

My Puerperal Psychosis

Migration

I drove myself over to Aberystwyth in January in the yellow convertible two-seater which had now become our second car, my car. The seatbelt pressed snugly over my taut stomach in which the baby I carried fidgeted reassuringly. Persistent kicks to the bladder were uncomfortable, but never painful. I felt contented to be sharing my body with my child. My now gravid shape was enclosed in a burgundy red romper suit with a pinstripe of gold thread running through it. Its bib top accommodated a range of cheerful jumpers, whilst the cuffed ankles displayed my heeled black boots. I enjoyed my body and the slight incongruity that I offered to bystanders at the petrol stations. 'Good-looking single woman driving Triumph Spitfire' as I passed in my car. Confident, well groomed mother-to-be as I raised myself to my toes and strode to the cash desk.

The bungalow at Bethania was not quite what I expected. Tim had mentioned curlews warbling overhead when he describing viewing the place in the summer. In the gathering dusk of a January evening, with bad weather forecast, the building looked whitish and tawdry, looming at the highest point of a sloping drive of scalplings, surrounded by rough grass, a fence, and misty darkness. Inside, it was tidy and characterless, a sitting room with a large picture window gazing out into the mist, a bedroom, a galley kitchen-cum-diner. It smelt, a smell with which I was to become familiar, of Welsh mould and dampness.

University term was to start on Monday, and this, for the duration of my maternity leave, and for the arrival of our baby, would be home. Determined to step confidently out into my new life, I went into Aberystwyth the next morning. My last visit, house-hunting with Tim, had been dreary. We had stayed the night at the Groves Hotel on North Parade. Unaccountably they had treated us with suspicion, indeed we surmised that, notwithstanding my rings and my bulge, they believed us to be unmarried. Reluctantly, they allowed us an extra pillow and blanket. When it became apparent that we planned to look round town for a restaurant instead of eating in the hotel, the patron became objectionable. Like naughty children we had scurried out, eventually dining, almost alone in a bistro on the old street running up from Trefechan Bridge. We faced each other over a candle guttering in a glass. The tall pews or stalls in which we sat were stripped pine, hard and un-reclining.

Knowing no one I strode round the town, pausing to buy a chicken in the butchers, gaze at log-burning stoves in the ironmongers on Great Darkgate Street, buying cabbage in a greengrocers. Budgens, our Oxford supermarket seemed impossibly exotic. Shopping here was to be like my childhood in 1950's in York, a protracted stroll with shopping bags from butcher to fishmonger to greengrocer to cheese shop and then back around again to buy the things we'd forgotten.

The predicted severe weather arrived on Sunday night, preceded thankfully, by half a ton of coal, delivered by the coal merchant on Saturday while I was in town. We snuggled together in the over-soft, smelly double bed as the timber framed bungalow creaked and groaned around us. As huge gusts passed over the roof the loft inspection hatch would lift and clatter back again overhead. Tim's long body wrapped around me and mine around my baby. I felt warm and secure. The howling gale and tawdry house were all part of the adventure.

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The reflective brilliance of the morning light revealed that it had snowed; rank upon rank of white hills and dark hedge-lines marched to the horizon. Inside the house, doors would no longer close, the timer-framed house having changed shape and the doorframes become rhomboidal overnight. The front door would open however. On opening it we found a white snow sheet almost totally closing the porch. Climbing out through our snowdrift we soon realise that while the fields were almost bare, great drifts of powdery snow lay deep along the roads and hedgebanks.

We were snowed in for ten days, with the chicken, a few spices, and a big bag of onions which had travelled with me, from our Oxford allotment, on the preceding Friday. As the days passed the proportion of chicken diminished, and of onions rose in our catering, with fart-ogenic consequences. Helicopters chuntered occasionally overhead, bringing food for beleaguered animals, the sun shone. It was bitterly, brilliantly cold. University first week was cancelled, and our confinement was without care. We walked over the snow blasted fields to the village shop, where we introduced ourselves as the newcomers we were, and bought tinned and dried goods which might have been there since the war. My pregnant state served me well in the matter of the eggs. This was our first ever appearance in the shop. Nonetheless we were allowed to purchase a dozen eggs, which were soon to be the staples of macaroni cheese, onion quiche, chicken and onion soup, piperade with extra onions and like onion-rich delicacies. The phone remained connected and the TV worked, there was no-where we could go, so we settled down to wait it out.

The bungalow proved difficult to keep warm. Interior doors could not be closed, and the coal fired stove with back boiler proved sadly ill found. Little of the heat was thrown into the room, whilst the back boiler was plumbed to just one radiator, in the dining area behind it, so the fuel we lavished on the fire served chiefly to overheat the hot water. At two in the morning we would be roused by terrifying gurgling and hissing in the loft. One or other of us would buy silence by running a bathful of boiling water down the drain before returning to bed.

On the ninth and tenth days Tim began, in a desultory fashion to dig two trenches for the car wheels down the rough drive towards the road. Land Rovers were now moving cautiously along the sugar-white roads and passing us with their plummy sheepdogs as we walked the road towards Penuwch. Flocks of fieldfare and redwing plucked the hawthorn hedges clean of berries, dark patches of starlings probed the damp seeping areas where spring water melted the upland fields.

On the tenth day came the thaw, and with it the return to daily life. We called up our landlord, and, expounding upon the inadequacies of his house, demanded to break contract and leave. The driving rain of the thaw had found out a further deficiency: the picture window leaked great pools of water onto the sitting room floor. My indignation was palpable; one should at least expect a newly built, modern bungalow to be warm, weather tight and clean. The pervasive mouldy smell was now easy to understand.

As Tim resumed his teaching I toured the estate agents in search of an alternative home. We considered a tiny flat in Aberystwyth, with deep pub carpeting and a Baby Belling on the stairwell for cooking on. It seemed seductively warm and toy-town to

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me, but Tim, conscious of its diminutive scale, objected. In Watkins' Estate Agency they were discouraging "Well there's a flat at Llanilar but I don't know that they'd want a baby. And the old lady's dying downstairs. No I don't think you'd want to go there."

I asked to view it, nonetheless, and when I arrived my spirits rose. Castle Hill was a big Georgian house surrounded by rhododendrons. Two Victorian wings and a bell tower extended its façade overlooking the park. The entire top floor of the Georgian box could be ours. It was not approached through the house, in which the old lady and her daughter Myrtle resided. In the 1960's Myrtle's mother had caused to be built an outside stone wing, enclosing a switch back staircase, which ascended directly to the second floor flat.

I immediately liked the shabby spaciousness of the Top Flat. Before conversion it had consisted of two pairs of interconnecting big rooms on either side of the stairwell and large bathroom. One seventeen-foot square room was to be our bedroom, the other the sitting room. The rooms were shabbily furnished with good antiques, ageing sofas and easy chairs and brocade curtains. The floors shifted and creaked as you walked across them, they were broad wormy oak boards on which a central carpet occupied the middle ground. Another seventeen-foot square had been divided to make dining room and kitchen, each with a single square window looking out through the beech crowns towards the village. The other room was the second bedroom, diminished in depth by the passage leading to the front door. It had an extravagantly floral wallpaper, great repeating bunches of roses each tied with a sinuous ribbon.

Myrtle liked us, I think. It was a straightforward matter of class. We had Oxford accents, professional qualifications, and most importantly, were most visibly and thoroughly married. The Loxdales took the view that the tenantry were a reflection of their landlords, and should be, above all, respectable people.

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Birth

In those two months in Castle Hill I took my impending motherhood extremely seriously. I needed to get known, meet mothers, find a doctor, visit the hospital. I attended antenatal classes at the town clinic and National Childbirth Trust classes in the cheerful Banc Y Darren home of Betty Loyn. At the town classes we were a mixed group, and spent a lot of time practicing the kite method for folding a terry towel nappy. With careful detachment and lack of pressure, both bottle and breast feeding were described to us. At the end of each session we lay on the floor on thin mats, and even cautiously pinched our neighbour gently to remind ourselves that the breathing was to alleviate discomfort.

At the NCT classes, the parents were all economic migrants, who worked at the University, the plant breeding station or the Welsh College of Agriculture. We propped ourselves up on bright scatter cushions, drank coffee, asked questions. We lay on the floor practicing relaxing and breathing, talking about natural labour and breast feeding. I wanted it all, just as nature intended. This was a project I intended to get right.

