

Mandy Herbert

A Life Unmade

One.

I dream of her again. She's there but not. I've left her somewhere and I can't find her.

All I can hear are the cries and I ache.

I wake up frantic, convinced for a moment that it was real, that she was there. My body aches for her, the ache so real, so tangible. I stumble out of bed, searching, calling.

Two.

"We're not ready."

"You mean, you're not ready."

"Don't do this. I mean we're not ready. Are you seriously telling me that you're ready to drop all this for sleepless nights and a never-ending money pit? You know it would mean no more big trips to Canada or Europe, right?"

"Wow, you really have a way with words. You should go into advertising."

I can't help the sarcasm. We've had this conversation every month without fail. Sometimes he's on the pro side, sometimes I am, but we never seem to meet. Last month I'd freaked out, convinced that trying to bring up a child in our shoebox of an apartment would result in child services filing charges of neglect. I had it all figured out: someone would shop us to the authorities—probably the Russians next door—and one morning, the doors would burst open and they'd discover our child living in amongst the desks and books in the study, cuddling an iPad. They'd look around—where's the bouncy chair and wifi baby monitor? Where's the millions of unitaskers designed to make baby

food? ARE YOU NEGLECTING YOUR CHILD? And they'd take her away, leaving us bereft.

Logically, I know that these fears are ridiculous but they filled my mind daily. We decided to stay on the Pill that month.

But now I'm ready and he's on the platform, unsure.

"Tobes, I'm ready and you know you're ready. I mean, as ready as ever. We could save and save and save and still we'd want more money set aside, or more stuff."

He looks at me and sighs.

"If you're sure. I guess there's no turning back." But I see him smile and his eyes do that thing where they crease when he's excited about something.

I can't help but giggle a little madly.

Three.

"Not this month my love."

I sigh as I open the bathroom door. I'd had a feeling it was coming but seeing that telltale blood in the toilet confirmed it. He reaches out to me, pulling me close. We stand there quietly, holding each other, propping ourselves up.

"It's okay. There's no rush, you know. It'll happen when it happens."

The same words as last month and the month before. It'll happen when it happens.

"It's my fault. It's my fault."

I whisper it over and over again, knowing I sound like a cliché but powerless to stop myself.

"How is it your fault? That's just ridiculous."

"I was relieved that first month when I wasn't pregnant. Relieved that we could still go to Fiji for Kate's wedding and I could drink and enjoy the week away. I don't know."

"So was I. But that's got nothing to do with this. You didn't wish it away. I don't know what your teachers were like in school but biology doesn't work that way, you know."

He pulls back with a grin and I can't help but smile back.

"Ha ha. Very funny. You know what I mean though."

"I do, my love, but relax, it's going to be fine. Before you know it, we'll be whinging about sleepless nights and comparing poopy nappies with the best of them."

Four.

The pills are lined up on the kitchen counter. Thank god for combined multi-vitamins, otherwise the morning routine would stretch into late afternoon. Folate and iron, vitamin C and D, throw in fish oil and swallow it all down with a soy milk spinach smoothie for good measure. I never realised how much help my body needed to be normal, to do normal things that women's bodies are supposed to do. How are all these fucking teenagers popping out kids left, right and centre? I doubt they're popping fucking iron tablets every morning, followed by a main course of fish oil caplets. But this is what I do.

Last week, we shelled out a couple of hundred bucks and sat in a specialist's waiting room for an hour, watching the other patients watching us. Everyone's wondering where you are on your journey. It's such a euphemism. What everyone wants to ask is are you pregnant? Has it worked for you? What's wrong with me? But we all stare and pretend to read the old magazines and watch terrible morning shows on the TV in the corner while checking our phones and Facebook.

The doctor is reassuring and calm. He talks about sperm count and ovulation and draws terrible drawings that wouldn't win any prizes for realism. There's a booklet and a plan, which is supposed to reassure me that we're on track, on the track.

"Don't worry," he says, "I'll give you many babies."

Five.

"I feel like I'm walking around with a big sign above my head."

I giggle at the thought of a massive neon arrow hovering above my head, pointing at my belly.

"That would be awkward. How would you get through doorways?" Toby looks up from tying his shoelaces.

We laugh that laugh, the self-assured we-have-a-secret laugh that all expectant parents have before anyone else has been allowed in.

"Are you sure nobody can tell? What if they offer me a drink?"

"Firstly, nobody can tell anything except that you look beautiful and secondly, you don't drink much anyway, so nobody will wonder anything. As long as you don't throw up at the dinner table, I think you're 'right.'"

