their heady scent reminded her of the fragranced pads she used. She thought of the packaging which showed inanely smiling women, the insane pretence they didn’t mind. When she got back home,

she'd consult another doctor. She was forty-three, not eighty, for Christ's sake; her current problem could not be permanent. Another of those blue birds hopped about so optimistically.

Pretty.

Gardens comprehensively toured, she continued walking.

Heat reflected back from the pavements. A park offered scorched greenery. People sported colourful clothes. Bounding dogs lolled their tongues. Toddlers toddled. A blue lake shimmered with sailing boats. She spotted ducklings. Eight, no nine, no ten of them, tiny fluffs of yellow life, venturing off in small quick darts, already so independent.

Feel something!

Surely it couldn't be so difficult. At some point she would kick-start back into feeling bright.

She fought the increasing heaviness of her legs and continued along more roads, the sun burning through her sunscreen, until finally she caught the ocean's acrid scent.

Cafés were strung along the seafront and she stopped in the first, grateful to sink into a wicker chair in the shadow of a wide awning. She ordered an elaborate sandwich and fizzy water.

Sitting provided relief for her aching limbs. The sea lay before her, its white-laced waves moving purposefully forward, uncurling before clutching at the sand. A holiday brochure vista. The sea breeze took the edge off the heat, and the salt air cleared her head. She gazed over the expanse of water to the wide curve on the horizon where the blueness of the sea merged into the crystalline blueness of the sky.

Come on! Closing her eyes she could sense that childhood, day-at-the-seaside pleasure teasing at the edges. It was almost there, a lightening to her mood, offering not so much happiness as a belief in it as a possibility. Which was exactly the trick in marketing, overriding inconvenient realities to sell future dreams.

‘Everything OK with your order?’

Melissa’s eyes blinked open; the rake-thin waitress smiled. ‘Yes,’ Melissa said.

‘Everything’s fine.’

Time was passing; she was getting through her day and soon she would have won the right to sleep. She just needed to push herself a little more.

Keep pushing, that nurse had said. Just keep pushing.

She abandoned her mayonnaise-mess of a picked-at sandwich and resumed walking. Along the seashore, kids splashed in the shallows and gym-honed bodies played volleyball or sprawled out on the sand. People were swimming, their seal-heads bobbing up and down. Further out were surfers and she remembered the last time she had been here when, despite a heavy schedule, she had fitted in some water-sports. The thought of the sheer amount of energy required was disquieting.

She kept walking to the far end of the beach, keeping her legs moving to a rhythm, like the lapping of waves, staving off the craving to sink down into the sand and shut her eyes. Just keep moving.

She walked beyond the flags marking out the boundaries of the beach patrols, out to where the waves crashed more forcibly onto outlying rocks and people were scattered sparsely. No question of surfing, but she could swim, making up for her earlier wimp-out. One failure risked another; one act of spiritedness would help ensure the next. Seawater would provide the perfect wake-up call.

She took the hotel-branded towel out of her bag and unwrapped her costume. It was still damp and chlorine-scented from sitting on the poolside. Undressing beneath a towel was awkward. She used to be proud of her body; now she felt horridly aware of her ungainliness and of the ugly purple scorings. One hand manoeuvred the bulky knickers down her thighs while the other pinned the towel in place. The lycra snagged and resisted. The costume was

clammy against her skin. She felt conscious of the hard protrusion of her nipples, which were wrongly shaped for breast-feeding, and which Ben so forcibly rejected. The warmth of the sun seemed to dim and the wind blew stronger. The waves looked stronger too.

An invigorating swim. The walk back. A quick bite from room service. An hour to review tomorrow's presentation. *Of course, as a new mother myself*; she was planning to play on that line. After all that, she'd have earned her right to twelve glorious hours in the all-to-herself luxury of a double bed, without the faintest chance of a wake-up wail.

The waves lapped coldly over her feet. It would be fine once she was in. Her feet had warmed up by the time the cold line of the sea was licking her knees; her knees were warmer once the waves reached her thighs. *Three. Two. One.* She counted down then failed to plunge forward. She'd lost discipline. Had failed to shrug off her excess weight. She would start to put that right. *Now!*

Now!

Her body refused. Just as it had this morning.

And then...

In a rush, she was diving in, moving past the point of no return. The shock of cold thrilled through her. She started flailing her limbs. The more vigorously she moved, the sooner she would warm up. She headed away from shore.

Slowly, she felt her body adapt. Exercise released feel-good endorphins, a sure-fire bet. Unlike mother-love hormones which had fallen far short of their vastly oversold reputation. She set her sights on a rock out in the bay. If she reached that, then she could rest, before heading back. Perhaps she could get a cab to the hotel and skip dinner. She'd look through her notes tomorrow morning. She could surrender into the bliss of sleep. It was only a little while that she had to keep pushing on.

Push, that nurse had kept saying. Just keep it going. It won't be much longer now.

Twenty-six fucking hours.

Her arms propelled her forwards, her legs kicked, as she drew on the anger that for twenty-six hours no one had done anything other than tell her to push.

Steve should have insisted on a caesarean. She hadn't been in a state to insist coherently on anything. Afterwards he said *he* wasn't a doctor and couldn't be expected to override medical decisions and he probably wouldn't have been listened to anyway.

But he hadn't even tried.

Her skin was tingling and her limbs were turning numb. Her lungs laboured and she felt a weakness in her thigh muscles and a strain in her groin. Tiredness had always been something to work through and overcome. *Work hard and play harder.* The rock did not seem to be getting closer. It must be doing, obviously, but there was some problem with perspective and it was further than she'd originally judged.

A superstition murmured in her mind: if she could reach the rock then everything would be alright. Achieve this, and the rest would follow. Physical fitness. Confidence at work. The flow of lucrative and creative ideas. Her sense of direction and control.

Loving Ben.

Having got this far, she would not turn around.

Water splashed into her mouth, bitter with salt and gritty with sand; it burned her nasal passages and left her spluttering. She flipped onto her back. The kids playing in the shallows seemed very small.

She let herself glide with the waves, which carried her up-up, down-down, the water buffeting her body like a masseuse. This was Melbourne. A city beach. Strictly speaking she was outside the boundaries of those nanny-state flags, but she could not possibly be in any danger.

The wakeful shock of cold had worn off and her eyes were heavy. Her legs and arms felt heavy too as they moved in slow motion. Breath rasped in her throat. If she could reach the rock, she could rest and recuperate.

Her movements slowed until she was doing barely more than treading water; the rock was no nearer. Too late to change her course. She remembered staring down at the blue line of the pregnancy test and thinking *I've done it now*. She remembered the person she had been, that happy, energetic person who had always been so certain that she did not need to be a mother to find purpose in her life.

She thought of Steve with his ultimatums. How he'd worn her down with his *now or never* arguments, his mis-selling of the having-it-all family dream.

She'd love it, if she just plunged right on in, so everyone had said. But what if the whole babies thing was nothing but some vast marketing conspiracy. After all, where would companies be without the steady production-line of proto-consumers. It was in so many vested interests, the hard-selling of a fantasy which lured women into irrevocable choices that they could not later decry, not without admitting to their own unnatural inadequacy.

What if she never acclimatised?

She thought of Ben, her first glimpse of his misshapen, bruised head, the after-effect of the ventouse, her utter numbness. *Feel something!*

She thought how it had been Steve who first held Ben and how the two of them would be managing fine without her, managing just fine.

Her eyes dragged. She could feel the pull of baby hands, urging her to give in, let go, stop fighting; tugging her down into the salty embrace of sleep.

It would be so easy.

She remembered how she needed to stay awake. She really did need to stay awake.