

## **Almost**

The Uber driver looked at Eva in dismay as she shuffled out to his car. She wondered if she should tell him that her waters had already broken. That he needn't worry about a pool of bloody discharge staining his shiny Toyota, because it had already gushed out on to the musty carpet in her apartment. But, she said nothing, and he took her overnight bag in silence and placed it gently on the back seat.

She felt a contraction rippling through her, and she stood for a moment, bent forward, clutching the roof of his car, while he waited beside her awkwardly hopping from foot to foot.

'Do you think, perhaps, an ambulance would be a better idea, Madam?' As the contraction eased, she slowly straightened up.

'No, we've plenty of time.' He looked dubiously down at her swollen belly, but he opened the passenger door and guided her into the front seat. She recoiled at the pungent scent of garlic that permeated the car, and quietly asked if he would open the windows.

'Of course, of course,' he said enthusiastically, starting the ignition. The windows rolled down and the breeze flowed across her as they drove, calming and cooling her. He gripped the wheel tightly, keeping up a melodic refrain.

'Nearly there, Madam. Not too long, Madam.' She sat beside him wide-eyed, clutching the dashboard each time her body crumpled into a contraction. As they made their way along the back streets of Eastgate, she saw only the shiny, silver elephant that hung on a short chain from the roof of the car, swinging like a pendulum every time they turned a corner.

‘It is Ganesh, Madam,’ the driver said, noticing her gaze on the figure. ‘He is a very important god in India. He symbolises good luck.’ He smiled at her as if that was the best news she would hear all day.

They pulled up outside the emergency department, and he burst from the car, dashing around to open the passenger door. He eased her from her seat, and solemnly handed her the overnight bag.

‘Madam, it has been my great pleasure to drive you on this most important occasion. I wish you the very best of luck and may Ganesh watch over you.’ Eva was already wrapped around a metal post, groaning with pain.

‘Someone, someone, please help,’ he called out, waving his arms like a swimmer drowning in the surf. He hovered near Eva until an orderly arrived with a wheelchair and then he retreated silently to his car. She eased upright as the contraction faded and saw his car in the distance, turning out of the hospital slip road and merging into the traffic. She remembered that she had forgotten to pay him.

The waiting room swelled with hollow faces. Women groaned and dozing men draped themselves across vinyl seats.

‘Someone will take you up in a few minutes. Won’t be long.’ Eva nodded in the direction of the voice, but didn’t reply. She could feel another contraction coming and was focused on the torrent of pain that was about to crash down upon her. Soon she was doubled over again, gripping the armrests of the wheelchair as her body recoiled against the war that had unfolded within her.

It didn’t seem that long ago that she perched on the toilet, waving a plastic rod beneath her as urine splashed up on to her hands, and then placed the damp piece of white plastic in the basin. It was the same colour as the porcelain and blended with it like a camouflaged lizard. She balanced on the side of the shower recess, staring

ahead at the white tiles that climbed the walls around her in furry frames of mouldy grout. Every few seconds she looked towards the sink, and eventually she raised herself up and leaned tentatively towards it. She picked up the damp test rod in her hands, wanting to look, but hesitating. Eva wasn't even sure what she wanted the results to be.

Finally, she turned it over, and the plus sign beamed up at her as if it were backlit. *That's a positive*, she thought. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* She stood there in silence as a wave of terror and elation washed over her. Outside, the traffic hummed, and she thought how strange it was that all these people were heading to work or home or to the gym, oblivious to the seismic shift that was happening here. She wanted to tell someone, anyone, but she couldn't think of a single person who would care. Definitely not the Scottish carpenter, who she had spent a few weeks with before he got on the Greyhound bus and scurried north. And not her parents, who had demanded that she leave home like a lodger who refused to pay the rent.