One session was for fathers too, and we each turned up with our partner. All looked somewhat apprehensive and Tim more uncomfortable than most. He didn't go in for small talk, and mixed warily. As Betty talked warmly of the importance of fathers I could feel him, sceptic and nervous beside me. We had an unspoken contract. I had waited for years before he had agreed to our having a baby, and then endured months of disappointments when our intermittent sex-like had failed to deliver the results. There was no feeling in our partnership that babies were something a woman did for a man. The baby was my project, I must make it work without placing undue demands. If Tim felt disassociated from the forthcoming birth that was his privilege.

My labour started unspectacularly, with a rupture of membranes. I hobbled to the bathroom, cupping my hands to avoid staining the old Castle Hill carpets. It was night time and I phoned the hospital. Not a lot seemed to be happening so I decided not to go in until morning.

We arrived, like good NCT parents with sundry extras. A sleeping bag and pillow to relax on the floor with. My small case of necessities. No one seemed awfully interested in us and we were told to go and wait in the day room. Contractions were mild and regular. Eventually I was processed and provided with an identity bracelet. The contractions meanwhile, in this waiting room atmosphere diminished to nothing. It all felt anti-climactic. I was admitted but had nothing to do. Drawing on NCT advice I declared I wanted to go out and walk around.

This was the first of many incidents in which the authoritarian structure of the hospital proved to be multi-headed creature. The Indian lady doctor acceded, provided Tim went with me, and still braceleted, I put on my clothes. Then as we left the building and headed towards the car an anxious nurse ran after us, telling me that the baby's cord might drop, be squashed in the cervix, and the baby would then die. I retained my resolve. Tim had done little to inform himself and probably felt ill at ease with this dilemma.

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Feeling well and empowered, with an obviously living baby inside me I demanded a sea front walk on the promenade. The contractions picked up a little in the fresh air and buffeted in spring winds and fleeting sunshine, I led a brisk pace up the rubbly path up Constitution Hill. Squally rain splashed upon us, Tim trailed nervously behind as I powered to the funicular railway bridge on the slope. A squall whipped in from the sea, rain stung my face; it seemed wise to go back before being deemed an irresponsible lunatic intent upon catching a chill.

Our return to the hospital was not conspicuously more rousing. Eventually we were allocated a room in the delivery suite, with a narrow bed and a chair. On what little floor remained, I laid out the sleeping bag and pillow. At times the contractions felt hard enough to make me stop and breath carefully. I welcomed then, every one.

With the night staff came a malign presence, fat, elderly affronted-looking Sister Jones. Eyeing my nervous tall husband she launched her first salvo “I hope you’re a man of stamina ... or you may as well go home now.” Obviously she hoped he would. As I adopted NCT postures on my mat her derision increased. “What are you doing down there – you look like a praying mantis,” and “You aren’t in labour. I can tell by the look on your face.”

It was in the face of jibes like this that I retired to the toilet and covertly examined myself – she obviously wasn’t going to. I found my cervix some 2-3 cms dilated and could feel the crown of a hard, hairy head. This at least was as it should be. I had the sense not to reveal my findings though, to either Tim or Sister Jones.

A painful night passed slowly, as we clung together on the narrow bed. There was nowhere else to relax. Sister Jones looked in occasionally, scornfully, and left. She didn’t like fathers, and she didn’t like NCT mums. Actually it appeared what she liked best was malleable lone teenagers she could dominate.

Morning took a long time coming. I was tired, thirsty, hungry, and intermittently in quite severe pain. I ate the sandwich Tim had brought in with him. This too was, I knew, an act of disobedience. But it was more than 24 hours since I’d eaten supper at home the previous night, and I had been offered nothing since.

With the day shift a more friendly young midwife was back, but there was general consternation. My membranes had been ruptured for more than 24 hours, and this, Doctor did not allow. So notwithstanding my NCT aspirations, I was put in a bed and my arm attached to a drip. No-one examined me internally, but they turned the dial up full and advised Tim it would be many hours yet. He looked wan and crumpled. What had I co-opted him into? (I hadn’t exactly co-opted him – but popular mores dictated he should be there). I felt responsible for his misery, and I encouraged him to go home. He went.

As the drugs ran into my body my womb took on a new purpose. Great contractions wracked my body. Far from relaxing I braced my feet against the end of the bed and held tight as huge forces wrenched my abdomen. In less than half an hour I felt something was moving. I called out, and the Nurse expressed disbelief. By chance though, this was ward-round time and the Consultant himself appeared at the foot of

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my bed. Parting my knees he ducked his balding head down to look. “She is ready” he said, in a tone of patient irritation.

In a great flurry I was heaved off my bed and into a wheel chair for the short dash across the corridor. The young midwife asked if she should phone Tim. I remember my reply – “Tell him he doesn’t need to come” I said anxiously. This had been traumatic enough for him already.

There was a lot of pushing, flat on my back, in the delivery suite. The Consultant was gone. Tim appeared and I heard the midwives conferring in Welsh. I recognised the word episiotomy. There was also consternation that I had escaped being shaved. There on the delivery table I had to postpone my pushing while they performed a ‘mini shave’. Doctor, apparently, insisted upon it.

My agreement to an episiotomy was sought and granted. No time to argue, with a simple snip my daughter was borne in a tumbling slippery expulsion, and she was briefly put into my arms.

I tried to latch her onto my inexperienced breast. She was too new. We both had no idea what we were about. And the hospital had other plans. Almost as swiftly she was taken from me to be weighed and tagged, lying on a hard table. Then she was removed to be bathed. I next met her, silent and swaddled in a plastic fish tank beside my bed.

I, meanwhile had remained stranded like a whale upon the high bed, my ankles now on the stirrups awaiting the doctor: The Indian lady doctor reappeared, and carefully stitched me. Tim hovered behind her, watching. I felt he was testing himself, gazing at this less than pleasant sight. I wished he was more interested in the other end of me, more effusive about the miraculous baby.

When at last I was moved to the side ward beside my baby, he sat and sagged, in the chair by the bed. He had been home for just twenty minutes and fallen asleep when the hospital had phoned. Shortly, he went back home to sleep. An orderly brought me a tea and biscuit. It must have been about 2.0 pm.

I lay and gazed at the tiny baby in her tank. I was euphoric and emotional. A nurse looked in and they brought me the phone on a trolley. I rang my parents, my voice trembling with tears as I said, “It’s a girl”.

After about an hour I dared to reach my baby out of her tank. I held her to my breast and she latched on and sucked. I wanted to show someone, but there was no-one to show. I felt proud, and very much alone. I played with her tiny feet and hands, scaly with sloughing layers of skin, they looked like tiny gloves. Feeling the need for some kind of validation, I looked for the bell by my bed. There was no bell. I was quite alone.

Eventually I put her back in her tank and lay looking at her beside me. I didn’t know whether I was allowed out of bed. I had had to brace myself on the floor to lift her, but dared not go further. Perhaps I would disintegrate if I did.

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Hours passed and nobody came. I heard voices in the corridor and called out, but they passed by. Five hours passed and no-one came. I was cradling Cecily again, bewitched by the rhythmic pulsing of her fontanelle, when a smell began to assail me. Looking down her nappy I found the cause, a daunting slimy mass of black meconium, gluily spread right up her spine. Where were her nappies? How did I do it? I had never, ever changed a living baby, though I had practised the kite method of folding terry-towelling in the town antenatal classes. But we had all been told to bring a pack of disposables to hospital.

I put her in her tank again, and, getting out of bed, hobbled to the door. I opened it and looked out. It was nearly dark and two nurses were chatting in the doorway of the Nursing Station some twenty yards away.

‘Excuse me,’ I said ‘could you help.’

With an exasperated flat-footed waddle one burly nurse came towards me.

‘She’s dirty, she needs changing.’ I said.

‘That’s your job.’ she responded briskly and to my shame, I wept.

‘I haven’t been shown how.’ I wailed. ‘I don’t know where her things are, and I’m so hungry. I haven’t eaten anything since Tuesday.’ (By now it was Thursday night).

‘And I need the toilet.’

My distress obviously summoned Sister Davies, the ward Sister whom I had visited before Cecily’s birth. Suddenly there was a great bustle around me. I was pointed down the corridor to the ladies. While I was there, gingerly trying to urinate, Cecily was changed, (still I hadn’t been shown how), and I returned, my composure recovered, but tense and frightened inside. It became clear that I had missed lunch, (because still in the delivery suite) and supper too, because it was assumed I was sleeping. Now there was nothing for it but tea and a biscuit once more.

Tim came and sat with me for a little. Tired and pale, he wasn’t chatty and soon went home again. I had another bout of breast feeding but it was difficult to know what she was drinking. So I settled down in my bed, euphoria and hunger both denying me sleep, and listened to the rain crashing like bullets on the glass exterior of the Bronglais tower, waited for morning.