He makes a good point. He's the relaxed one in this story. It's almost as if all the doubts have evaporated and this is the role he was born into.

"How are you feeling—do you need to bring those crackers with us?"

I grab the water crackers, my salvation. As long as I don't think about food, I'm fine. I can even eat a bit before my brain catches up with my belly, but those crackers have something magical about them. I have packets stashed everywhere. I'm sure we'll be finding them for years to come.

"All set. Let's go Daddy-o!"

Six.

The cramps start in the middle of the night and immediately I know. I just know. I don't even have to wake him up—my gasp must have pulled him from his deep sleep and we both sit up, in shock. I say nothing, just bend over and gasp again and again. Without looking, I know there is blood. I feel the warmth between my legs and I know.

Seven.

They're everywhere. Every second Facebook update is someone else announcing a due date and those that aren't are baby updates and it hurts.

I've I stopped listening to my favourite radio station ever since they started running a competition with couples trying to get pregnant. I shout at the announcers while I'm driving, angry at how unfair the world is.

I want to be one of those couples, pregnant and in the running to win. Or just pregnant, that would be enough.

Toby says nothing any more. There's nothing to say.

Eight.

This time we are circumspect. I'm glad for my previous squirrelling away of water crackers because I find them whenever I need them most. There's a pack within reach in the driver's door in my car, in my top drawer at work, next to the microwave in the kitchen. I grab them without thinking and munch away, sure that my colleagues think I'm gaining weight from all the snacking. Last time I couldn't wait to tell

people I'm not fat, I'm pregnant, counting the days until they would stop judging me for snacking and start asking me about the baby.

This time, I don't care what they think. It's easier to be fat. People don't commiserate with the fatty snacking in the office. They barely notice you.

All I crave is chicken—grilled or roasted with some crispy skin—but the smell of it cooking makes me gag. Most cooking smells make me gag these days. I'm still taking the pills—the folate and iron and vitamin D—when I can, but otherwise I stay out of the kitchen. Toby is learning to cook at last. He's turning into a great maker-of-chicken-sandwiches.

We smile tentatively at first but as the weeks pass, we allow ourselves a little more freedom. I let my hand linger on my belly for a moment longer every time, terrified the gentlest touch will be too much. We don't say a word about anything, not even when it's just us. Conversations dance around the words family and pregnant until we're so far away from it all.

I'm counting days and examining the toilet bowl, holding my breath and watching, waiting.

It's only once I'm lying on the table with the icy cold gel on my belly and the ultrasound technician watching the screen with a smile—a smile!—that we allow ourselves to breathe.

I hear his intake of breath and he grips my hand. I can hardly speak, lest the moment be a dream.

Nine.

It's glorious, this attention, although I roll my eyes when I tell stories of strangers wanting to touch my belly.

“I mean, do I LOOK like a Buddha? Okay, maybe I do but REALLY!”

I laugh with my friends, a proper laugh, a belly laugh, as if she's laughing with us all. She's a quiet one in there, hardly moving much, but she's already a big presence in our lives. Every morning, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and look at my belly, look at my baby. I'm exhausted all the time but not as badly as I was at the start. Everyone jokes that I should be storing up sleep now since there won't be much of it later. But I can't seem to find a comfortable position any more. I

shift from side to side and use every spare pillow to prop up my belly until I can relax. But then I need to pee, so it all starts again.

I don't even mind not eating cheese or sushi. I haven't had a sip of coffee in months and I can't even contemplate wanting it again.

We have a birth plan and I'm starting pre-natal yoga next week.

Ten.

Pain.

Ripping me in half and I want to scream but I have no breath left. It feels as if a train is crashing through me, pulling me every which way, and I am breathless. My birth plan with 'epidural' underlined three times has been long forgotten. Things move so much faster in life than on paper. Toby is standing at my shoulder, half-massaging my neck that I know he thinks feels good but I just want to yell at him to stop, but I have no breath for words.

This is all normal. Women do this all the time. I need to remember this. I'm in a good hospital, with good—expensive—doctors. I'll be fine.

But when I look at the doctor, he's not calm. There's a rush of bodies, a crush of hands and machines. I want to scream, to grab a hand, but they're passing me by and the world is dark. Our hearts pound in union.

And then they don't.

Eleven.

He waits for me to do the rounds, to search every room, open every door as I do most mornings after those dreams. He watches me silently. He used to try reasoning with me but now he's given up.

And then I stop. Aware again, at last, for the first time, that as much as I search, she is nowhere.