



STATISTICALLY SPEAKING



DEBBIE
JOHNSON

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A Novel



DEBBIE JOHNSON



HARPER MUSE

Statistically Speaking

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To Milly Johnson, for just being you.

HARPER
MUSE



PART I
THEN



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CHAPTER 1

TEN TINY FINGERS, TEN TINY TOES

October, eighteen years ago

“You’re doing great,” the midwife says, glancing up at me from between my trembling, sweat-sheened knees. “Keep going, my love, just keep going.”

She is trying to be encouraging, trying to be kind, trying to help me through this. I know that none of this is her fault, but still, I kind of want to punch her in the face.

I ignore her and concentrate on counting my breaths, counting the precious moments of calm between waves of agony.

At my side, Geoff with a G is murmuring words of encouragement while pointedly averting his gaze from the war zone that is my lower half.

“Brilliant, Gemma,” he mutters, eyes skittering, his skin pale and waxy. He looks as though he’s in so much distress that you’d think he was the one doing this.

None of this is his fault either, but I want to punch him in the face as well.

I grunt and screw up my eyes and push so hard when I am told to that I feel as though I might pass out from lack of oxygen. My fists are scrunched around creased hospital sheets,



my hair is stuck to my forehead in damp clumps, and I can taste salt on my otherwise dry lips. I push, and I pant, and I want to give up. Actually, I don't just want to give up; I think I might want to die.

In the background, the music is doing nothing to help. I'd put together some songs, back when I thought listening to them might make a difference, but now that just seems silly. As if Robbie Williams singing about angels could help with this. It's definitely not Robbie's fault, but if he were in the room, and I had the spare energy, his face wouldn't be safe either.

Mainly, I want to punch myself in the face—because this is *my* fault. And it is so much harder than I thought, than I ever could have imagined, it would be. It is nothing like it is on television—but then again, neither was the act that started it all. There is nothing magical about any of it, nothing beautiful or perfect. Just pain, and worry, and a weird sense of loneliness.

Your first love and motherhood come with such loaded expectations. They are the moments that are supposed to mean something. To connect you to something bigger than yourself. To make you feel special.

That's all bullshit, I reckon. If losing your virginity and having a baby were sold the way they really are, nobody would ever do either of those things, and the human race would die out. If they were billed as "pain and worry and a weird sense of loneliness," nobody would be in such a rush to do either, would they? We've all been conned.

Life isn't rainbows and unicorns. It's sludge-gray drizzle and feral rats. Then again, I am not in the best of moods.

I am sixteen and I am having a baby. I am pushing a real-

life human being out of my lady parts, and it hurts. It hurts a lot, and I left “tired” behind about twelve hours ago—now I am well into “so exhausted I may never leave this bloody bed.”

I knew it would be painful, but I wasn’t prepared for the exhaustion, the sense of defeat, the feeling of failure—the suspicion that I might not be able to do what millions of women have done for millennia, squatting in deserts and on bathroom floors and in the backs of taxis. I am too crap to even give birth properly.

I want to cry, for so many reasons—but I am too wrung out to spare the tears. I feel another wave of pain and get yelled at to push, and I try, I really do, but I have nothing left to give. All of me has floated away in a cloud of despair and sheer knackeredness.

“I can’t do this!” I scream. “Please, just make it stop! Make it stop!” I bite my lip hard, three times, feeling blood on my tongue.

Geoff with a G looks even queasier, but he takes hold of one of my hands, squeezes my fingers, and says: “You’re okay, Gemma. You can do this. You know you can.”

He doesn’t sound very convinced, but it is something to cling to. Kind words, a kind touch. A kind man. It calms me enough that I take in more air, gulping it in greedily.

“Gemma, you’re nearly there, love!” says the midwife. I’ve forgotten her name. Something Irish, I think, even though her accent is pure East London. This is my third midwife—I have gone through a few shift changes now.

“You said that hours ago!” I scream at her. “You were lying! You’re a bloody liar!”

The midwife actually laughs out loud at this accusation. It is a strange sound to hear floating up to my ears, a tinkling

of amusement as she roots around, as she inspects, as she probes.

“Gemma, I can see her head!” she adds. “And I’m not lying—I can see her head, and she has lovely red hair like you, and she is so ready to come and meet you—come on now, one last big push for me!”

Red hair. Huh. I’ve always hated mine, but for some reason I feel weirdly pleased that she has it too. Like it’s a connection we will always have, no matter what else we lose. A twine of ginger reaching down through the ages. I grip hold of Geoff’s hand, tighter than any sane human being would appreciate, and I push, growling out a long stream of air, forcing myself to find that last shred of strength that I need. I lean forward as I do it, squashed up and folded and as concertinaed as my malformed body can get.

