

Fragments of

hope



David and Valerie have lived in Brussels together for five years. Having made the decision to have a child, they could not have begun to foresee the journey that they were about to embark upon. David recalls the beginning of this remarkable story with a series of extracts from his book on modern fatherhood.

Surely, having a baby could never be described as easy. Indeed, for many, the process of trying to have a child, particularly in the face of medical complications, can be deeply traumatic and leave long-lasting emotional scars. Unlike many European countries, however, IVF is made freely available by the Belgian state, giving hope to thousands of couples each year (see pages 24 and 25). But what is the human and emotional cost associated with this miracle of modern science?

know, but I follow the instructions and go over the schedule in my head as if I am following a simple cake recipe. Blood tests, hormonal stimulation, pick up, date of transfer... I sometimes listen to myself in conversation and wonder how I learned the strange language of the 'club' of which I have become a life-long member. Even the routine of giving sperm becomes commonplace and I get used to passing by queues of men with my empty pot and seeing, from their knowing look, that they too are about to perform this most unmentionable of acts behind closed doors.

EPISODE 1.

Sitting in front of the doctor, I am surprised how normal this all feels. I am about to become an actor in one of the most remarkable scientific developments of the 20th century and I don't feel anything. Perhaps it is because our conversation is not in my mother tongue, or that I am just so tired by the emotional roller-coaster of recent months. I don't

And there is nothing like having to perform this act of manhood to catapult you straight into the existential present. This is no time for reassuring words about trying later when you are less stressed. No, this is a now-or-never moment and perhaps the one time when a woman will not settle for anything less. Everyone is waiting. The men outside, the nurse in the lab. My Love is waiting and depending entirely upon me. I literally hold her future in my hands ...

in the future

EPISODE 2.

Waiting is something I have never been very good at, but we seem to have been doing a lot of it recently. I have run out of words and, in my painful efforts to give reassurance, have started saying stupid things like “I am sure it will be okay”, “We just need to give it time”, “Don’t give up and keep on hoping”.

Looking back I am ashamed, but I simply did not know what to say. I just wanted to fill the silence that hung like a mist over every aspect of our lives.

Normal life is on hold right now and, even if things go well, I know that the only thing we have to look forward to is graduation to another *salle d’attente*: two more long weeks of silence that tests the nerve of even the most hopeful club members as, in each and every moment, there are conflicting signs of hope and despair.

When the phone call comes and we suffer the indignity of being told by a disinterested doctor that the dream is over, there is a strange feeling of relief. At least the waiting is over and hope has a chance to rest its quickly diminishing voice. I am aware, however, that the silence between My Love and I has deepened and am beginning to wonder if we have stumbled upon a path on which there is no return.

EPISODE 3.

Each month is a like a new dawn. I wake up early and feel the first rays of sunlight filling the room. There is so much promise, and hope comes more easily to my mind. But then the clouds begin to return, anxiety creeps in like a shadow, and I am again confronted by the eternal ‘now’. There is still no sign that this time it will work; nothing to hold on to except the memories of previous disappointment. Even the dream-factories seem unable to take us away from our predicament and fuel the pain of our sense of loss.

Ours is the silent scream of thousands of couples who have learned to live their lives according to the menstrual calendar. This feels strange – it is almost as if I know too much. There is no more mystery, no more magic – only dates, tests, and temperature

records. The bedroom has become a shrine to modern medicine and I have even learned to participate in its sacred acts.

The first time I practised on an orange, which was easy enough. But no matter how hard I try, I cannot help feeling that, by injecting the one I love, I am doing more harm than good. Each time I pierce her skin and slowly release the hormones into her body, I feel her pain and wish that somehow I could share her humiliation. Her body is no longer her own. She can no longer see it as something beautiful, sensual or innately creative. Gone are any romantic notions of providing a nest for her future offspring. When she looks in the mirror, I can see in her eyes that all she sees is an artificially created egg farm.





EPISODE 4.

The predicament of knowing too much is hard to avoid in an age of information overload. I often look back and wonder whether my parents and grandparents were more content than I am now. Life was different then. But I have eaten from the tree of knowledge and now this bitter-sweet fruit begins to eat me up inside.

More than anything else, the internet is surely to be blamed for our predicament. This is how it works:

- We feel anxious and alone.
- We look for information on the internet that will calm our fear.
- We rarely find information that is directly relevant to our original question.
- We do, however, find other information that causes us to worry even more.
- We therefore turn off the computer feeling more anxious and more alone.

And so the cycle of knowledge continues. Even though we know that this is how it works, we can't stop ourselves. The doctors are unavailable, our friends don't really understand, and we have no more words of reassurance to give one another, so there is nowhere else to turn. We keep looking for that one, magical, all-illuminating website that feels our pain, understands our situation and points us, step-by-step, towards our chosen future. *If anyone knows the url of this site, please let me know as soon as possible.*



EPISODE 5.

When you close your eyes and rehearse the moment in your head, you imagine all manner of times, places and emotions. But I never once imagined standing on the forecourt of a motorway petrol station, lashed by wind and rain, hardly able to hear the broken English of the woman at the other end of the telephone, as motorists carried on regardless, oblivious of the existential moment that was about to force itself upon us.

As I returned to the car, I saw the tears of despair had already begun to fall. "Bitch", I shouted, only this time I wasn't referring to a disinterested nurse. My Love was the subject of my abuse. I was angry. Angry that she had managed to rid my heart of hope, just when hope was already two weeks old. How dare she break my spirit and tempt me across the Rubicon of despair after all these months? It felt like renouncing my faith just prior to meeting my Maker or losing a cup final in the last minute of extra time.

But she saw the smile inside me, the beating of my heart that signalled a different song. This time things were different.



EPISODE 6.

As the moment flows into the river of my memory, I find myself returning to it over and over again. The treacherous journey towards new life has begun and deep down I understand that the shaft of light breaking through the clouds will be the only thing to guide us through the next few weeks. It was, of course, an ordinary moment with no weight of human history attached to it. But still I want to mark it, to stake my claim upon it and make it my own. So I decide to make a phone call.

I call a trusted friend and share the news. The result, however, is not what I expect. As I recount the chain of events, I am deafened by the echoes of ordinariness that seem to resound with every word I say. Hanging up, I realise that no single person will ever be able to stand where I am standing right now. No one will understand, because this is our moment. Only my Love and I will ever remember the unique constellation of Truth that shone upon a deserted motorway petrol station somewhere between our town and the North Sea. There were no shepherds, no herald of angels, and no wise men to speak of, but we had received our gift and this was our stable.

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