The ward woke up again at about seven and when a new auxiliary appeared I wasted no time in asking for my dearest wish – food. I had been fantasising about huge fried breakfasts, creamy milk, toast thick with butter and marmalade. Instead I received an individual pack of cornflakes. ‘I’ll try and get you some toast,’ she said ‘but its in very short supply.’ One slice of bendy barely brown plastic bread eventually came my way.

There were more bruising experiences that morning. Climbing from my bed I made my way to the bathroom, to wash and change my sanitary towel. Looking down over my sagging stomach I saw it bulging empty, soft, and felt a sharp pang of bereavement. My companion of the last months was gone. Cleaning myself on the bidet I had a sudden bowel movement and several small hard turds tumbled into the

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water. Fearful after the response of the nurse last night I dared not confess my embarrassment. Instead I fished with my fingers in the mess of blood and floaters in the bidet, lifted them out and transferred them to the toilet. The essence was not to be found out. All the time I felt a tug of panic. Was Cecily alright? I had left her alone in my room. Would she still be there when I went back? Whom could I trust?

I went back and, finding a nurse in the room, asked to be shown how to change her. She, too, thought I was trying it on. 'She's your baby, you do it' she replied. Perhaps many new Mums try to duck out of this messy duty. I, on the other hand just wanted supervision, validation that, in my first-ever manipulation of the packet of Pampers which I had brought, unopened, to the hospital, I was doing it right. My voice quavered. "No tears" she snapped, and with those sharp words effected the conversion of my character, from fearful compliant patient to angry client. The mood change was empowering. I fanned my anger, and spoke with articulate authority. I pointed out that I had received neither food nor help, that I had no intention of remaining any longer in the hospital, and that I required an immediate discharge. "Make sure you get that arranged." Speak as if you expect to be obeyed and you are. The Nurse scurried off. Inexpertly I unclothed and changed my baby, and was attaching her to my breast when Sister Davies hurried in. Apologies, explanations and justifications flooded from her. It was as if by the sheer volume of her enquiries she would cancel out my displeasure. The food – was I a bit of a gourmet really? – "No, I just hadn't been brought any food." The misunderstandings – had I been in hospital before? "No" – well that explained it apparently. The single room? She always tried to provide this little bonus for mothers 'like me'. Wasn't I pleased? Under no circumstance would I let my composure waver again. For what seemed like hours I sat enthroned on my bed, legs crossed, baby suckling on my little finger (it was easier than trying to feed her while maintaining composure in this prolonged discussion with Miss Davies. I phoned Tim, and asked him to bring me my clothes (those are routinely sent home with the father to prevent any possibility of sudden defection). The hours of the morning slipped away. Apparently I could not leave without seeing the Paediatrician. "When is he coming?" "Soon" is the only answer a hospital will ever give. Soon is a term of indescribable elasticity once you are a patient or relative. The movements of a Consultant are one of the deep mysteries.

It was not until the mid afternoon that Dr Lewis arrived, a pleasant, educated man who found me, breast feeding on my bed, articulate and competent, with a baby of utter health and normality. We discussed my former career, as biological anthropologist and the possibilities of some future collaborative work together at Bronglais. He belonged to the world I normally inhabited, far above the petty pre-occupations of nurses' rules. Only after he left did another obstacle arise. Somebody remembered that no baby is allowed to leave the hospital until it has urinated. While the slimy meconium had been unforgettable, like the pitch lake, the other had passed unrecorded. I must wait, therefore, for a wet nappy.

It was evening by the time we left the hospital, its last little ritual being that we might not carry our own baby to the car. Insurance liability apparently. A nurse, a new one, (for yet another shift had now started), carried her across the threshold, and I walked beside her, in the same pinstriped maternity pants in which I had come to Wales.

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As we drove away, me clutching Cecily in my arms in the front seat, Tim turned on the music system. Loud choral music flooded the car. The baby began to cry. I reached for the volume control – “Its too loud its hurting her ears – she doesn’t like it.” “Well she’ll have to learn to,” he said.

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Coming Home

We climbed the four short flights to our front door and clattered wearily into the sitting room. Tim went to make a cup of tea. My stomach felt shaky, hollow. I sank gratefully into the deep feather-cushioned sofa, our only luxury, which we had bought before leaving Oxford as our oasis of comfort in a new world, and had already lugged from Oxford to Bethania, and from Bethania to Castle Hill. My concentration focussed on the fabric, its dark navy ground, the strange, crested oriental birds, the scattered false chrysanthemums. Beyond this refuge the flat was disordered. Newspapers and coffee cups littered the surfaces, great wisps of dust lay beneath the sideboard.

The baby began to cry, and there was a loud ringing of the door bell. As I wrestled to attach her to my nipple a new authority-figure appeared, a midwife in her navy uniform, a strange pie-shaped felt beret nailed asymmetrically to her head. She had an enormous form to fill in.

I did ask for her help in latching the baby to my breast, but we were not very adept and clearly the form was of more immediate importance. After a fumbled failure I again placated her hungry sucking with my little finger thrust pad upwards to her small domed palate and dictated the inevitable trivia: my date of birth, my address, my postcode. If the Midwife had managed to locate us so swiftly she, presumably already knew those things. But forms are forms, and they must be completed. Probably she was also anxious to be off home.

Feeding Cecily was now difficult and frustrating. Her delicate ivory features became redly contorted, as the newborn braying burst from her. Tim was embarrassed by the noise. “What will they be thinking downstairs?” he asked rhetorically.

Of course now I know that I should just have said “They’ll be glad the baby is home. They won’t mind”. But then and there, my responsibility to placate and silence this roaring bundle was paramount. Eventually I managed to give suck. But possibly I was by now so tense that I could not let down milk. Certainly I did not experience the painful but pleasing plunging pain in the womb which had accompanied earlier suckling. Somehow though, she sucked, turned pale again, and slept.

We went to bed early, Tim wan and unshaven, the baby in her brown plastic carrycot beside our bed. It had seemed a long haul, feeding ourselves and the setting out of her things. For we did not return to a meticulously prepared nursery, rather to a collection of necessary objects stacked unused on the bed in the spare room. Deep within me was a fear that something might go wrong, and I dreaded having the entire impedimenta of baby care jeering at me should I return home with no baby. The baby was the most important project of my life. No triumphal nursery was to tempt fate to humble my anticipation.

Unforeseen though, was the influence upon our previously childless dyad. As I sat upon the bed, directing Tim to collect flannelette sheets, nappies, and baby wipes and set them out by our bed, I saw his jaw tense, his internalised, withdrawn expression take hold. This, he seemed to gesture, is the future, husband as slave. We snuggled down in the bed in our customary sleeping position, like spoons, his arms around me.

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It was a relief to stop talking, directing, telling people things. All too soon the little grunts and snuffles from the carrycot turned again to cries, and up we both got.

That night brought some cameos of pure despair, which are etched indelibly upon my memory. Kneeling on the floor at the changing mat, the baby clutched to my chest, I found I quite simply couldn't get up. My pelvis felt spread and weak I would need to go onto my hands and knees in order to rise. To put down the crying tiny baby seemed impossible. I knelt there, knees splayed, immovable, weeping over my child. I also remember her next dirty nappy, yellow goo oozing out into the pale blue baby-gro leg, and Tim recoiling, hand over nose, at the sight. That night we got through all her three baby gro's, and even the little brown velour suit with feet, her only luxury, which I had furtively bought in Debenhams in Oxford. I didn't want her to wear it at night, just because her other clothes were dirty. It had been destined for a triumphal moment of ceremony.

In the dark watches of that endless night Tim suggested we take her back to the hospital. "I don't know how to care for a baby, *you* don't know how to care for a baby." he said. After all I'd gone through to escape, how could he contemplate delivering us, failures, back to the hospital door? Desperation fuels anger. Anger fuels coping. I coped. I no longer needed sleep.

In the morning I phoned my parents. I can't cope, I said briefly, my voice trembling, please come. Perhaps I imagined they would come at once. But there were plants to water, milk to cancel. Packing. They would set off tomorrow, they said.

In the morning daylight the screaming fury of the dark hours was just a tranquil ivory-skinned infant, slumbering in her carry-cot. I bathed myself and, standing in front of the big washstand mirror in the bathroom made a remarkable discovery. My belly and inner thighs hung flabbily and yet as I stood, mastering one muscle group after another, I could twitch them, tense them, and spring them back into their former shape. It seemed a momentous discovery, and one far outside the sedate predictions of the baby books. Muscle by muscle I was reclaiming my abdomen to its old shape. I was thrilled, awed, called Tim to share in my elation. For him, though, I was just behaving strangely in front of the mirror.

