



# 1

Five days before my birth, my mother heaved her swollen flesh through the far too narrow doorway into a room which stretched and strained to contain the bulk of her. She was stretched tight to bursting with the imminence of my arrival into the world. She sat on a tiny bentwood chair that creaked and groaned in protest. I rested between the chair and the table, stretching out my angry red fists, kicking and scrambling and turning fast enough to cause my mother to flinch and press me back into her body. I have always been restless.

The woman was exactly as she should be; oldish and bentish and sharp with her one fast eye. The other eye slid slowly around in her head, trying to follow conversation, never quite focusing on my mother's face. My mother nodded and stroked my outstretched foot, pleased with the hunch and the lazy eye, breathing in an air of the theatrical as if it were fine incense.

The room itself smelt damp and dank with decay, the true perfume of magic. A hint of fetid armpit odour darted out whenever the woman raised her arms. She did this so frequently that my mother was forced to hold her wrist to her nose, indulging in the scent of cheap perfume.

'Hah!' The old woman flapped her arms stretching out her five stumpy fingers towards me, touching the tight belly-drum with its bumps and bulges. Peeling back my mother's cotton shirt and tracing the silver snail trails across her skin.

'Five,' said the woman, counting, 'Five tears to your tummy, Mother, five stretches in your flesh.'

She sat with a great gasp and a tiny trumpet of wind that added itself instantly to the blend of magic aromas. Her belly was almost as large as my mother's and the table strained between the two of them, causing me to turn and kick and stir in my restless amniotic fluids.

She spread five finger slugs open on the table and closed her eyelids. The lazy eye rolled aimlessly beneath the skin.

'Five will be important to this child. Tell him so. Five fingers on each hand, five toes a foot. Lucky child. Five tears to your flesh, five lines to your palm. Five days you will bleed when he isn't inside you anymore. Every five seconds a new thought will enter his head. Too many thoughts all knocking against each other. Every five years he will be renewed. Too quick. He is a quick one, your son, too quick to arrive and just as itchy to leave again.'

I quick-kicked and made my mother jump. I was leaning too far forward in her skin. My ear was outlined, flesh like rubber stretching for me to hear. My mother pressed me back, her hand muffled the world outside, her breath lulled me back into my primal sleep.

There was some transaction that I did not hear. I slept for five minutes or five hours or five days. More of her otherworldly wisdom was exchanged for my mother's money.

Five days after this I was born on the lounge room floor. The angry red of my arrival slopped over the edge of the plastic bags my father had hurriedly laid down to spare the carpet. The sound of an approaching ambulance rivalled my own shrill wailing. My sister Diana provided a sobbing base note to the melody. She had been banished to her bedroom (soon to be ours) in the panic of the moment.



2

This is my earliest memory. I lie on the crisp blue sheets that smell bitter and acrid like the belly of a machine and I remember this. It is a dark memory, vivid in its womb blindness.

'What is your earliest memory?' the doctor will ask me and I will lay it on the laminex between us without hesitation. A memory magician.

'How do you know?' he will say. It is always a 'he' in a corporation uniform and a cold smile. 'Surely you can't remember events that happened before you were born. Surely memory is a switch that is flicked by the first dazzling glare of the sun.'

But I was born in the dark in the middle of the night, and the transition was more gentle than that. And so I remember.

I would like to return to the hostel where it is dark and damp and there is no breath of machinery.

They are short of beds here and they want me gone almost as much as I want to be gone. I must give them a story that is easy to believe. A story is a key to my release.



3

I will tell them about my five fairy-godparents. No, it is not some kind of elaborate delusion. It is a true story that I can remember from when I was five days old. An aquatic creature, still pruned and patchy, smelling of milk and milky excrement and vomituous lactic bile crusting my lips in a white film.

An attractive little creature. My sister prods and pokes me when my parents are not watching.

'Fish,' she spits, and I burp a pale bubble at her.

It is the morning of my naming. A babble of friends and relatives spill out of the kitchen, staining the carpet with wine and dip and throwaway words that hide amongst the pile smelling of nicotine and deceit.

My sister Diana points to the particular carpet stain that is her only souvenir of my birth night. She tugs an auntie by the hem of her skirt and points to it.

'Mummy's blood. Mummy's blood.' It is her favourite addition to the household, this carpet stain certainly more interesting than the lump of squalling flesh that I am.

The aunt is not convinced.

'Red wine, dear.'

She is one of those nasty head-patting aunts with thick hands that always smell sharply of hotel-quality soap. She spills her own drink, almost as if to prove the origin of the stain.

