

Louise Doughty

*Whatever You Love**

Part 3: Before

8.

David got to hold her first. Sheena the midwife checked her over, pronounced her a sparkling ten on the Agpar scale, swaddled her and handed her to her father. I was on my back on the high bed; dazed and disbelieving. Sheena and the trainee midwife were seated on stools at the foot of the bed. The delivery room was high-ceilinged, echoey. I heard Sheena say quietly, ‘Now, I don’t really like putting stitches here because there’s a lot of nerve endings but I think we better had.’ I’m not going to like this much, I thought, and I didn’t.

‘In all directions then, is it?’ I called down to them, when I could speak again.

‘I’m afraid so, but don’t you worry, we’re going to sort you out now.’ Sheena lifted her head and beamed at me. ‘You’re going to be just fine, now.’ Sheena and I worked together for three years before I had my daughter and she delivered half the babies born in this town during that period. She walked on water as far as I was concerned.

I turned my head to watch David who was sitting in the chair next to my bed, holding *her*, our girl, smiling down at her while they worked on me. His face glowed as though lit by a

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campside fire. It took a lot to render David speechless but he was silent now, lips pressed together, gaze locked so firmly it would have taken a crowbar to shift it.

I had had 50mg of Pethidine but was learning the hard way that didn't help much when it came to stitching torn muscle – another sting of pain shot through me, so sharp and deep I could not locate its starting point, knew only that it finished somewhere deep inside. I gasped out loud but David did not lift his gaze from his daughter. I didn't mind. She was too swaddled for me to see her but watching David's face as he stared and stared at his new baby girl was almost as good, as though his face was a reflective pool. The stitching took forever but eventually I was allowed to raise myself. The trainee midwife was sent out to make me tea and toast and Sheena leaned forward and took Betty from David's reluctant grasp. 'Let's give mum a turn, shall we?' she said firmly. She handed Betty to me. At last. I lifted my t-shirt, the one I later discarded because it was bloodstained, loosened the swaddling a little and placed my new baby girl at my breast. She stared up at me with midnight blue eyes and latched on immediately. There was still a little blood on her forehead. Sheena, watching, gave a broad smile. 'Sure, you're not going to have any problems with that little person.'

Sheena was right. We never did. It was as though Betty had spent her time in the womb flicking idly through textbooks on what was expected of a newborn baby. She fed every four hours. She smiled right on cue, at six weeks. She held her head up nicely at three months. David and I were the smuggest parents on the planet, which considering how smug all parents of newborn babies are is saying something. We had only two topics of conversation, in those early months. The first was the utter superiority of our baby to all other babies ever born, and the second was the

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utter superiority of our parenting to that of all other parents. In the post-natal classes, I would listen with a small smile to the tales of other mothers – how their babies were awake all night, how they just wouldn't latch on, how the antibiotics they had taken for mastitis had given the babies thrush. When I got home, I would relate every detail of these conversations to David and we would sit together over dinner and unpick each one of their complaints, shaking our heads. Why did other parents make such a meal of it? What was their problem?

Betty was eighteen months old when I got the phone call from the home. I had been expecting it for so long that I didn't expect it any more and when it happened I experienced a strange sense of vertigo, similar to the one I felt when David dangled me over the cliff-top: a weak, hollow sensation. 'I'm very sorry,' said the doctor who made the call. 'I've got some very bad news.' My mother had been frail for years. It was a chest infection got her in the end.

My mother was not part of my daily routine – she had never been able to bathe my baby daughter with me, or babysit. I missed her absence more than her presence. I missed the mother who died in her sleep after many years in a nursing home but also the mother I would have had had her illness not taken a grip when I was so young. In that sense, my mourning had a level of self-indulgence quite startling in its purity. I had been called brave so often during her illness that I handled her death with a degree of cowardice to which I felt quite entitled, as if I had been storing up self-pity all those years, only liberated to indulge it when my mum was no longer there as a living example of how much worse her situation was than mine. I mourned the person I would have been had I been raised by a healthy mother.

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Three weeks after my mother's funeral, David came into the bedroom one evening, where I was sitting up in bed reading a book called *A Good Innings* – Sunita at work had lent me her battered paperback copy. Her father had died of motor neurone disease. As long as you got past the chapter on learning to rebirth yourself, she said, it had some interesting things to say. I had just read the line, 'It can be hurtful to realise that others around you regard grief for an elderly parent as excessive or self-indulgent.'

David was standing by the bed, working both shoulders backwards. 'I think I'm going to have to get health and safety to look at my chair again,' he said. He had tried any number of different designs of chair in front of his desk at work, nothing helped. It was David that needed redesigning, his tall, poorly constructed frame.