Over time, her belly and her breasts swelled like leavened bread. Sometimes he slammed against her with karate kicks, and other times he danced like a disco king, spinning and leaping across his watery dance floor. When he was still, she rested her hand on her stomach, waiting for him to wake up and play. She lay in bed in the early morning and sang folk tunes to him until her neighbour bashed on the wall and yelled, *Shut the fuck up!*

Someone wheeled her down a long, shiny corridor to the delivery room, and Eva watched the multi-coloured carpet tiles roll away beneath her. Firm hands helped her out of the chair and on to the floor. The midwife didn't demand answers from Eva, and Eva had none to give. She breathed when she could, and at other times she gritted her teeth and sank to the bottom of a dark and stormy ocean. She heard

grunting and moaning, and she realised that the voice was her own. Staff came and went, and distant words reassured and encouraged her. Firm arms forced her to take sips of water, guiding the straw between her parched lips, and then gently pulling it away.

Hours went by and still she laboured, sweat pouring down her back. She measured time only by the brief moments of respite between contractions. Someone loomed over her, and words tumbled down on her like shards of glass.

‘Eva, I’m Doctor Barton. We’re taking you up to theatre. Everything’s going to be fine.’

*Everything’s going to be fine.*

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Someone patted Eva’s arm for a moment, and she shuddered involuntarily at the touch.

‘Hey, Eva. I’m Sylvie. I’m looking after you this morning. Can I get you anything?’ she asked in a gentle voice. Eva shook her head, her face to the wall. The midwife’s voice reminded Eva of her mother when she was young, trying to soothe her into sleep. The words came slowly, deliberately, as though each one was important. Eva felt firm hands pulling up the cotton blanket and tucking in the crisp sheets. Sylvie placed her hand on Eva’s shoulder, and held it there while she straightened up her pillow. She moved noiselessly across to the window, and pulled up the blind, letting in a sharp, jolt of light, which streamed in and across the foot of her bed.

‘I’m sorry, love, but I need to do some obs. It won’t take long.’ She wheeled a trolley across to the bed and gently lifted Eva’s arm, wrapping a black sleeve around her upper arm and slowly pumping it full of air until it was tight.

‘Is there really nobody we can call? Family? A friend?’ Eva closed her eyes and moved closer to the wall. ‘What’s your living situation, hon? Will anyone be with you when you get home?’

Eva thought of her faded flat with its blinds and peeling paint. Her living room doubled as her bedroom, and a sagging couch and chairs draped in precarious towers of clothing jostled for position. The walls were so thin that sometimes, early in the dusky morning when the flat next door reverberated with the sounds of drunken lust, she almost felt like she was having sex with her neighbour.

At every rental inspection, she received a stern reminder to improve her cleaning standards. The agent strutted from room to room making notes on his iPad and taking photos of the shower recess and the dust-covered exhaust fan. His polyester suit didn’t quite make it to his pale, thin ankles. He opened wardrobes, which generally exploded with handbags and shoes and shopping bags, and ran his finger along the window frame, leaving a white stripe in the black dust.

‘This doesn’t look good, Eva. Remember what I told you last time?’

‘Yep. I know. But this is a shit-bucket of an apartment anyway, and a bit of dusting and bleach is not going to change that.’

‘But you need to make an effort. I have to report this. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t.’

‘Whatever. I don’t really care.’

‘Eva, you need to take this seriously. Apartments at this end of the market are in hot demand right now. We could easily rent it out to someone else.’ She cringed at the word, *hot*. She waited for him to say that it was *well appointed* or *cozy*.

‘What, you mean crap apartments at the bottom end of the market? Of course they are, because nobody can afford anything better. I wouldn’t be living here, buddy,

if I had other options.’ They both looked around at the peeling paint and patched carpet, which had once been sage green, but was now dark and dank and threadbare in patches.

The kitchen was tucked off to the side of the living room. Oatmeal-coloured cabinets lined the wall, the doors all hanging at slightly different angles, above a faded, laminate bench top. She watched him furiously tapping on his iPad.

‘Give me a break, Dean. It is Dean isn’t it? I’m working my balls off just to get by, and I really don’t see how some dust and mould decreases the value of this place.’