I hear Geoff and the midwife speaking words that don’t register; I feel a flickering sensation behind my eyes, a high-pitched ringing in my ears, the world around me a blanked-out buzzing void: nothing exists but me and this moment and doing this one thing. The most important thing I have ever done.

I am sixteen and I am having a baby. A baby girl, with red hair. I let out one scream, put all my energy into helping her into the world, and know that I am spent. That I have nothing more to give. If this is not enough, then this is not happening.

It is enough. And it is happening. Head, shoulders, tiny body, slithering into this small room in this busy hospital, like she’s in a rush now. She’s rushing out of me and into her own life—into a world that I hope treats her well.

I feel disconnected from my own body as she arrives, burdened with a sense of physical relief and emotional dread. I

stare at the curtains, at the stripes, repeated patterns of three different shades of green. I read somewhere once that green is supposed to be calming. It is not—at least not in this situation.

I blink rapidly as the midwife pulls my baby up and into her solid hands. I wonder how many babies she has delivered with those hands, how many women she has helped. I find that I don't really care, about that or about anything. I am done, I am trembling, I am slick with sweat. It has even caught in my eyelashes, is dripping from my brows. The skin of my face feels sore and stretched over my bones.

I look at the clock on the off-white wall. It is just past midnight on October 3. It is her birthday. She took her sweet time, and arrived ten days after she was scheduled to. But she is here, this brand-new thing, this fresh creature, this tiny human. This life waiting to unfold. She is here, and she has been born to the sound of Kelis singing about her milkshake. That doesn't seem right, somehow—but it is done, and I can only hope that she hasn't absorbed it. That she won't grow up to have a weird yearning to lie on tables in diners.

The midwife—she's called Siobhan, I suddenly remember—is cooing and chatting as she cuts the cord, starts to check the baby over. It only takes minutes, but it is enough time for me to lose whatever magic was keeping me upright and present.

I collapse backward, my head banging against the steel of the bed frame. I don't even feel it. I am suddenly bone-deep cold, shivering, in shock. If I'd just finished a marathon, someone would wrap me in a foil sheet and give me a Mars bar.

"Here she is—absolutely perfect! Eight pounds, two ounces, and a lovely length—she's going to be a tall one!" says

Siobhan, bringing the tiny form, wrapped in a blanket, toward me. I see one pudgy arm sticking out, fist clenched in bright red fury. Like she's already angry at the world.

"I don't want to hold her!" I say quickly, holding my hands up to ward them away, wishing I could run—not even a marathon, just out of this room. Away from here, away from now.

I cannot run, though. I cannot move. I am trapped, my body still pulsating, my mind spiraling as she approaches.

"It's okay, Gemma," says Geoff with a G. He has stood up, is peering into that blanket, smiling at what he sees.

"You should see her. You should hold her. You'll regret it if you don't." I glare at him, filled with anger—with a bright red fury of my own. I have so many regrets already; what harm could one more possibly do me?

I don't have the energy to argue, though, and I accept the bundle that is passed to me. Part of me knows he is right. That even if this hurts, I must do it, or wake up every single day for the rest of my life wishing I'd been brave enough.

I have held babies before. Some of my foster families also took in tiny ones like this. I have changed nappies and warmed bottles, and wondered what all the fuss is about. Babies are noisy and messy and not very good conversationalists and I never understood why people are so keen on them.

This, though, is different. This is my baby. This is a baby who has lived inside my body for more than nine months. This is a little girl with red hair and a red face, and she is at once a stranger and someone I have known for all of eternity. She is new and she is old and she is everything all at the same time.

She nestles into me, her face turning sideways, rooting and snuffling, one finger flipping up as though she was born knowing how to be rude. She has a bad attitude, I decide, as I peel

back the covers and gaze at her face. I like people with a bad attitude.

“Perfect, Gemma,” says Siobhan, hovering by my side. “Look at that. Look at what you did, you brave girl. Ten tiny fingers, ten tiny toes.”

The midwife is patronizing me, which I can’t blame her for. It’s hard to argue a case for your maturity and wisdom when you’ve just given birth to a baby you conceived while you were still in school.

But she is also mistaken, at least about one of those things. The baby might be perfect, but I am not brave. I am not brave at all. I ignore her, lost now in more important things. Like counting those ten tiny fingers, those ten tiny toes, and drinking in that angry red face. I stroke my baby’s hair, damp and gooey still, and she blinks her eyes open and stares up at me. Her eyes are wide, and a dark shade that could be either blue or gray, but I know they’ll probably change anyway over the next few months. I saw it in one of the books Geoff gave me.