The next midwife arrived in the mid morning, an older Welsh woman with an iron grey perm. Leaving us to 'women's matters', Tim set off in the car on an errand to Aberystwyth to buy some food. Throughout his absence I sat on the bed, and she, still hatted and coated upon the chair, questioning and questioning me. She asked all about the labour, but when I told her kept responding "that's over now". Perhaps I was rambling. I don't know. Possibly she was both garrulous and curious. Certainly I learnt far more about her than I needed to know. About her own children, about how she had been unable to breastfeed. She also had to clean the baby's umbilical cord, and we unwrapped the sleeping child.

Expectant mothers all received a small dowry from the Health Service. A huge roll of lumpy cotton wool, and a bottle of surgical spirit. She asked for these, and I looked hopefully in the bathroom. "I don't know" I said "it doesn't matter". But to Sister Williams it did matter, and she told me so in forceful tones. As she left she provided me with the nugget of advice which was to haunt me for six days.

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“Don’t let her go more than four hours” she said “she’s so little, she might slip away.”

As the days passed the four-hour-rule terrified and confused me. Latched to my breast, the baby might suck for twenty minutes. Then moved to the other she would continue. When did the four hours begin? When I started or when she finished? And afterwards I would be famished, shuffle off to the fridge for milk and biscuit, need a pee. Before going to sleep I normally brush my teeth and hair. And once I had accomplished all this it did not seem worth attempting sleep. Two hours sleep would be no use anyway. Four consecutive hours, I knew, are needed for REM sleep. So there was no point in sleep at all. She might also wake and need changing. I must be awake, ready.

My parents arrived the next afternoon and I babbled out my fear and confusion beside my sleeping child. If in doubt, summon a doctor, has always been my mother’s philosophy, and Dr Lloyd was duly summoned. He arrived, beamed in an avuncular fashion, de-fused the tension. She was just a baby. She’d wake up when she was hungry. He could see nothing to worry about. A great wave of gratitude came over me. We had roast lamb for supper, all sitting around the table. We had some wine. Things felt almost normal. That night, clumped together on the bed Tim and I discussed her name, and agreed to call our baby Cecily. Tim confided that he found he felt alright about my nurturing role. Her didn’t sound totally convincing, but as we curled like spoons in the soft bed I felt myself floating, my skin pink, glowing and sensitive, “We’re two babies” I said, hallucinating the image “We’ve two naked babies, floating, floating in cotton wool.”

By morning the luxury of the moment was a distant mirage. Clocks and four-hour-cycles nagged my fragmented brain. I found I kept starting sentences I couldn’t finish, having revelatory discoveries I couldn’t remember. It was like the light on the road to Damascus switched on and off like a strobe. Time too ran fast and slow. Midwives came and went in an endless stream. Twice daily to prevent me or my baby sleeping. I lay in the pink glow of the afternoon, the satin curtains drawn against the sun, neither waking nor rested, but in a strange erratic world in between. As the thoughts came, broke into pieces and disappeared again, I sought to trap them on paper, writing notes to myself which, when I returned to them, had also become incomprehensible. Meals, came and went, served at the dining table by Mummy. Between them I returned to my room. We didn’t relax and watch T.V. as Tim and I would have done alone. Mummy and Daddy, didn’t have a TV, didn’t approve. The sitting room silence, with Daddy reading the paper was tense, inimical. I didn’t sleep in my room either. Just floated, and worried more and more about sleep.

On the fifth day, I wondered whether it was Cecily’s small baby snuffling noises which prevented my sleep. Mummy took her away into the spare room in her cot. At the midwife’s suggestion they also bought a couple of dummies, to pacify her if she cried. Tense and sleepless in my pink curtained cave, I began to wonder whether they were secretly bottle feeding her without my permission, on the emergency soya milk composition which was presented, as a freebie to all deluded would-be breast feeding mothers.

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Psychosis

On the sixth day, I began to scream. The sound filled my head. It was empowering. It felt absolutely and utterly right. I was only dimly aware of my mother, my drained, stressed, ash faced husband, my bumbling dad who had, till a few seconds previously been crystal clear in my racing perception. I knew, held the picture in my mind, that my mother had snatched my baby from me and hurried from the room. But for the present, the screaming was enough. This, I knew, was great certainty, was the answer. This was the cure, the talisman, the solution I had been struggling to find. I would scream till my brain was clear again. Then I would stop.

Of course I never tested whether I was right. In no time, it seemed to me, the doctor was in the room. Small, over-coated, with the belt drawn tight round his gaberdine, silvery hair brushed back. I knew him, he met my eye and spoke confidently. I trusted him as an equal. He sat down on the edge of the bed in which I had spent the last six days, wrestling with the slipping cogs of my brain, writing notes to myself to catch the thoughts before they escaped, laboriously clamping my beautiful, ivory skinned baby to my breast. I trusted him and he repaid my trust by slipping a hypodermic needle into my thigh. I don't remember any more for a while.

It was morning and Joy Cooke, the Community Midwife had arrived. She wore a navy blue uniform with epaulettes, and kept calling me "luvvie". She wanted me to get dressed, and so I did. Only as I reached to put on my jewellery, my gold chain and my engagement ring, did she strike a false note. "Leave those here luvvie, you won't be needing them". Why not? I kept my wedding ring on. She and Tim accompanied me down the three flights of stairs to the Mini which was waiting outside. He and I got into the back. Apparently I was being taken to hospital.

I was quiet. I was compliant. Tim exchanged some pleasantries with the young woman who drove. The fields and villages unfolded and we passed over hills. They were unfamiliar villages. Suddenly I realised I had been tricked. This was not the way to hospital, where Cecily had been born. Cecily was no longer there. Like my ring she was left behind. Somehow I had to make them stop, or at least delay them until the sun went down.

Of course they believe I was insane. So they cannot credit me with thought. But I sat quietly thinking what to do with my racing, imperfect mind. I could fight, but I might crash the car and I didn't want to die. I just had to slow them down, and since I didn't know how far they were taking me I didn't know for how long. So I decided to shake. I've never done it before or since, but when I really concentrated I found I could shake so violently my hands became a blur. My wedding ring vibrated up my finger and flew off into the interstices of the car. I could have stopped shaking and retrieved it. Part of me wanted to do so. I loved that ring, with its textured relief in squares of polished, roughed and textured gold. We had picked it out together in the Sloane Street jewellers where we had bought the spikey modern engagement ring displaying three tiny diamonds. The ring which my encrusted mother-in-law had dismissed with the words "Intriguing, my dear". Not her dear. Not Sister Cook's luvvie. Me, unique, private me. Me the proud, frightened owner of an utterly perfect baby, and an ambivalent, frightened husband, who hadn't really wanted babies.

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So I didn't stop shaking, and mentally said goodbye to the ring. The alternative would expose me as a fake, which I knew I was. But being believed was the critical thing. I shook the harder. I panted. Tim tried to control me in a tight hug so I bit him in a fold of skin above the armpit. He yelled. I bit harder. At last she stopped the car by the side of the road. I considered kicking out the side window of the car. I was sure I could do it. But I thought I shouldn't. I had been brought up very strictly where damage to property was concerned. Not breaking things was almost a religion in our home. That was why I had found Tim's destructive rages so alarming. Over the years he had kicked our glass front door from the inside. Broken the telephone, when I had threatened to phone my mother during one of our blazing fights. Kicked a hole in the wicker lobster-pot stool we had brought home from that rain soaked holiday in Scotland. Nothing bad had happened to him as a result. In the end he had wept and I had forgiven him. But something told me that to break the window of this unknown woman's car would be unforgivable. So I held my peace, and eventually an ambulance arrived and I was led, quite docile from the car, and we continued our journey of betrayal.

When we arrived at the hospital I was led up some broad, shallow steps. I thought I should not fight, but I still had my body as a weapon. I turned on the shakes, and in a supreme release I managed to piss and crap myself. The latter lodged warm in my dungarees, but the warm pool splattered the steps. That will have to be cleaned up, I thought, with pride and satisfaction. It was when they got me to a room with a bed in it that things turned nasty. They took my clothes and put me in a gown tied at the back. Several women held me and a man approached with a syringe in a kidney shaped steel dish. I knew now what I must do. I waited, watching my opportunity. As he drew near I lashed out, with a massive, flat-footed kick. The dish and syringe flew. I heard the tinkle of breaking glass. He swore. I felt strong, competent. I waited for the next attack.

