

I hadn't seen Joanne and Daniel in four years. We were in the village square at Crouch End when I spotted them, and I felt a warning buzz reverberate through me. Asher was standing in front of me, his feet on my feet, layered up like a Michelin man in his coat and hat and scarf. I crouched down, put my hands under his little arms, picked him up and held him tight.

A year ago, London had been at the height of its modern prosperity, a cashed-up casino of abundance and excess. That had changed. But today, in the afternoon half-light, rugged-up Christmas carollers sang defiantly, demanding our attention away from plummeting property values and redundancy fears, to notice instead the twinkling shop fronts, the gussied-up old clock tower covered in fairy lights and the magically still air, thick and soupy with harmony.

We'd left Veronica making mince pies and Asher's supper. I'd wanted her to come with us, but now I was glad she'd stayed home. I shuffled us a few steps back in the crowd, which meant I could sneak looks at Joanne and Daniel without them being able to see me, a rubber-necker at a car crash. Daniel had his arm around Joanne's shoulder and she was resting her head in the crook of his arm. They looked, as they listened to the singers, calm and relaxed, as if nothing was wrong, as if they were completely unaware of the empty space gaping around them.

Asher was four now, I reminded myself. The formidable maternity ward at the Whittington was far away. My memories were like a photo album of another generation's moments; some faded, some missing, some still surprisingly stark and true.

We met Joanne and Daniel at our antenatal class, which was filled with upwardly-mobile types who took the paid-for NCT class instead of the free NHS class. NCT gave us from the leafy suburbs the chance to dodge those from the surrounding dives. We were, effectively, already keeping our future Eves and Olivers well away from their future Chantelles and Tyrones.

We'd not bonded, particularly, with Joanne and Daniel; they seemed quite a lot posher than us, and far more earnest about the whole pregnancy thing. At our post-session coffees, Joanne would rave about her Yoga for Pregnancy class in Highbury while I imagined a room filled with closed-eyed, large-bellied women standing stork-like on one leg. Daniel would anxiously tell us about the pain-relieving power of sacral massage, about which he'd learnt at one of their many workshops.

They'd cut themselves off from London's sharper-edged hamlets several years earlier, swapping the tedious anxiety of life in fashionably grimy Stoke Newington for sensibly shod Muswell Hill. Ostensibly, it had been a forward investment in the education of their children to be; they'd claimed a south-facing, eggshell-painted, original-featured

Victorian terrace within half a mile of Coldfall and Rhodes Avenue schools. When the time for school came however, they would lament, there still were no guarantees of a placement; it was likely they'd have to join the daily caravan of shiny SUVs and Audis up tramping into the wilds of Bounds Green – or beyond – for the best part of an hour each morning and afternoon. But after fleeing the flatlands and scrum of the inner city ('white flight', they were calling it in the press, and Daniel and Joanne resented the implication) and surrounding themselves with fellow watchers of documentaries and lovers of farmers' markets, they'd felt an easing in their throats and shoulders. Central London is for the very poor and the very rich, they'd say, and they can have it.

We, on the other hand, lived in a flat in Stroud Green behind Nandos. We sometimes called it Crouch End, usually to unfamiliar people at parties, in a kind of micro-pretension. Our entire flat was only marginally bigger than Daniel and Joanne's freshly-painted nursery. We shopped at Tesco; they had free trade Waitrose goodies delivered in an eco-van. They went to wine appreciation evenings at the local Nicolas; we specialised in the eager drinking of discounted Chilean reds. In general terms, they were compulsive over-achievers, while we were expert under-achievers.

During one antenatal class, our second of six, held in a small hot room that felt like it should be filled with side-burned, smoking businessmen, I lost the respect of Daniel, Joanne and many of the others during the compulsory watching of the dreaded 'Birth Story' video. Ours involved a Dutch couple (it's always a Dutch couple, I've since established through casual research with other fathers), a Swiss ball, a birthing pool and a considerable amount of otherworldly howling. To be fair, I had been sitting just a metre from the screen and the video was very graphic. My brain obviously couldn't cope with the sight of the poor woman's snatch expanding out of all reasonable proportion and decided instead that the most manly thing to do was to focus on the animalistic call and response of the Dutch couple: pained moan, supportive groan, pained moan, supportive groan. Repeating at a steadily increasing pace and pitch, the sounds became more and more comedic, and halfway through the crowning I had to leave the room, completely and helplessly overcome with giggles. I excused myself by banging my chest with my fist, indicating, I hoped, that I was in the midst of a coughing fit.

Once outside the confines of the room, the sounds instantly ceased to be amusing, but I went to the men's and splashed some water on my face anyway, then waited until the video had finished before I went back in, just in case.

'What the hell was that?' hissed Veronica when I took my seat beside her again, and the laughter once again threatened to spasm out of me against my will.

'Sorry.'

'Jesus.'

For the rest of the session I felt extraordinarily self-conscious, and for some reason had an unrelenting urge to clear my throat. I tried to get involved, joining in the discussions on birth plans with what I hoped was a serious and compassionate point of view, but the damage had been done; according to the faces of the group, I was just not taking this whole fatherhood thing seriously.

I pulled it together in later sessions though, managing to look on attentively while Veronica took her turn at clumsily practicing her breastfeeding holds with a doll (fat lot of use that'd been). I even got my answer right when we blokes had to name the parts of a woman's reproductive anatomy (the uterus, in my case). But the giggling, a kind of terror-based hysteria really, was only just containable during our group's mandatory hospital visit.