I won’t be in her life by then. It is strange to think that I will not be around to see what color eyes she has. It is one of the many things I will never know. The way she looks at me, though, is enough for now.

The way she looks at me, it feels like she understands it all. Like she knows all the stuff, the good and the bad and the boring. It is the stare of someone who sees right through you, who cuts through the bullshit, who knows everything that has ever happened in the universe ever. Minutes old and already the wisest being I’ve met.

Geoff is blathering. Siobhan is chattering. Kelis has been replaced by Christina Aguilera. None of it matters. It is all surplus to requirements. All that matters is me and my baby—

this beautiful-ugly, young-old scrap of a person lying on my chest.

It is me and her and it is the magic. It is the rainbows and the unicorns and the perfect. It is the everything—the anti-lonely, the anti-weird, the anti-fear. It is the best I have ever felt in my life, and it is the worst I have ever felt in my life.

She is perfect, the most beautiful human I have ever seen. I cannot believe she came from me. She is perfect, and now I am going to give her away. I am going to let her be taken out of my arms, out of this room, passed on to strangers. Her real life starts as soon as she is away from me, in a better reality. One where she will be loved and cherished and well fed and well cared for. Where she will have a good home, and people who love her, and an education, and opportunity.

Where she won't have me.

I kiss her red face, and smell her red hair, and try to imprint every detail of this moment, of this creation, into my memory.

"I love you, Baby," I murmur. I don't want to give her a name. That is for her new family to do. The family that Geoff with a G found and vetted and worked with. The family that will give her the life I can't. The family that will give her the awesome world she deserves. To me, she will always be just Baby.

"It's not too late, you know," says Geoff quietly. "Nothing is settled, nothing is definite. You have weeks to decide before anything gets signed. You could keep her until then, see how you feel. We can find ways to help you—you don't have to rush into this."

I don't meet his eyes—my eyes are on my baby, soaking in her wondrousness—but I manage a smile for him. He means well, and I no longer wish to damage his face.

He means well, but he and I both know what that help would look like. I might find a foster family that would take in a teenager and a newborn. I might find a place in an independent living unit. I might even be able to find my own place, if I were very special and very lucky and the Gods of Forgotten Children smiled upon me. There would be assessments and key workers and reports and visits and a grinding sense of benign scrutiny. Every move, every mistake, every choice I made, would be watched.

I've lived in and out of this system for a lot of my life, and I know how it feels to always be watched. Sometimes the system works—I have met good people, had foster parents who helped me, found some stability. Sometimes it doesn't work, and the less said about that the better. But none of it is what I want for this little girl—she shouldn't have to settle for second best, for anything less than perfect.

I don't want her growing up with a mum who is still too young to look after her properly. A mum who can barely make a Pot Noodle without scalding herself. I don't want her growing up with the smell of mold in cheap rooms, or picking up on the secondhand anxiety that I'd be bound to share on endless walks with a pram on endless aimless days, worried about money and safety and what will become of us.

There isn't a smiling grandma with abundant patience, there isn't a long-lost auntie who will take us in. There is just me and well-meaning strangers, and that is not good enough for her. I want to give her the world—but all I can give her is this. The knowledge that I am not ready. That I am not capable, right now, of being what she needs. What she deserves.

Her new family—her real family—is more than ready. They have wanted her for years. They have her nursery painted in

yellow and cream, they have tiny sleepsuits all soft and clean, and they have a baby-shaped hole in their hearts that she will fill.

I could love her, but I couldn't give her that world. I love her, so I am giving her away.

I drag my gaze away from hers and look up at Geoff. He looks a bit teary-eyed and I wonder if he is cut out for this job—for being a social worker. He shouldn't even be here, really—he is doing more than his job demands. Going above and beyond, and risking broken finger bones to be here with me.

"It's okay," I say firmly. "I've made up my mind. I've thought about it all, Geoff. It's what is best for her. And probably me. You can take her."

Siobhan is silent for once, nodding when she sees my resolve, silently taking my newborn into her arms.

"They are lovely, Gemma," Geoff replies. "She couldn't ask for better parents. They're so excited about meeting her."

I nod and close my eyes. I am sad and tired and don't want to be conscious anymore. There is a possibility that I may never want to be conscious again.

"Have you got the letter?" I ask.

"I have, and I'll make sure they get it."

"Could I have it back? Just for a minute. And a pen. I need a pen."

Geoff fumbles in the satchel bag he carries everywhere with him, big enough to contain the files that summarize his clients' lives. He pulls out a brown envelope, removes the letter inside it, then rummages some more. I hear him muttering something about how he can never find a bloody pen, and he is saved by Siobhan. She passes one over to him, and he nods gratefully before he brings them both to me.