It soon came, and more after that. There was a jumble of raised voices which penetrated my screams. One warm Welsh voice sounds kindly, heavily accented, "Its alright cariad, don't worry, it happened to me, I thought I was going mad!" She sounded genuine and I considered stopping the fight, but hard hands grappled with me and the others voices were urgent, hostile. I decided hers was a false appeal to get my guard down, and fought on. Once I escaped into the corridor and hurled my arms round the neck of a burly middle aged man, pleading for help. He looked embarrassed and surprised. I think he was a patient. I let go.

When I was a child I used to think quite a lot about torture, and whether I could withstand it. I don't know whether other children do. I never asked anyone whether they had such thoughts. But the struggle which followed was what all that introspection had prepared me for. I resisted every assault with all the guile I was capable of. I screamed, or rather shrieked. These were not the reverberant, purging screams which had catalysed the nightmare. I could hear, I think, a man sobbing in the corridor. I hoped it was Tim and screamed some more. Eventually they must have sedated me and I sank down in a room eerily illuminated by the flashing blue lights of arriving ambulances. As I sank I realised another blazing truth. The trick was not minding. If you didn't mind when they beat you, then of course they hadn't really won. Your spirit was unbroken. Then I let myself sleep.

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I woke several times in the night, my breasts swollen with milk. A calm young woman sat by my bed. She had long dark hair and a gentle, quiet face. She wore a long button-fronted dressing gown. Probably she was a hallucination, for there was nothing in my subsequent experience of Carmarthen General Hospital to suggest that calm gentle mentors was a part of the programme. But to me she is real, and was the only gentle influence I experienced there.

In the morning my tormentors were back with their syringes. I fought, a little so they had to hold me down, but my inner revelation remained. I didn't really mind so it didn't matter.

When they started to make me get up for meals I realised that I was far from safe, and that my captors did indeed matter. An elderly woman with dead blank eyes was led by a uniformed nurse to the table beside me. Lodged in her hair were the gobs of jelly indicative of recent ECT. So that was what I was here for. Despite my massive post-partum hunger, my mouth dried instantly. Any minute they would overpower me, and burn out my brain, my memories, my personality.

It didn't happen right away, and instead I received visitors. A young midwife came to inspect my gynaecological health. She didn't mention a baby. No-one mentioned a baby. It was almost as if Cecily didn't, hadn't existed. The midwife was obviously puzzled by the huge contused bruises on my thighs. "What's happened here?" she asked. I looked and realised this must be the outcome of my battle with the syringe wielding staff. Suddenly cautious, I mumbled "I don't know."

Tim also appeared in my room. He told me that if I would stop resisting injections they would give me medicine by mouth. It seemed like a deal and soon I joined the queue of patients who shambled regularly to the serving hatch to be given a small plastic beaker of syrupy liquid and to swallow it while being watched. I resumed the struggle to master my slipping mind. I got Tim to get me a small notebook and wrote memos to myself. Sometimes a nurse, curious, would read them. But there was no-one I trusted, save the blue-gowned girl who never returned, so as soon as a message had been read I knew it to have become invalidated, meaningless. So I wrote notes in duplicate, but different, hiding one in my nursing bra, leaving the fake note on the bedside table to be read. My private notes would hold the truth. Sadly, they didn't seem to make sense either. I demanded other things in duplicates too, like the clumsy breast pumps which resembled devices for clearing a blocked sink. Distractedly, I tried to extract milk from my distended breasts. I was easily defeated, and the two pumps stood unused on my bedside table for days while the tension in my now useless breasts gradually faded. Nobody offered to help me. Nobody did anything much for me. I now collected my food on a tray, and sat quietly at mealtimes, intimidated by the dead passivity of my neighbours, but fearful that at any moment I would be dragged away for ECT. If I appeared as lifeless as they did, I reasoned, the authorities might not realise they had forgotten to treat me. Three times a day I lined up at the hatch for syrup.

It was during these days of terrified limbo that I was taken for my one interview with a consultant or some such. He was a bulgy unsmiling man in a cigarette-smelling tweed jacket. I spoke to him as an equal, I am confident with professionals, but easily

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cowed by uniformed nurses. I tried to make it all clear. “Am I making sense?” I asked him anxiously. “No” he said, and my interview was over and I was back on the ward.

Six days passed in Carmarthen and I received no treatment but the syrupy drugs. Tim visited daily but no-one else came. It gave me great confidence that my brain was not, in fact, irredeemably broken when I was able to tell him where my father’s and his birthday presents were hidden, ready wrapped, in the bottom of the wardrobe. Daddy’s birthday was that day, Tim’s three days later. He went home and, bitterly, handed my father his present. I know, because Tim told me, not without satisfaction, that my father burst into tears.

These three were in uncharted territory, with my baby. In their mid sixties, my parents hadn’t handled a baby since me. Probably the weight of that responsibility caused them to care for her in preference to visiting me. Or perhaps the idea of the psychiatric ward was just too daunting for them. But Carmarthen was just an hour away and they could have come. Instead they built a 1950’s routine around bottle feeds, health visitor calls and outdoor walks with the pram. They even took photos of her for me to see later, so I wouldn’t miss those early days. How misguided. It was years and another baby before I could bring myself to look at those pictures of my child, without me. I still don’t like to.

Tim was allowed to take me out of the ward, and I remember sitting in the fresh air, weeping, talking, questioning, believing even that I was making sense, for I understood his questions and could often provide essential answers. He brought news that I was to be transferred to the Warneford, Oxford, where they had a mother and baby unit. He described how he had negotiated my transfer from Wales, where ECT was indeed, as I had guessed, the treatment of choice. He shared with me some of his parts of the trauma we were caught up in. A sympathetic caretaker at the University in Aberystwyth had told him how the same thing had happened to his wife. She had never come right again, he said, and eventually threw herself off a fire escape. Not me, I thought, that’s not going to be me.

He had been able to make use of the fact that I was still on the staff at Oxford University, on maternity leave in Wales. My condition, Tim told me, was called puerperal psychosis, and the prognosis was anything up to lifetime lunacy. The Health Authority was thus readily convinced that it would be a bargain to transfer me by ambulance to Oxford, especially since Tim had refused permission for the dreaded ECT. Looking back, the fact that he informed me of so much of this whilst I was still in Carmarthen, and that I understood it, is further proof that my malfunctioning was only partial. There was much to be arranged and he didn’t seem to stay long on these visits. Friends were renting our Oxford home, and they would have to be asked to leave to accommodate him, my parents and eventually me. I have always been the one who knew the minutiae of our domestic arrangements. He asked me, and I told him where to find the key to the filing cabinet in our Oxford home. It felt normal and reassuring to be needed for these trivia.

Returning to the ward with a new purpose I decided to take a bath. It was five days since my ignominious arrival, and I felt dirty, greasy and lank. Apparently I was even further disimproved by the crusts of spittle which form around the mouths of patients

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chemically coshed as I was. But mirrors were not a conspicuous feature of the ward environment and I had not noticed their lack. I wandered around the locked ward looking for a bathroom. I found one at last, and went back to find my towel. Back in the bathroom, I encountered an unexpected difficulty. The taps on the end of the big freestanding baths had no handles, just square rods where the cross tops should be. I retired to my room and awaited a visit from the next uniformed authority figure. I explained without irony that the bathtaps seemed to be broken. I distinctly sensed that I had said something foolish or patronising.

Later that afternoon an auxiliary bustled in announcing she would take me for a bath. From a locked cupboard she produced the tap heads, ran in the water, and sat down in a chair beside the bath. I hesitated. Surely she did not expect me to take a bath in front of her? But she did, and as I soaped myself uneasily it dawned upon me that she was there to prevent me from drowning myself. But of course she did not know that I was cleaning myself up in preparation for my departure from this hellhole.

As the date of my transfer to Oxford approached I confided in one of the younger nurses my anxiety that something might go wrong. “Oh, I don’t think so” she replied, “not unless you go ape and start rampaging up and down the ward”. I was so grateful to her for that clue. I tidied away all my duplicate memos on the bedside cabinet and awaited transfer. When they took me to the ambulance I lay down on the bench and didn’t move all the journey. I saw the iron arches of the Severn suspension bridge pass above me, against a wispy blue spring sky. I did not dare move more than my eyes in case my escape would be retracted. Two nurses sat on the seats, chatting idly, it was a nice day’s excursion for them. For me it was a new beginning.