I glanced up at him, over the yellow oval of light that fell on the book from the reading lamp clipped to the headboard behind me. My reading glasses were perched on the end of my nose, so I looked at him over them, a level look. Seeing he had my attention, he took a step towards me and turned around. 'It's here,' he said, 'lower than before, right down here.' He prodded at his lower back, then arched backwards, wincing.

'Take a Neurofen,' I said, and returned to my book.

Then there was Betty and all the glorious shapes of Betty; Betty who clambered into our bed each morning and huddled down between us for all of thirty seconds before she decided it was time to stand up and use my pillow – over which my hair was still strewn – as a trampoline; Betty who would wear nothing but her purple dungarees with the appliquéd dog on the bib front. Dog

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trousers, she called them. She would have slept in them if we let her. If I put them through the wash, she would howl as if she was being tortured. After she had started school, I came across an old video cassette of her at eighteen months and went to the trouble of extricating the old video and TV from the pile of junk in the box room in order to watch it. She was pottering around the sitting room of Aunt Lorraine's house, at some large gathering with adults seated on sofas, bashing peoples' knees with an inflatable hammer. Although the adults in the scene were off-camera, it was clear from the shrieks of laughter on the tape that we all considered this to be exceptionally clever and amusing behaviour. Every now and then, Betty turned to the camera and waved the hammer gleefully. It took me a few minutes to work out what was bothering me about the scene. It was only when she pointed a finger at the camera, then at something the camera couldn't see, turned back and said, 'Shoosh!' that I worked it out. She wasn't talking. Why wasn't she talking? I thought, momentarily baffled. Ah, of course, she was only eighteen months old. She couldn't talk. How strange that there should have ever been a time when she couldn't talk, when even 'dog trousers' was a distant and unimaginable accomplishment. This was something that always amazed me. Each successive Betty erased the Betty that preceded her – yet they were all still inside her, like a Russian doll, or one of those paper strings of figures you make by folding a sheet many times and cutting it, then unfolding it again.

Lorraine's house was the usual venue for these get-togethers. It was a large, red-brick semi, vaguely Edwardian, on the very edge of Eastley, the next town along the coast from ours. I felt warmly towards it, remembering that I had been a hit on my very first visit there – as a result was close to Lorraine in a way I wasn't to David's reserved mother. David's mother and father were

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quiet, pleasant people who gave me the distinct impression that I wasn't quite good enough for their beloved only son – nearly, but not quite. Lorraine, on the other hand, was easy to please. She liked people who laughed at her jokes and helped her carry dishes from room to room. It wasn't much to ask and I joined in with alacrity. I thought of her as my ally.

If anyone knew in advance which way my marriage was likely go, it would have been Lorraine. We were washing up in her kitchen one Sunday afternoon – or rather I was washing up while she loaded the dishwasher. David's sister Ceri was buzzing in and out taking orders for tea or coffee from the half dozen relatives in the sitting room. 'What's the chance of that brother of yours mowing my lawn while he's here?' Lorraine said to her. 'Or are the boys glued to the armchairs for the rest of the day now?'

'Not much,' Ceri replied coolly. 'Uncle Richard is showing him the paint stripper.'

'Oh hell... ' muttered Lorraine. Uncle Richard, her husband, had a merry laugh and angina. Lawn mowing and DIY were both out, but that didn't stop him purchasing labour-saving devices as if he was opening a museum dedicated to them. David was always required to admire the new labour-saving device when we visited, on account of how he designed such things himself. He probably would rather have been mowing the lawn.

A little female solidarity was called for. 'I can't get him to do even ours,' I said to Lorraine as Ceri bustled out of the room again. 'The weekends are always so busy and he's never back from work before half past eight these days.' In fact, I didn't mind that he often worked late and missed Betty's bedtime. It was easier to put her to bed alone than to have her over-excited by David's return just as we were on the final page of *No Roses For Harry*.

Lorraine did not respond immediately, but continued loading the dishwasher. 'Off down the boozier with the boys, is it?'

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There was something about the way she said it, a dryness in her tone I had not heard before, that made me pause in what I was doing, my hands still in the foaming suds – she used a different brand of washing up liquid from mine and I had put too much in. It was frothing up over the sides and onto the countertop.

‘No, no... well, not that often I don’t think...’ David went to the pub after work sometimes but recently he had been too busy, I thought. I realised I didn’t know which it was: the office or the pub. He didn’t volunteer the information and I didn’t ask. I never asked David questions, after all, it was always the other way around. This was pre-Chloe, when as far as I knew, David and I were happy together and my life with Betty was absorbing enough for me not to question that.

I still didn’t know any different, there in Lorraine’s kitchen, but what came to me then was an awareness that I didn’t know any different – knowledge that my ignorance existed.