I wriggle as upright as I can, and feel like my body might split in two. I wince, and Geoff gives me a book to lean on. It is a hardback Tom Clancy novel, which almost makes me laugh—he is the least macho man I have ever met. Perhaps it belongs to his wife.

I screw up my eyes, folding the letter over to the blank bit at the end. I already know there are 1,615 words. Probably too many, maybe not enough—if this is going to be all of me that she has, how could it ever be enough? I wrote that letter over and over, so many times, the floor around me scattered with balled-up sheets and my fingers aching and stained from cheap, leaking pens.

Still, I need to write more. I need to say more. I need to tell her about this moment in time, this perfect, wonderful, terrible moment.

I scrawl a hurried PS. My writing is wrecked, and I am scared of blotting the pages with sweat, but eventually it is done. I pass it over to Geoff, and I fall back onto the bed and back into the cold, numb place that I know will help me survive this. A place I am all too familiar with. Geoff puts the letter back into the envelope and into his bag. He smiles at me and looks as though he is about to speak.

“Don’t,” I preempt. “There isn’t anything else to be said.”

He nods decisively, and Siobhan passes him the baby, legs kicking and fists still waving. He accepts this precious bundle and leaves the room. He takes the perfect and the rainbow and the unicorn with him. I am left there with a midwife and a placenta, and the knowledge that doing the right thing doesn’t always feel right.

I imagine my own mother, sixteen years ago, in a room like this, riddled with mind-worms and drugs and a life that was



swallowing her whole. I wonder if she saw me, a tiny thing with bright red hair, and felt all that pain and glory and potential.

It is too much. It is too hard. I am deflated and empty in every way. I feel my mind fracturing into a million pieces, falling into a dark place that I might never escape from.

I console myself with remembering. With counting. With ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes.

HARPER
MUSE



CHAPTER 2

1,656 WORDS AND WAY TOO MANY FEELINGS

Dear Baby,

This is a weird one to write, and probably a weird one to read. This is, like, version fifty, and I've decided it's the final version, because I'm never going to get it entirely right and because I've got blisters on my pen-holding finger now.

Anyway, your real parents have promised they will give this to you when they think you're old enough. That might mean when you're ten or when you're fifty, who knows? I've suggested they give it to you when you're sixteen, which is how old I am now.

So—this is me. Your biological mother. As I write this you are still inside me, which is odd, but I think I'll miss it. I'll miss you, and I'll miss knowing that you're safe and well and protected. I can't imagine putting my hand on my tummy and you not being there.

If you're reading this, you know that you were adopted, and I hope you have a really good life and that your mum and dad tell you off plenty and set loads of rules for you. It might not feel like it, but that's a good thing, honest—it means they're

bothered. So maybe try not to hate them for it, like I see all my mates do—they're always moaning about being controlled and stuff.

That's it, by the way—the sum of my life wisdom.

I don't have much to share with you on that front, because, like I say, I'm sixteen. I don't regret having you—you were not some terrible mistake—but I would maybe also say on the life wisdom front that vodka and boys don't mix that well, so be careful with that.

You're probably wondering why I gave you away, and that's fair, and that's why I'm writing this. I didn't want you to grow up feeling rejected, or crap about yourself, or at least no more than normal. So, here's the thing—I didn't give you away because I didn't love you, or because I didn't want you, or because there was anything wrong with you. I haven't met you in person yet, but I just know you're perfect in every way a baby can be perfect. I can tell.

I gave you away because of me, and my life, and what I can't do for you. My mum has a mental illness, and she also does a lot of drugs and drinks too much, and I'm sure that's all kind of bundled up for her in one horrible package. If I was looking at her life from the outside, I'd feel so sorry for her—she tries so hard, and on days when she's her version of normal, she is really funny and kind and good to be with. But on the days when she's not, she's so sad she can't get out of bed, or sometimes she's scary and out of control. Either way, it makes you feel completely freaked out.

I know it's not her fault, but I am angry with her anyway. Then I feel guilty for being angry, and it all gets squished up in my head. One of the ways I deal with that is by counting things.

Whenever I'm a bit stressed or upset, I count stuff to calm me down. Stupid things, like steps, and windows, and how many Skittles there are in a bag. I started doing that when I was really little, like about seven, I think. Old enough to count anyway. She told me she was going out to get some chips and would only be five minutes, and I was at home on my own and I was scared. So I started counting because I knew there were sixty seconds in each minute. Every time I got to sixty I made a mark on my coloring book.

Eventually the coloring book was pretty full, and I was pretty hungry, and I couldn't even cry anymore because I was so tired. She didn't come home for three days, and I just ate dry cereal out of the box. I even counted how many bits of Coco Pops there were.