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The Warneford

The Warneford ward was a strange place, more a deranged house party than a hospital. Its respectable brick exterior gave on long green linoleum wards, with single bedrooms, dormitories, a day-room, a dining room, and a nursery. This last room, next to the nurses station was always locked, and contained two babies, big blue-eyed six month old Wayne, and the now the two week old Cecily. The patients ranged across the entire human condition. There was a hollow-eyed distinguished silver-haired man, and a feisty angry lady publisher called Felicity who sometimes rampaged, swearing freely around the ward, was overpowered and dosed with extra Largactil. There were several little old ladies, each different, some very elderly, and a young teenager called Lydia who, soon after her arrival, cut off all her hair leaving angry balding tufts. My fellow mother Denise didn't seem mad at all, just very sad and weary as she spooned baby paps into Wayne's willing toothless gape. Her problem was simple, she didn't like Wayne. Probably she had battered him, though this was not discussed. Each weekend she looked forward to the visit of her husband and four year old daughter and her drawn face would light up on seeing her. Whatever was wrong in the relationship with Wayne, it was not so of her girl child. As she wearily explained one day (the nurses did not encourage us mothers to talk to each other) if she wanted to keep Wayne she had to be a voluntary in-patient. Eventually she decided it was too much to ask, and Wayne was fostered to another family member.

In the Warneford, the house party atmosphere remained provided you didn't break the undefined rules. As at Carmarthen I was expected to queue up for my syrup, and sent off to bed at 10 pm. In the daytime, under supervision, I was taken to care for Cecily, to lift her, change her, feed her, sterilise her bottles and make up the mixture. There was a washing machine and ironing board where we could do the babies' laundry. Babies, though were not to be hugged and wept over. They were to be serviced and put down. Cecily was the only warm, yielding friend I had in that place and I wanted to luxuriate in her little body. Time and again I was scolded for shedding tears over my baby, told, entirely without foundation, that it upset her. If you want a good guilt free cry, hug a baby. Human contact, they revel in. Tears are irrelevant to them.

The first morning I woke in my single room I panicked. Any moment, I believed that the door would burst open and the men in white coats would drag me away to the terrifying ordeal of ECT. I leapt out of bed, held tightly to the knob, tried to prevent entry. Of course the result was that I was overpowered, dressed and sent out to breakfast. But at least someone assured me there was to be no ECT for me. It was the first time anyone in authority had alleviated that fear. Another day I went off and put myself to bed in the afternoon. That too turned out to be not allowed, and I was unceremoniously pulled out of bed. Over the next fortnight the nurses reduced my drugs to a single sleeping pill at night. I was a good patient, passionate to be allowed more access to my baby, dismissive of attempts to distract me into occupational therapy, chiefly blotching around with paints. The petty injustices of an institution in which the rules were never explained caused me great insecurity. When Tim visited, I pleaded to go home, it was thus that I made a horrifying discovery. As I wept over him (who found it far more upsetting than did Cecily) he angrily revealed the humiliating truth "I can't take you home" he said "you've been committed. You are not allowed to leave for 30 days, and even then, only if they say so."

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Along with the anger and rejection I felt, came a new reserve of power. Tim, my father and mother, to whom I had deferred, they were powerless. It was me and Cecily against the world. And we'd better put our minds to learning this world's rules, to conform and to escape.

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Treatment

It seemed I had put on almost two stone in my drug induced, and largely bed-ridden stupor. I now tipped the scales at over 10 stone, (well above my post-delivery weight) and was horrified, though the fat West Indian night nurses were sympathetic. “Cecily don’t want no skin and bones Mummy!” Celia crooned comfortingly. My only clothing was the multistriped linen maternity trousers which had been irredeemably destroyed with bleach at the Carmarthen laundry, and the same pinstripe romper suit in which aeons ago, I had driven to Wales. After a couple of days Tim brought me three pairs of size 14 trousers from Wallis’s in Oxford. There were two pairs of cords, and a pair of brown silk baggies. My gratitude was intense, though the dry clean-only silk trousers seemed far too fine to wear there. I realised there were other things I wanted: my handbag, and my jewellery. Lacking the gold chain I always wore, I kept finding myself fingering my throat, feeling for it with a sense of loss. Tim brought me these things, though the purse, when I inspected it, contained only a tenner, and no credit card, and the handbag contained no keys. Perhaps he too, was taking precautions against my escape.

One morning, shepherded out of the building for a pointless mornings’ paintblotching, I notice a public telephone in the long corridor from the ward. At the next opportunity I set off to use it. Eventually I found a hospital shop where they would change my tenner, and armed with my handful of coins I went to the machine and phoned home. Tim answered. He sounded surprised and abrupt – why had I phoned? I hardly knew. But I could hear the clink and scrape of what I recognised as my parents breakfasting in the background. The revelations which thundered into my consciousness these days were less strobe like, I could catch the thought and identify it. And in that single moment I realised with a lurch that I had no home. Not as long as they were in it.

When Tim visited that evening I implored him to send them home to York. “We don’t need them, I wailed, I have Cecily now. I don’t want to see them, make them go.” But he was adamant. He needed them, he said. He had to go back on weekdays to teach in Aberystwyth. He needed them at Cunnor to run the house. And they wanted to visit me. I became resentful but wary. Refusing to see one’s parents might be a sign of insanity, which would delay my escape.

Dressed like a student nurse in my new cords, I discovered that I could leave the building without being challenged, and so I began to go running in the grounds. Often I would hurry out before breakfast, when I had burst suddenly, janglingly awake. Running through the drizzle, in my size 14 corduroy jeans, tears often coursed down my face whilst an uncontrollable wetness spread between my legs. No-one at the Warneford took any interest in physical as opposed to mental problems, and although I tried to complain about this unstoppable seepage, no nurse took any interest the matter. A sanitary towel was insufficient to staunch it. At the time I thought my womb was leaking lymph. Eventually I worked out for myself that it was urine, though fresh and dilute and almost odourless when first released. I would scuttled back along the long green corridor after these runs, my inner thighs dark with moisture, change my trousers and put the wet ones in the wash with the baby clothes. Pelvic floor exercises I eventually remembered for myself. When I asked to see a doctor I was told I would have to ask for a house call from my GP. I suppose I should

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have gone to the payphone in the foyer, phoned the receptionist of my former doctor on the Banbury Road, and asserted my need. But this was just too difficult, and in any case my registered GP these days was in Wales.

As my consciousness widened I began to notice my surrounding. In the hospital grounds I would be arrested, amazed by the beauty of the unfurling buds on a young tulip tree. My parents, and my brother were all walking me, like a strange wild animal, in the park when I stopped, thrilled by its exquisite perfection. "Its so beautiful" I exclaimed. Worried by more prosaic concerns they watched me quietly, neither my highs nor my lows were comprehensible to them. They however were sane, confined, worried. I expressed everything with a far keener edge.

I was dutiful towards my parents, and miserable, subdued, anxious. But how they irritated me. I couldn't think about my home when the Relaxation Therapist instructed us to lie each on a mat visualising a place we loved. My home was defiled. They were squatting in it, taking care of the house for Tim, so they said, and in order to be able to visit me. Instead I would concentrate on the deep set window and the faded satin curtain blowing in the wind at Castle Hill, the flat in which I had commenced my labour and to which I had returned for those six nightmare days after the birth.

As a member of the mad, I was also driven to paroxysms of fury by the manifestations of insanity of my sane parents. Inside, I now knew a whole set of trivial madness indicators. Nor knowing the day of the week, wearing your jumper inside out, smearing food on your lips while dining were all chidable offences in the inmates. How, then, could my father dare to appear in his yellow sleeveless pullover with the seams showing? Or my mother not know that it was Tuesday? Sometimes the irritation would twang like a physical blow inside my skull. I looked forward to their goodbyes.

One day I walked into the dayroom and looked uncomprehendingly at the television, on it was a great grey naval vessel, helicopters hovering above it, belching dark plumes of smoke. The time was 11 am and yet it didn't look like a movie. Some of the nurses perched on the armchairs watching. This was my first intimation of the Falklands War, and I dared not ask what was going on. Not knowing would be a further indication of my inadequacy. I have long learnt to protect my ignorance by silence. Only by appearing well dressed and well informed, and by knowing the days of the week, would Cecily and I be allowed to escape.

Early in my confinement at the Warneford, I made requests. I asked to see my psychiatrist (Tim when tiring of my endless questions and reproaches had told me to do so), I also asked for an aspirin for a headache. I asked for help changing Cecily. I imagined that the hospital was there to provide for me, and that I was expected to contribute to it. As time went by I learnt that sane people ask for nothing.

Once a week we had a ward meeting in the day room. No-one ever said what it was for, but all the chairs were filled with the patients, a few men, several old women, younger women, the two mothers, the teenage girl. The nurses on shift sat there too, and the young psychiatrist, clutching his clipboard, and arranging his cavalry twill trouser-creases as he sat. Then nothing happened for a while. At the first meeting I

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was part of, the feisty Felicity suddenly burst out in a tirade. She was heavily sedated on Largactil and had a crust of yellow spittle round her mouth. Although I couldn't understand what she was saying I was impressed by her energy. She had motivation. She also had an educated voice and was perhaps a few years my senior. Later I learnt that she also had a sports car, which, after a home visit she drove back to the Warneford and parked, with the staff cars, outside the door. Voluntary patients could drive cars it seemed. They could, however, be treated like small children for failing to eat up their dinner, or spilling their food.