Aunt Lorraine lifted the door of the dishwasher awkwardly – her bulk made her stiff when she bent. She twiddled with the dial, pushed two buttons with jabs of her plump forefinger and the dishwasher made a *je-jung* sound as it bounced and grinded into life. She picked up a teatowel from the countertop and wiped her hands. Still without looking at me, she said thoughtfully, ‘Well, there’s a price to pay with a boy like our David, I suppose.’ She looked at the door, towards where her sitting room was full of her husband and her relatives. Her expression was clouded. ‘I should know that as well as anyone...’ she muttered.

I didn’t know what she was talking about. A price? What price was I paying for having David? What price had she paid for Uncle Richard? It seemed an odd way to refer to a relationship – was there always a price to be paid? If so, I wasn’t aware that I was paying one.

We finished clearing up, then took coffee for ourselves and went into the sitting room where Uncle Richard was playing a board game with the older of Ceri's two boys – the youngest boy was upstairs with Betty. Everyone else was sitting on chairs around the room. The paint stripper sat, admired and then discarded, amongst half-finished wine-glasses on the dining table. 'They are playing weddings,' David informed me, referring to our daughter and her cousin, and pulled a face. I sat down on the arm of the sofa and leaned towards him, reaching out a hand to smooth down his hair where it was sticking up and crinkled, towards the back of his head. He moved his head away. I had only meant to be affectionate but the sharpness of his movement suggested irritation, as if he thought I was trying to infantilise him.

The door from the hallway opened; in walked Betty. She had an old net curtain round her shoulders and was using one hand to clutch it in place. In the other, she held a sink plunger, thrust before her like a ceremonial mace. On her head, she was wearing a yellow t-shirt that she had helped herself to from Lorraine's laundry basket and which I knew to be in lieu of a gold crown – in Betty's mind, the line between brides and princesses was blurry. Both got to dress up and be worshipped and that was fine by her.

We broke into spontaneous applause. All the adults gave their own, particular sort of exhalation – vocalised in my case, a long 'Aaah...', a sigh from Aunt Lorraine, a grin from David, an explosive chuckle from Uncle Richard, who reached out to grab her, destabilising the yellow t-shirt. Whatever the different quality of those reactions, they all meant the same thing to Betty as she pushed herself free of Uncle Richard, replaced the t-shirt on her head and stood in the middle of the room, clutching the rubber plunger and beaming round at us all. *All I have to do is walk into a room*, she was saying to herself. *That's all I have to do.*

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I leaned over and kissed the top of David's head and this time he did not move away but reached out a hand and squeezed my knee in acknowledgment of our shared pride. In that respect, nothing had changed. We were still the smuggest parents in the world.

When Rees was born, it was payback time. It began with the trouble I had feeding him. He wouldn't latch on if his life depended on it – which it would have done were it not for the joys of formula milk. I developed mastitis and had to take antibiotics. Oh, and he screamed all night. It was only then I realised what a mistake I had made in having our easy baby first. 'God,' I said to David one evening, 'I had coffee at Sally's house this morning.'

'Mmm...' he murmured, wiping down the hob, while I sat on a high kitchen stool, a wide-awake little Rees in my arms. I launched into my tale with some enthusiasm. This sort of story was what filled my day at that point in our lives.

'I was trying to feed him, you wouldn't believe how smug that woman is...' The youngest of Sally's four children, Willow, had just gone up to Reception with Betty and Sally was incredibly broody. She had watched me trying to feed Rees at her kitchen table and made one suggestion after another. By the time she said, 'Have you tried lying flat on your back with him across your shoulder?' I had been ready to scream. The harder I had tried to get Rees to latch on, the more frantic he had become. I was sweating profusely – Sally's kitchen was overheated, I had just had a hot drink and both breasts were full, the pads in my nursing bra sodden with warm milk. In the end, Sally had almost snatched Rees from me and walked around her kitchen with him on her shoulder while I removed my zip-up fleece, took deep breaths and tried to calm down. Rees,

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meanwhile, had become more and more hysterical. By the time Sally handed him back – unwillingly, for it was admitting defeat – he was beetroot-coloured.

‘Honestly,’ I bumbled to David, as he stood with his back to me, attending to a boiled-over, dried-hard crust of something on the hob, ‘someone should explain to that woman that childrearing doesn’t have to be a competitive sport. It’s only because she’s got nothing else going on in her life, that’s why she’s so obsessed with being helpful. And then, when I did finally get him latched on, she tried telling me that...’

I told this story to David in the same way I told him all my stories about my day with Rees, with an air of cheery desperation to which he never responded. I was trying to re-conjure his fascination with Betty when she was a newborn, our shared joy at that time. But by then, Chloe was on the scene.

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