Diana watches the wine soak into the tiny loops of wool. The colours are far from matched. The bloodstain is five-days-old and browner than fresh wine. Diana scratches at the old stain, thick and hard and an angry dark in comparison.

Someone taps a glass. My sister strains to see past veiny legs and long skirts.

‘We are all gathered together today to welcome our little boy into the world.’

It is our father’s voice, thick with cigar smoke and alcohol. My sister and I recognise it instantly. She and I both strain across the chaos of bodies that separates us from him. I wail for him, for his touch and attention. Diana is almost three and therefore she restrains herself, setting her lips in a tight white line, shouldering her way through the sweaty stockings until she has hold of her favorite green corduroy trouser legs.

She smiles because she is almost three and I am still very much a cry baby at only five-days-old.

‘Today is a very special day,’ says our father, wrestling for balance with my sister swaying and bobbing and pulling at his leg, shouting to be heard above my sobbing.

‘With you as our witnesses, we will name our baby and wish him love and prosperity.’

There is a general cheer and loud applause. More wine is spilled on the carpet, small whispers sizzling like sparklers. My father holds out his palms and the crowd becomes silent. I can see my sister mimicking the gesture from between the bars of what must have been my crib, although it is more like a cage in my memory. Her miniature gesturing silences me. The magic of semaphore. I perform a little vomit in appreciation.

‘We are not practising Christians,’ continues my father, ‘but Christianity has some very nice ideas, we have decided to borrow some Christian concepts, to reclaim them, to make them our own.’

Diana and I stare up at the man admiringly.

‘Godparents are such a nice idea, don’t you think. Spiritual guides for our son’s great adventure through life. Not ‘God’ parents in the ‘God’ sense, but more like fairy-godparents, in a kind of a Cinderella sense. And not only one fairy godmother, but five uncle and aunty fairy-godparents.’

What a grand idea. What a truly once-upon-a-time happily-ever-after kind of an idea.

We are both impressed for a very long moment until Diana is jolted back into reality by her heightened sense of jealousy.

‘Daddy!’ She tugs and prods until she has gained his attention.

Glowing with a paternal warmth he bends to listen to her tiny whisper. His glow dulls a little, and a stormy line appears in the flesh of his brow.

I am close enough to hear him whisper, ‘Later, dear,’ in his firmest whispery voice. Diana, however, will not be whispered away that easily; she tugs and prods harder, and her face turns an angry shade of red. Her bottom lip quivers. Our father does what he always does in moments of extreme discomfort. He turns to my mother who has been sitting quietly on a high stool behind him.

My tantrumming sister is dragged from the room, banished for the second time in five days. It is too late, of course, everyone present has heard her wailing, ‘I want a fairy-godmother too’ quite clearly recognisable between her fitful breaths. The inequity has been noted by all.

At the end of the tale I am granted five fairy godparents on the day I turn five-days-old and my sister, poor Diana, has none at all.



4

This is almost my earliest memory.

‘No,’ I will lie to the doctor, ‘I can’t remember anything before that. I have been carrying the guilt of the five fairy-godparents memory all my life. It is the weight of guilt that drives me to all manner of self-deprecating delusions. Yes, of course I will run home immediately and apologise to my sister. I will point my finger at my father and transfer some of this terrible burden onto his broad and manly shoulders. I will weep into a pillow and make loud noises on percussive instruments and attend the various support groups and workshops available to me through the generous public health system.

‘Reborn, I will re-enter the world, a new man, or the same man rediscovered, or whatever.’

The doctor will beam and hug me and the nurses will hand out lamingtons at morning tea in celebration of my recovery. The other patients will stare at me blankly or shake my hand or resent me for my skilful manipulation of the system.



5

Five years will pass. I will become an exceptionally well-adjusted individual. Five years of percussive therapy is enough to transform even the most hardened lunatic.

I will be married. It is hard to foresee the shape and the face of my wife, but I know she will be beautiful by the shimmering blue aura I see around her, and I guess that she will be clever because of the endless admiration I have for her.

We will have five children of indeterminate gender and IQ. Each one will be gifted in their own special way. An accountant, a painter, a woodturner, a musician, and a fortuneteller. I believe we will all live happily ever after, except for the afternoon when the Labrador retriever is hit by a car. We will band together as a family and this tragedy will strengthen us.

When our children are grown they will drift off into their successful adult lives. My wife and I will sink into quiet elderly bliss. It will be mostly sunny, but the summers never as scalding or as humid as the days when I used to be insane. It will be a mild life, but a good one, and at the end of it my wife and I will die in our sleep at the same moment, shedding our earthly skins and wandering into the ether.

And that's all, really. Except for a postscript about the long and fruitful lives of our five children.

No, I don't suppose there is anything else to add.

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