Felicity's example, and the yawning uncomfortable silence, convinced me that I should contribute something. I did, a strange incoherent expression of apology and love for my baby in which I still feel keen shame to remember that I speculated that I might have hurt her but I never ever meant to. I knew I was faking it, just as I had faked the shakes in the Mini on the way to Carmarthen. Never had it crossed my mind to lay a rough hand on Cecily. Confession, even untruthful, was, I hoped, a step towards release. However as my speech to the group tailed off, no one said anything. I never spoke at the weekly meeting again.

Tim had told me that instead of the ECT I feared, the Warneford would provide group therapy. For weeks I wondered when this was going to happen. There was the weekly, largely silent assembly in the day room. There were occasions when we were shepherded off to occupational therapy (just twice in my case) or sent upstairs to practice relaxation, and there were the meals, where we sat with our trays like students in a refectory and ate. I often cried at meals, and usually went back for second helps, I was often hungry. One old lady, intent on not eating, would be shouted at by the nursing staff to make her spoon a few mouthfuls into her mouth. I was still there on the lunchtime when she slumped forward over the table and quietly died. The nurses seemed a bit shaken that afternoon. Perhaps her problems were not only psychiatric, I wondered.

One ward sister, Sarah, used to talk with me at some length when I was in the nursery with Cecily. Her alternate, a fat charge nurse called Phil was hateful. He would jeeringly mimic my posh voice, and bully me to put her down the minute her bottle was finished, and leave her crying, face down in her cot. The nursery door would be locked, separating me from my child, and I would skulk in the corridor, wracked by her cries. This never seemed to happen when visitors were on the ward, but was, apparently a necessary part of training for me. Only when Tim was visiting could I sit around in the nursery with my baby in my arms and some semblance of relaxation was allowed. When my parents came they always came together, and with both of them, a nurse, and baby Wayne and his mother, the small nursery with glass baby tanks seemed claustrophobic and cold. I would babble about anxieties, zinc and castor oil cream, and babygros and look forward to their departure.

So what was the group and when was the therapy? I never found out exactly. I did learn to conform, and in conforming demonstrated my sanity. The silver haired donnish man came, with his wife, to say goodbye to me part way through my stay. With a sad, wintry smile he remarked that they considered you sane when you stopped asking to consult your psychiatrist. His wife looked plump, brave and supportive. The greatest sense of community attended the warm drinks at about 9 pm before bedtime, while the nursing shift changeover took place. Patients asked one

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another questions then, unobserved, and many would ask me about my baby. They liked having the babies on the ward, though they barely met them, for babies were not allowed out of the nursery, and other loonies were not allowed in. One elderly lady, Grace, contributed more than anyone to rebuilding my fragile self-image. “You’re so brave” she would exclaim “You’ve done so much. You’re trying so hard, I do so admire you. I wish I were more like that”. Approval would release the floodgates of my tears, but her faith in me was so comforting. While the day and night staff were engaged in the change of duty the inmates relaxed, exchanged confidences and cameos from their past, and took genuine rather than professional interest in one another.

I was emotionally fragile but apparently normal, and sometimes mistaken by visitors for a student nurse rather than an inmate. There were no staff uniforms to distinguish the kept from the keepers. Eventually I was summoned to an interview with “my psychiatrist”. He arranged his ankle over his perfectly trousered left knee, and, propping up his clipboard embarked on a long series of questions about my relationships. He probed the relationships between me and Tim, me and my parents, the dominance relationships between my mother and my father, their interactions with me, and with my brother, his interactions with me. I answered articulately and at length. Everyone is an expert on their own family. His questions made me see certain patterns I had not previously noted. When he asked who was the dominant partner in my parents’ marriage I knew without doubt what Mummy would have me say. Like a 1940’s romance, she always cast Daddy as the dominant male, the provider, the decision maker and herself as the provided-for, the little woman. It was with a frisson of guilt that I revealed the truth. Decision-making was my mother’s domain. Daddy was totally manipulated. I couldn’t remember any family decision which had not been negotiated by my mother through him. He also asked a lot about Tim’s background and it all poured forth. His aged parents, boarding school from the age of six, the bleeding stomach ulcer which attended his first job, his reluctant fatherhood, his inability to cope with our return from hospital. Before the interview ended he told me about a residential facility where mothers and fathers could together play house with their baby under the watchful eye of psychiatrists. He asked whether I would be interested. I said yes.

When Mummy and Daddy next visited we took Cecily in the pram on our walk in the park and I described my interview with the psychiatrist. I told of their interest in Tim, and she was warmly approving, Tim, she was certain, was the problem. Her sympathy though was not warmed by compassion. “But you knew”, she exclaimed plaintively “You knew he was weak when you married him”. I sniffed. Tim made me laugh, still could, even in lacunae in our awful weepy visits in the hospital. Mummy didn’t. But instead of endorsing my indignation at the psychiatrist’ probing she was full of approval. “They really care, they really understand about families.” she emphasised. “They also asked about you and Daddy, your relationship, and Nigel,” I added. “I can’t see how that’s relevant” she bridled at once. I let it pass. Passionately I wished they would take my whole family in hand. Under the veneer of convention they’d soon find out who the real nutters were.

Soon after I was allowed home for my first overnight visit, with Cecily. The very prospect brought me out in a cold sweat of anxiety. For Tim it was just a matter of moving a baby, a changing mat and a set of bottles and sterilizer. I was limp, he

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competent. Encouraged by Sarah, who always behaved flirtatiously and admiringly towards my tall plummy-voiced husband, we loaded ourselves into the car and went home to Cumnor. My parents were there. They brought me cups of tea, with biscuits and a sugar spoon, they served supper at the dining table not in front of the T.V., they impressed their order and their rituals over my home, and it wasn't home at all. On Sunday morning I found my bright plastic clothes pegs, all warped and distorted in a bowl on the kitchen table. Without a smidgin of apology they explained that they had 'found' them in the shed, where they might have been peed on by mice and so had been obliged to sterilize the lot in boiling water to safeguard Cecily's health. The pretty plastic pegs were now irredeemably warped. When we fled back to the Warneford after Sunday lunch I felt relieved. Here Cecily and I were a self-sufficient capsule of two, and I had learnt to conform. Outside, even my home was not my own.

When Sarah asked how the weekend had gone I replied with feeling. Once again I did not get the response I expected. Rather than offering sympathy, she declared that I was in danger of becoming institutionalised, and that I should go home again. The next weekend I was sent home for longer.

Each home visit was longer than the last. For one, my parents actually went away for a brief visit to their home in York. We coped without them very well. We had sex in the afternoon, in our bedroom, while Cecily lay, legs waving in the half open sweater-drawer at the foot of the bed. We ate stew and rice on our knees in front of the T.V. We walked round the village with the pram, and to my relief nobody stared at us. I went back happier to my undemanding Warneford life. Tim went back to lecture at Aberystwyth. My parents returned to my house. The next weekend I was to be released from Thursday to Monday, and for much of that time Tim would be in Wales.

It was on that visit that I swore at my mother. It sounds a trivial offence, but in our household, it had never been done before. Restraint was absolute, and sometimes stifling. Now 32, I came home to be parented by them once more, to conform to the obsessional rituals of clothes peg sterilization, individual towel hygiene and hand washing dictated by them. They couldn't resist hanging around supervising whilst I mixed the baby formula, though at the Warneford I was a trusty, mixing my stockpile of six bottles without interference. We ate silently, at the dining table, the oppression of home spilling out over me. Doubtless Mummy voiced some strongly held opinions, and Daddy flaccidly agreed. When Tim got back, having driven across Wales he had broken the wing mirror on the car. A glancing impact of some 140 mph with an oncoming vehicle. I felt angry to have fear for his life added to my burden of over-raw emotion, and I shouted at him.

He went back to Wales on the Sunday night, taking my only life-line, our portable T.V. I pleaded tentatively, but he felt himself the more injured of the two of us. "You've got everything here, you can't expect me to go sit in that flat with nothing to do." When he had gone, I retired to my bedroom and lay on the bed with Cecily. I gazed into her eyes, my hand on her fat stomach, and she wriggled and waved her star shaped hands at me. She was beginning to smile. Into this idyll intruded a tapping on the door, and my mother. I must not take Cecily to bed with me. It was just like the sodding Warneford! I had been stripped of so many of my aspirations. Breast feeding had been denied me, the drugs and separation saw to that. The moses basket

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with the baby sleeping bag inside it languished unused. It had been my image that our baby would sleep by my bed in it, but this was not to be. In the Warneford she occupied a plastic fish tank. At home my mother had designated the box-room, next to their bedroom as a nursery, and the hard brown carrycot as more suitable (since sheets could more readily be changed) than the pretty zippered bag.