‘Well, why don’t you leave it to the professionals to make that decision. This is what I’m paid to do, babe.’

‘I’m not your babe, Dean. Never have been. Never will be.’ He finished his inspection in silence, furiously tapping away on his screen. She hadn’t been kicked out, so clearly Dean hadn’t been too critical in his report. Maybe he wasn’t a complete jerk.

Eva felt a cold, hard object pressing into her ear and a sharp beep.

‘All good,’ Sylvie said, a little too brightly. She patted Eva on the shoulder and then left with soundless footsteps. Eva didn’t know what Sylvie looked like, but she imagined someone middle-aged, with generous hips and thick calves. She could picture her, calmly walking away in her sensible shoes, tucking her pen neatly into her pocket. Eva wondered when she would be back. She had so many questions, but she seemed to have lost her voice along with all that blood.

‘We’re so sorry,’ someone had said. ‘We did everything we could.’ They had asked if she would like to hold him and she shook her head, recoiling from the limp bundle they offered her.

Eva wanted to grab Sylvie by the shoulders and shout, *What the hell went wrong?* Her throat was raw, and she ached in distant parts of her body. She took a sugary sip of a juice-box and slid it back on to her bedside cupboard. There was a murmured conversation in the hallway outside her room and muffled groans of a woman in the sticky vortex of labour. It was quiet in her room apart from the click-click of an infusion pump. She curled up like a possum in the white hospital bed, ragged with an exhaustion she had never known.

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Eva doesn't know where she is headed or why. She just needs to be out of the dank apartment. The petrol fumes from passing traffic remind her of something bigger than herself, and she is comforted by the uniformity. Each street looks like the one before, with faded letterboxes, peeling paint and straggling gardens that are more dirt than plant. Cars and buses roar down Bligh Street, and pedestrians bustle in either direction, heads down, eyes on the cracked, grey pavement. She ambles along the footpath, her hands wrapped firmly around the pram handle, leaning forward, as though she is trying to shield it from something. Every few steps she stops to make a gentle cooing sound and tuck in the muslin wrap.

She waits at the intersection for the lights to change, one hand on her hip, the other gently rocking the pram back and forth. A woman shuffles up beside her at the traffic lights and tries to catch Eva's eye. Her grey hair is bundled into a loose bun, but long strands have fallen loose and they quiver in the wind like wild dandelions.

'Your first is it, love?' she asks, shuffling closer. 'It's hard work isn't it? Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Best thing I ever did, but jeez it is hard.' Her words bounce away in the breeze.

Eva turns her pale face towards the woman, but her eyes flutter away to the moving cars, the faded façades of old buildings and a swarm of schoolgirls across the street. The girls have rolled over the bands of their navy skirts so that they barely cover their knickers, their legs long and tanned like a forest of saplings. They wrap their arms around each other, shrieking and giggling and scuffing their black school shoes on the pavement.

The lights change, and a stream of people explode across the street, but Eva remains where she is. She stands, as if rooted to the ground, her arms rocking the pram wildly as it bounces back and forth on the uneven paving.

The woman is still beside her.

‘Are you okay, hon?’ she says, her face looming large in front of Eva. Eva’s gaze brushes over her creased and faded skin before skimming away. She wants to say something. She’d like to reassure the woman that everything is fine, that she’s just another mother out for a walk with her baby, but the words don’t come.

‘May I?’ the woman says, reaching for the pram. Eva sees the woman lunge forward. She wants to block her, but her feet are concrete weights, and she watches helplessly as a stranger’s hands slip like silk beneath the pram’s cover. The muslin wrap slides away. Eva feels as if she has been stripped naked. That she is standing completely exposed in the busy street. They look in silence into the pram.

A delicate, shiny doll nestles like a pearl in an oyster shell. It has pouting lips, rosy cheeks and sky-blue eyes, framed by long, looping lashes, which are snapped open in a permanent expression of wonder.

It looks like a baby. Almost.