There are few things more intimidating than a guided tour of a labour ward. For a start, the decrepid, Dickensian exterior of the Whittington didn't inspire any kind of belief that it was a modern hospital with state-of-the-art medical facilities. Inside, overcrowded wards just made things feel even more desperate. But the delivery suite was the real kicker. The high white bed stood, surrounded by strange-looking apparatus like chattering ladies-in-waiting around an imperiously silent queen. The gas-and-air machine, which we all had a turn on, seemed to me to be ridiculously ineffective. But most terrifying of all was the forlorn little brown office chair sitting humbly in the corner, trying to stay out of the way. I was as wide-eyed and frightened as a schoolboy on his first visit to the dental clinic. We ended up in that very same suite.

Veronica had an endless labour. Contractions every six minutes for three days. 'Cervix doesn't want to open,' they'd say. 'Quite common. Try to rest.' It had been demoralising and exhausting for her, those days stuck in limbo, not giving birth but unable to sleep or eat.

At work, I'd explain proudly that my phone needed to stay on in meetings; I was expecting an important call, my wife was due to have a baby.

I remember standing on the platform at Farringdon, staring down the tunnel to make the train come quicker, wishing I had a car so I could scream through the streets of Islington, preferably with a police escort wailing in front of me, like a high-speed diplomat.

I remember the consultant checking Veronica and declaring that she was two centimetres dilated, which for both of us felt like a victory against her stubborn cervix.

Veronica, clearly buoyed by the good news, told the consultant that she'd been in labour for three days.

'Oh, you're not in labour yet, love,' the consultant had said breezily, and I never saw a more hateful look in my wife's eyes.

I remember Veronica throwing up, Lucozade and banana, onto my shirt. Her face, purple and grotesque with strain and pain, unrecognisable. Utter powerlessness. Asher slithering out. Asher not being able to breathe. Utter powerlessness. Doctors rushing in, paediatricians, talking kindly and softly to Asher as they gently pumped his lungs with oxygen. Standing behind the doctors, watching, utterly powerless. Veronica's face as the midwife stitched her up, intent on Asher, as though she could stare away the three metres between them and hold him with her eyes. The whites of the professionals' eyes slowly disappearing. Faith, then belief, then relief. Asher suckling. We'd been lucky.

When the panic subsided, the world had tilted slightly, and forever, on its axis. Love came quickly and intensely, but those first moments were even more fundamental and profound: life. The Indians say you can see god in every newborn's eyes.

When Veronica's ecstatic high had subsided and she and Asher had fallen into an exhausted and traumatised sleep, I watched Asher's arms jerking violently from his shoulders in a nightmare and wanted to cradle him. It's not so bad out here son, I whispered to him. It just takes a bit of getting used to.

I remember walking out into the corridor to call my parents, feeling calm and absolutely full of joy. The next few moments are more of a blur.

I remember Daniel walking toward me, a face from worlds ago. He had a cup of coffee in his hand. I saw him before he saw me. I said hello, eager to share my news, my joy, my pride, my awe and wonder with him, with anyone. I didn't notice his eyes at first.

'Is Joanne having the baby?' I asked; had his world changed, like mine? I couldn't wait for an answer. 'Vron's just in postnatal now – we've got a boy! She's doing well; it was amazing, actually,' I bumbled, my impotence of a few hours ago completely forgotten.

Then I looked at him properly. Red-rimmed eyes filled with a terrible emotion that I couldn't decipher. He suddenly came into sharp focus. Everything else sucked away into another part of my brain, like a dream upon waking. I reeled away from him; my body knew before me what was coming. I'd been standing far too close.

'We lost the baby.' He moved a plastic stirrer mechanically around the black coffee as he spoke. 'Joanne's still in the delivery suite. She's OK, but we lost the baby.'

We both stared downward, at the yellow bubbles collecting on the side of his cup. Below, I saw a two heavy tears splash off a square of scuffed green lino. Daniel was still.

I can't remember what I said. We did talk some more after that. I know we did, because I had to relay the details to a shocked and confused Veronica. Later, both of us told the rest of the antenatal group. Cord around the neck. Somewhere between a routine check and a day later, the baby's heart had stopped beating. Joanne and Daniel suspected something but hadn't had any idea things had gone so spectacularly wrong until they'd gotten to the hospital. The midwife had been inconsolable, crying, 'I'm sorry!' over and over at a confused, uncomprehending, blank-staring Joanne and Daniel. Joanne had to deliver the baby.

I'd not seen either of them since, though I'd thought about them a lot during Asher's first months. They'd pop into my head unexpectedly and uninvited. I'd be changing Asher's nappy, thinking something innocent, like how I really should have painted his little room before he was born like Veronica had asked me to. Then I'd remember seeing Joanne and Daniel's nursery, fully kitted out and decorated, when the girls were pregnant. Without warning, a heavy sinker would attach itself to my heart, and we'd be off, plumbing the frightening and dark depths of sorrow. I'd put both hands on Asher's tiny chest, bring my face close to his, stare into his pale blue eyes and feel his heart beating. Eventually, the love and the joy and the thankfulness would overtake the profound sadness.

Joanne had come to meet Veronica and the other antenatal girls just the once, before all the babies were born, while the group was stuck in a kind of half-pregnant, half-new mum purgatory, and there was still room for someone with her undefined status.

We sent flowers, as a group. We felt bad, as a group. We gossiped later about official inquiries and getting the press involved and blame apportioning. We couldn't talk about their pain or our dumb luck, or even what had actually happened. Eventually, we stopped talking about them altogether, and after a decent period of unreturned phone calls and emails, closed ranks. Joanne and Daniel fell off the email lists. We stopped inviting them to barbecues and coffees. No one would talk about whether it was too painful for them, or too painful for us.

But here they were, listening to Christmas carols in this world that carried on regardless of their death and birth. Enjoying a moment with an empty space beside them. I kissed Asher's cheek, and the love felt unbearable.