Why didn't she just come and sit on the bed with me, sharing in the adoration of my daughter? At one prohibition too far I erupted in fury, and swore at her interference. Sarah, she justified, had told her I must not take Cecily to bed with me. So why had no-one told me? And in any case I was on, rather than in the bed. Were people forever going to inform one another of rules for my conduct of which I myself was not informed? It was time to banish the interferers, and this I proceeded to do.

I went back to the Warneford on the Tuesday, lucid with tightly controlled anger and discharged myself. With composure I told the expressionless psychiatrist with the trouser creases that going in and out of hospital was occasioning me more stress than staying out. As throughout our consultations, he expressed no opinion. My parents were delighted that I was now out, my lapse of manners overlooked as a symptom of my instability. I, however knew that they had to go. I viewed them in a different light. A light had been shone into the dark corners of my family, and what I had seen was no illusion of madness.

When the big white Volvo at last pulled out of the front gate I felt tearful but relieved. They could not now hold me back, but nor did I know how to go forward. The first week at home went passably well. Tim panicked a bit at my unprecedented tendency to go early morning running in the village (I'd never done it before I went mad, and he didn't know that I did it in hospital). We talked for hours, filling in more gaps in our shared trauma. We slept together, and awoke rested. But the next two weeks loomed insolubly. Tim had to supervise students in North Wales. I would be alone in the house with Cecily, I was tearful, and needed support. It seemed we had no one to turn to. The only person I could bear to have around me was Tim, and his sense of loyalty to job came first. Possibly part-time fathering was also quite to his taste.

I didn't erect the coping, self sufficient front which was later to characterise my parenting years. I was limp and helpless. At last he took me to visit my GP and we explained our predicament. "Why?" enquired Dr Livingstone "can't you take them with you?"

It was a bolt from the blue. Tim gulped and couldn't think of a reason. Though I believe he would have rejected the idea out of hand if it had come from me.

It was on this trip to North Wales that my rehabilitation really began. We stayed in hotels, at Red Wharf Bay in Anglesey, and at Ruthin Castle. He went out to see his students, while I pushed the buggy around the villages, breathed the air, bought a waterproof hood for the buggy, a changing bag and a baby hat. Nobody knew me at all. So they just assumed I was a normal Mum with an exceptionally pretty baby. She slept in our bedroom. We mixed her feeds with the hotel kettle, at mealtimes she sat, in her baby bouncer by our table.

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The assault course of the Warneford had welded me and Cecily into an inseparable unit. It had opened my eyes to my husband's weaknesses (my Mum was pleased about that) and to my parents' faults. Worst of all was my mother's judgementalism.

After we returned to Aberystwyth I telephoned my mother. I told her how unhelpful her criticisms of Tim had been. I was not emotional, but rather formal. I think part of me expected an apology. After all she had always subscribed to the view that her own marriage, and husband were without flaw. Surely she would understand that I felt my marriage had been, through her enthusiastic endorsement of Tim's faults, under attack. She did not understand, and indeed never, I think, accepted criticism. For almost a year there was no communication between us. At Christmas, I saw the opportunity to unbend, and went shopping for a Wedgewood calendar plate to send to them. It crossed in the post with a small parcel addressed me. In it was a rather loathsome fluffy doll-with-ears toy for Cecily, (not even wrapped in pretty paper), and a cheque for £25. The accompanying letter said that she had been unable to see anything she thought I would like. My pliant silent father remained just that, silent.

I wrote a formal thank you letter with clear overtones of indignation. Since she could not bring herself to indulge in gift giving, I would place the £25 in Cecily's savings bank. Annoyingly Cecily latched with uncritical enthusiasm upon the anthropomorphic rabbit, and I soon came to tolerate it. We had a very quiet Christmas, (we hardly knew anyone in Wales) but we'd never had a baby at Christmas before, and her entertainment drove my days. Every evening I'd sing her to sleep in the spare bedroom with the over florid wallpaper, and then arrange her small collection of toys: the box of bricks, the wooden springy men, the teething ring, and the peg basher on the low shelf with the TV. We'd doze in front of the TV hearing sheep bleating in the fields below. In the small hours as we snuggled in bed we'd be woken by a louder more persistent bleating. I'd pull on my dressing gown, and go and collect Cecily, who, once installed between us in our bed would fall into a happy sleep. Her firm rubbery body seemed in no danger of being smothered. Indeed sometimes I would wake to find her lying across my head amongst the pillows.

The following Spring, Cecily now an exquisite, slightly built toddler, I invited Mummy and Daddy to come and look at her. I did not suggest they stayed in the flat with us, and they spent two nights in a Bed and Breakfast nearby. We went to the river and the beach and all concentrated on Cecily. Tim went to work. Henceforth my husband and my parents would occupy two separate spheres of my life. My parents concentrated on the children. Tim immersed himself in his job. I, in due course, became a very competent mother of three.

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Afterwards

We put our Oxford house on the market and returned to Aberystwyth in September, and for a while I felt ill at ease. In a community of this size everyone would know something of my illness, but few knew how to approach me. Mainly it just wasn't mentioned.

Betty the NCT teacher got in touch and was warm and encouraging. I learnt then, too late, that to those who knew Aberystwyth better, the vileness of a certain midwife, hostile to husbands and those with NCT ideas, was an open secret. But vile as she had been, such is not sufficient explanation for what happened to me. I wrote a description of my experiences at Bronglais, and without rancour suggested the points at which the outcome could have been better managed. Procedures had taken precedence over humanity, form filling over practical help, and certain nurses and midwives had made deeply alarming assertions which were not calculated to instil confidence in a young mother. I believe Betty did make some efforts to use this document, for there were issues which could have helped many women, - the hunger, the abandonment in a single room, the stress of conflicting staff attitudes. But as she regretfully remarked, "But you've been ill, so they can say you're not remembering it quite right".

I sent a copy of the account to my mother, but she did not know how to respond to it, acknowledging its receipt and little more. My mother-in-law was similarly cautious to mention this momentous upheaval in my life. I was grateful to her sister, a beautiful elderly woman whose life had been tormented by the guilt of have born an institutionalised, imperfect, first born son. She wrote simply, "I am sorry you had such a horrid time, - it will take a long time to forget". I felt so grateful to her for acknowledging the fact of my remembering. Everyone else seemed to feel forgetting was an immediate duty. Perhaps a sizzle ECT would have wiped the experience, and saved them all some unease, but I am eternally grateful that Tim, as next of kin, forbade it. Memories may be good or bad, but they are mine, and the aggregate of experiences is me.

Everyone just expected me to move forward and put it behind me, and that is what I did. Two or three of my new friends heard a fairly full account in the following few years, but shortly afterwards, one of these decided that a close friendship between Cecily and her daughter would be a bad thing and took surprisingly draconian steps to curtail it. I suspected she felt uncomfortable with the possible insanity which she now knew underlay my normality. On the whole the best thing was to concentrate on letting the whole incident fade into the past. I did give a few lectures to the Zoologists at Aberystwyth at the invitation of the professor who knew of my Oxford background, but for the most part I embraced the round of mother and baby groups, toddler groups, rallied my old confident persona, and devoted myself to my child. Notwithstanding the feminist rhetoric for the educated woman, I felt I was right to devote myself to her full-time. However much we wish to mould babies to fit our lifestyles and need for fulfillment, they are equipped by evolution to bond with just one mother.

I read everything I could find about postnatal depression and soon reached an alarming conclusion. Psychosis, (which seems very different from classical

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depression) was quite likely to strike twice. This was information I felt disinclined to share with Tim. But when, after a disappointing early miscarriage, I found myself pregnant again, I sought out our avuncular GP, the very one who had had me sectioned. (To change my GP in our small community would, I felt, indicate that I harboured a grudge, and although I was disappointed that he had never alluded to my psychotic episode, or asked me about it, he had been an attentive and amiable doctor to Cecily). “I know,” I said “that there is a greater than random risk of this happening again. I want to have this baby at home, because I believe it will be much less stressful, and I want to try Katherine Dalton’s preventative treatment of post partum progesterone therapy.” I had come fully briefed to argue my case. To my relief he acceded without comment, and accepted the loan of Dr Dalton’s book.