After that, she went to hospital for a bit. And she gave me away. Then she came home and seemed better and got me back. Then it happened again, and again, until eventually she agreed that she would give me away for a longer time.

I didn't want that—even though it was shitty at home with my mum, it was still at home with my mum, which felt less frightening than living with strangers. But that's what happened, and I think now I can understand it a bit better. She didn't just give me away for the reasons I maybe thought at the time—because I was a pain, because I was inconvenient, because she preferred a simpler life without me. Or maybe she did, I don't know—it was all a bit chaotic.

But I think maybe she also gave me away because she knew it was better for me. She knew it was unhealthy for me, being with her, and maybe even dangerous. I think she gave me away because she wanted me to be safe and to be able to go to bed at

night without having to check she hadn't left toast burning or worrying that she'd spent all our money and that I'd be hungry for the rest of the week.

I say maybe, because I don't know—we don't have the kind of relationship where we can talk about it. I don't see her much anymore, and that's both good and bad. Maybe if I'd had a letter like this, I'd know—I'd know she did some of the things she did because she actually loved me. And I think that would have helped—it would have made me feel better.

So that's why I am writing this. So you can feel better. So you will always know that I didn't give you away because I didn't love you, or because you did anything wrong. I do love you, more than I've ever loved anyone. It's weird and huge and really unexpected, how much I love you.

But I'm also only sixteen. I live in foster care. At the moment I'm with a woman called Audrey and she is really strict and takes no crap, and that is a good thing for me.

Audrey makes sure all the boring stuff is taken care of, I have clean clothes and food and a bed—she's good to me, but she doesn't love me, and I feel that a lot. I compare myself to my friends and it makes me feel lonely. I know my mum loves me, but she can't give me any of that other stuff, and that other stuff is important too. If I could mix and match them, that'd be great—but you can't do that with human beings. I can't give you all the bits of me that love you but let someone else do the boring bit that keeps you safe and happy—I have to give all of you away, and hope you'll find the real deal with them. All of the bits you need in one place.

If I was older, if my whole universe was different, I would keep you. But this is the reality—I have no other family, I have

no money, and I don't have anything to offer you. I don't want you to grow up worried about how many Coco Pops are left in the box. I don't want you to grow up messed up by how messed up I am. I have thought about it such a lot, Baby, I really have—and even if you hate me for it, that's all right. You can. But you are going to have a proper family, and a nice life, and I hope all your worries will be normal ones, like about your mates and your exams and boys (clue: don't worry about any of those things!).

I can't tell you much about your bio-dad, because I don't know much. I am ashamed to say this, but I don't even know his name—but he was pretty cool, and he was nice to me. If you're good at wheelies, that comes from him. I met him in the park, hanging around, and he was only visiting and disappeared as fast as he arrived. I don't know what all that counts for, but there you go. I don't know my dad either—as legend has it, my mum got pregnant while she was at Glastonbury at the music festival, but I've never known if that was true or just an interesting story she created.

It's both scary and wonderful how casually a life can be created. You're drunk or careless or in love and carried away, and suddenly a whole new human person is there, with their own set of dreams and needs and disappointments. I hope you don't have to continue this line of women who give away their children, because it sucks.

I'm going to stop now, and I am going to just say this—you are loved, and you are perfect, and you are going to be brilliant. I'm sad I won't be around to see that, how brilliant you'll be, but I think maybe you'll be less brilliant if you get stuck with me as

your parent. Having a mum around isn't always for the best if it isn't the right mum.

Shine on, lovely Baby. I wish all the awesome for you.

Lots of love,

Your mum (my name is Gemma, by the way)

xxxxx

PS—I have met you now. You are amazing. The most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and the best thing I have ever done. You will never be mine, but I will be forever yours.

PART 2
NOW



HARPER
MUSE



CHAPTER 3

ONE HUNDRED IRON MEN AND ONE BLACK CLOUD

September, eighteen years later

“So,” I say to Bill as he sprawls next to me on the concrete steps that lead down to the beach, “how did my life get so messy? I’ve been here for over a year now. I only meant to stay for a few months. I meant to keep it simple. I blame you.”

Bill gazes at me with unreadable brown eyes, thuds his skinny tale once, and lets out a fragrant fart.

“Ha. Well, that told me.”

I reach out and scratch behind his ears. He’s a weird mix, Bill—some lurcher maybe, some collie, perhaps a bit of Lab. He’s multicolored, shades of yellow and brown and gray, and has fur that’s so long on his back he has a center parting, and so short on his head that he looks almost bald, apart from his massive and super-expressive eyebrows.

He has come from Hungary and probably doesn’t understand a word I’m saying. *As opposed to British dogs*, I think, smiling at how silly this internal conversation is. British dogs would be quick to pick up on the subtleties of my emotional turmoil, wouldn’t they? Not.

We have just finished our run, and we are sitting for a moment to gather our wits about us. I am, at least—I’m not so



sure about Bill. He's the strong, silent type and doesn't say much.

It is 7:30 a.m., and the beach is already busy with dog walkers. Dog walkers, I have come to learn, are a friendly bunch. I know none of their names, and I have never shared mine, but we know each other by our beasts. There is a man with a small pack of corgis, and a lovely lady with a chatty springer spaniel, and a woman with labradoodles called Buggy and Ronny, and one with an enormous Old English sheepdog called Marvin. I have no idea how they refer to me in their minds: Bill's mum, maybe, or the Ginger One with the Mixed-up Mongrel.

I have made up stories for them all, of course. I have assigned them fictional lives, complete with fictional partners and fictional children and fictional jobs. It comes as quite a shock when I see one of them out of context, and their actual lives don't match up to the ones I've amused myself with. I mean, who'd have thought that I'd see Mr. Smiley Staffy in town one day, and he'd be wearing a policeman's uniform, and be an actual policeman? In my version of events he was a landscape gardener who took his dog to work with him. Weird.

A small border terrier runs over to us and sniffs Bill's bits. Bill doesn't budge, or respond, or give any indication that he is alive. He is utterly inscrutable. It is a ploy that works, and we are soon left alone again.

It's the first week of September, and the sky is a pure pastel blue, cloudless and serene, colliding with sea and sand in lines of perfect color. It is clear enough to see the Welsh hills in the distance across from me, to see the curve of coastline that becomes Lancashire to my right, and the towers and spires of Liverpool to my left.

It is a strange stretch of land, sand dunes and sea creatures

and skylarks singing, thistledown and sea holly and marsh orchids and big horizons and ever-shifting views. All this in a marriage of convenience with giant wind turbines and the cranes and gantries of the docks, container ships and cruise liners ghosting past on mist-laden mornings. A perfect point of balance between nature and the city.

It is also home to an art installation called *Another Place*, a hundred cast-iron figures of naked men, by the artist Antony Gormley. Because we all need more naked men in our eyes, right?

The iron men stretch out into the sea, submerged by the tide, sunk into sand, often dressed up in football shirts or given Christmas hats or sunglasses. It's another strange thing about this place, which I like. I have amused myself many times, walking from statue to statue, counting them, never quite managing them all for fear of getting lost at sea or sinking into mud, never to be seen again.

Today, this early, the tide is out, and the men are exposed, pitted and gritted and looking out at the edge of the world, unmoved and calm.

Me, not so much. I am not calm, and I am not unmoved, and I feel as though a cartoon version of me would feature a giant black rain cloud hovering above my head.

I have done everything I usually do to prepare myself for the day that lies in front of me. I have run my usual distance—three miles—which, for me, is just under six thousand steps. I have walked another mile at a slower pace. I have sipped my water. I have played with the dog. I have sat here and watched the world go by, for as long as I can manage. As an extra treat, I have even done some of that 4-7-8 breathing, with Bill looking on in amusement as I huffed and puffed.

None of it has worked. I still feel wired, and tense, and overadrenalized. It makes me want to start running again, and just keep going until I leave everything, especially myself, behind.

Maybe it's because it's the first full day back at the school where I teach after the long summer break. Maybe it's because I'll be meeting new students, probably new colleagues, and greeting old ones. Maybe it's because Margie, the lady who lives in the flat beneath mine and actually owns Bill, keeps trying to find out my whole life story, and I just don't do life-story swapping. Maybe it's because Karim, the admittedly pretty gorgeous head of PE, has asked me out for a drink and I don't feel ready to have a man in my life just now, even on a casual basis. Maybe it's because I've agreed to a longer contract, adding another year on to the length of time I usually spend anywhere. Maybe it's because I am starting to feel settled here, and I find feeling settled very . . . unsettling.

Maybe, I admit to myself as I stand and stretch and start the walk home, it is all of those things and none of those things.

Maybe it is because she is almost eighteen, and might be doing her A-level exams, like most eighteen-year-olds in England. Maybe it is because this year, I could have been her teacher. Maybe it is because after her A levels, if they go well, she might be choosing universities and courses, standing at a crossroads in her life as she looks at careers and maybe even a gap year. She might have a part-time job, and be planning a big party and her first legal drink, and she will be surrounded by friends and love and choices. She is looking at the future, and it is bright.

Of course, I have no clue if any of this is even remotely true—but I like to imagine it is. I imagine it, because I have

no other option. I am not a part of her life, and never will be. I acknowledge this, and let the familiar tug of pain have its way with me, and know that I cannot chase it away before it is ready to go. It is a tenacious creature, this particular pain, made up of tentacles and hooks and talons that plunge deep and hold on tight.

I have missed her every single day since she was born. I have dreamed of her, and yearned for her, and never stopped thinking about her. But still, I know that I did the right thing. I repeat this to myself over and over again, until I feel its familiar truth, sad but consoling.

I reach the house by the beach where I live. It is at the end of a small terraced row, tucked between grand Victorian seaside homes with pastel-colored paint jobs and fancy wrought-iron verandas, and more modern mansions made of sheets of glass and sleek wood. Our terrace is homely, small but perfectly formed, gardens and patios edging out onto the marram grass and sand, within hearing of the waves and within sight of the sea. As I approach, I see Margie pottering around her terrace garden in a bright pink quilted dressing gown, and watch as Bill gambols toward her.

I see the balcony of my own home, above hers, with the small table and just the one chair and the blanket I've left out there so I can sit, alone, in the now-cool nights, looking out to sea and along to the lit-up wonderland of the port.

I know there are fourteen steps to go up, and that I need to shower, and eat, and try to coax myself into a back-to-school state of mind.

I open the glossy white gate at the end of Margie's terrace, and Bill runs to her, nuzzling her gnarled hands as she tries to hoist a full watering can around. Without asking, I take it

from her and start to sprinkle the patio pots, the mystery tubs, the fuchsias, the California lilac in terra-cotta. Every corner of her small space is filled with flowers and plants, with life and color, reaching upward and tumbling down and spreading into every nook and cranny.

Margie sinks down onto her cushioned chair and sighs. “Thanks, babe,” she says, massaging fingers that are curled with rheumatoid arthritis. She is only in her midsixties, but she suffers in ways I don’t even like to think about. “For that, and for walking the hellhound.”

“My pleasure,” I reply, trying to sound jaunty. Margie doesn’t like to need me, and I don’t blame her. “It’s good for me. What are you up to today?”

Some of the pain she experiences in the morning will ease as the day wears on—some will not. As well as her hands, she suffers from inflammation in her hips, knees, and feet. Her activities are not likely to take her far from home, which is perhaps why she has made her home so extremely welcoming. Inside as well as outside, it is awash with nature, cozy and bright and filled with softness, warmth, and comfort. I normally do not make friends with my neighbors, but Margie has seduced me.

“Oh, Daniel Craig’s due round at ten,” she says, grinning as Bill settles at her feet. “He’s coming by speedboat. I’ll be the talk of the town. What’s up with you, anyway? You don’t look yourself this morning. Something on your mind?”

Yes, I think. *The impending adulthood of the daughter I have never known. The low-level anxiety of feeling trapped in my own skin. The ongoing need to present a normal face to the world when I am anything but normal inside. The persistent, nagging, unnamed worry that all of my well-managed eccentricities might*

not be so well managed one day, and that I will emerge from my chrysalis of coping and become my own mother.

“Nope, not especially!” I singsong back at her. She narrows her eyes in a way that implies she is not convinced, and I back away from her, out of the gate, saying my goodbyes as I jog down the path that leads to my own front door. It takes Margie a good few minutes to get out of her chair, so I am safe as long as I keep moving.

“You forgot my fact for the day!” she shouts, her voice following me and stopping me in my tracks. I dash back, pop my head around the side of the wall, and reply: “The Great Fire of London. Started this day in 1666. Be careful if you bake today, Margie!”

She cackles in delight, and her laughter is enough to bring a smile to my face. I have been reluctant to become a part of Margie’s life, a part of anyone’s, in fact—but I cannot deny the pleasure it brings me, this simple connection, this straightforward sharing of words and routine and affection.

I try to keep that Margie-inspired smile alive as I run up my fourteen stairs and into my flat. Today is the first day of class at the school where I teach. Some of my new students will only be sixteen years old—babies who think they’re all grown up. The same age I was when I gave birth.

The same age I was when I first met Geoff with a G, the hospital social worker. The same age I was when I said goodbye on the same day I promised I was forever hers.

I go over to my phone, put my Get Up and Go playlist on shuffle, hoping to knock myself out of the bittersweet mood that is haranguing me. No such luck—it hits on The Clash with “Should I Stay or Should I Go.” The story of my life, and yet another random reminder of the past. I only started listen-

ing to The Clash because of Geoff—the first time I met him, I noticed he was wearing a band badge on his jacket lapel, as if he was trying to cling to the interesting life he had outside the confines of his work.

I'd been sent to the emergency room by my school after fainting and coming to on the classroom floor, the teacher looking concerned and one of the boys whispering that he could see my knickers.

I still vividly remember it now, that entire day. Telling the nurse who was assessing me that there was absolutely positively no way I could be pregnant, outraged that she was making this assumption based on prejudice—that because I was a foster kid, I'd become yet another statistic. That I would be too dumb to even realize if I was pregnant. The sense of horror when it turned out that her assumptions were based on years of medical experience, not on prejudice. That she was right, that I was predictable as well as stupid.

I'd had the urge to tell her that I'd only done it once, that we'd used what was clearly the world's crappiest condom, that my periods were always unreliable, that I thought I was putting on weight because I was eating too many packs of Wotsits to cope with exam stress . . . I said nothing, of course. I'd already learned by that point in life that staying quiet was usually the best course of action.

I was already past the date when “other options” would be available, so I was sent to Geoff. I remember sitting there in front of him, counting the tiles of linoleum on the floor, noting how many pencils and pens he had on his desk. The first thing I asked was whether I'd be able to do my history exams, which I immediately regretted, as it implied I wasn't taking in the full gravity of the situation.

I knew I was under scrutiny—I always was, and I hated it, the way my life was laid bare for the alphabet soup of concerned professionals to poke and prod at. I'd had people ticking boxes about my welfare for a long time, and as my mother was not a woman who was on intimate terms with the real world, I was more aware than other kids of how easy it was to be judged and found wanting.

He was kind, though, Geoff; he promised me he'd do his best to make sure I managed all my exams. He made me a mug of tea, and talked to me about specialist accommodation, and asked whether my mother would be able to help. I snapped at him that she was “off her head,” and was washed with a sense of shame for saying that.

She wasn't off her head. Technically, she suffered from rapid-cycling bipolar disorder. I can look back on it more clearly now as an adult—but then it was hard. Impossibly hard. She spun from being hyper and happy to being paralyzed by depression, combined with drug use and a whole lot of drinking, which started when she was much younger and had no idea about bipolar and just needed something to make all the bad stuff go away. Sometimes I felt sorry for her; sometimes I just detested her. But, pretty much, I always avoided being around her when I needed help, because I was scared of stressing her out. Stressing her out never ended well. She'd done her best, but I was in care because everyone thought it was better for me—including her, and including me.

Geoff didn't react to the anger—he was always good like that. Now, as an adult, sitting here on the edge of my bed and getting ready to head out into a fresh day of doing a job I love, I can calm myself. I can surround myself with a sense of security, with privacy, with protection. Back then, I was one

enormous exposed nerve. I sat there in his cubbyhole office, my hands against my belly, still shocked by the idea of there being another living creature in there. I didn't know if I saw it as a parasite, or a cool and beautiful thing I'd done by accident. Part of me wanted to imagine that I'd create my own little family, that I could love it so much that nothing else would matter—that I would never feel alone again.

Part of me thought it'd be a disaster, that I'd pass on all my own messed-up genes and I'd end up resenting us both, and she'd end up hating me.

It was when Geoff started talking about mother-and-baby placements and family support teams and doing a pre-birth assessment that reality started to take hold. I was so sick of being defined by other people back then, by their assessments and acronyms: I was a “looked after child,” I had an “independent reviewing officer,” and I was surrounded by jargon—*at risk*, *safeguarding issues*, *lack of suitable care within the parental environment*. I felt like I was nothing but a giant file, and I didn't want that for any child of mine.

I felt everything closing in on me, my whole life mapped out and swallowed up by this one mistake. I knew I could love a baby—but I also knew that my mother loved me, and in the real world, babies need more than love.

I look around at my lovely little flat, with its pretty balcony, and views across the sea, and nice schools nearby. I think about my job, and my perfectly adequate bank balance, and the sense of stability I've worked hard to build. If I'd had any of this back then, things would have been different—but, of course, I didn't, and as I haven't yet invented a time machine, there is little point imagining that alternate universe.

I close down my thoughts and, instead, open my sock

drawer. I have almost an hour before I need to be at work, and nothing calms my mind more than counting socks.

This is a new academic year. It is the year when I could be her teacher. It is the year when I need to start letting go.

HARPPER
MUSE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Debbie Johnson is an award-winning author who lives and works in Liverpool, where she divides her time between writing, caring for a small tribe of children and animals, and not doing the housework. She writes feel-good emotional women's fiction and has sold more than one million books worldwide. She is published in the USA, Canada, Australia, India, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, and the Ukraine. Her bestsellers include the Comfort Food Cafe series, *Cold Feet at Christmas*, *The A to Z of Everything*, *Maybe One Day*, and *The Moment I Met You*. Her novel *Never Kiss a Man in a Christmas Sweater* was made into a Hallmark movie.

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