

# Cambridge

JENNY. 10 JUNE 1988

*'Here's looking at you, babe!'*

A folded piece of A4, a lecture handout from four years ago, flutters to the floor. And I, leaning down to retrieve it, am overtaken by all the gnawing regret of an old love affair I'd intended Cambridge would help me forget.

The cartoon occupies the bottom third of the page. It's drawn in ball pen, and it's ridiculous: under a dinner table, a pair of bony male knees (below a kilt), equipped with human eyes, regard a pair of shapely female legs, ending in elegant feet in high heeled shoes. Max always liked to do daft things, even as he was also absorbing the scientific information. I can see it now: him passing me the drawing while maintaining that serious expression and looking straight ahead at the slide the lecturer had on the screen.

The lecture, early January 1984, was by one of my father's contacts from Caltech. It was held in London, and I took Max as my guest.

The subject was *Hox* genes, a family of 'super genes', each member of which recruits its own unique set of 'worker' genes. These *Hox* master switches, thrown at their appropriate points during development, help sculpt the complex shapes of a mature animal from a simple ball of cells. The lecturer was talking about Pax-6—the 'super gene' that coordinates the making of an eye—and an experiment where the mouse version of Pax-6 was artificially inserted into a fruit fly. Remarkably, extra eyes are produced all over the fruit fly, on its body, wings and antennae, and these are not mouse eyes, but compound insect eyes; the mouse Pax-6 had hijacked the fruit fly's own worker genes. I've since seen pictures. I've seen the real thing.

And now, I've just finished my final exams and I'm clearing up my undergraduate textbooks and stuffing two weeks' dirty washing into a bag for the launderette, having a peaceful, relaxing day—until I see that reminder.

Disturbed by the strength of my reaction, breathlessness, heart thumping, anger rising, I can't stay here. Grabbing what books I've sorted, and the washing, I set out. Taking with me Dad's present for my twenty-first

last year, a Sony CCD-v90 camcorder. Will try to capture Cambridge, like sunshine in a bottle!

At the market, my eye to the viewfinder, is that Daze? My stepsister? Browsing the market stalls? Small and wiry, so unlike me and Hat, great galloping blondes! Daze should be thousands of miles away in Colombia! Why's she here? Lowering the camera, moving closer, I tap her on the shoulder.

'Hey—Daisy! You're back: was it amazing? Not here just to visit me, are you?'

'Four-Eyes—gosh, yeah I was gonna come by your place later ...'

'Nearly gone already,' I say, ignoring her use of my insulting school nickname, indicating my bag, and noticing something new about Daze. An aggressive, Celtic-style, red and gold dragon undulates over the bump under her black T-shirt. Her straight, black, well-worn jeans must be fastened under that with a whopping great pin. 'Undergraduate stuff,' I say anyway, 'for sale to the next generation. So, was Colombia—'

She smiles her distinct, crooked smile. 'Yeah, it was. Gold Museum: you should see it. Ancient, weird, amazing stuff.' I'm amazed by her belly. 'So what?' Daze says.

'You're preppers: when did that happen?'

Daze glances downwards. 'So I am,' she says, like she'd never noticed the bulge before.

'And?' I say. I can't simply rudely ask, *Who's the father?* Or even, *Are you in a relationship?*

Daze tries to move on.

I reach for her: a person can't just get pregnant and have a baby without telling their family anything.

'Hang on,' I say, hand on her shoulder. 'Nobody knew did they? At home?'

'Jen, you look tired.' Daisy picks my hand off herself. 'Go and sleep off your exams. And when do you stop being the big sister to everyone?' She turns away, picks up an orange.

'I just ...' I say, standing between her and the stall.

'Just? Just nothing: my body, my baby, huh?' Her fingers pump the orange like she wants to squeeze it then and there.

'Odd you didn't tell anyone and don't want to talk about it.'

Her eyes blaze: 'Odd that you should care so much.'

And stressed, sleep-deprived, and this morning hung-over, after Finals, besides being upset by that concrete reminder of Max, I go further. She's really riled me. 'Daze, you are being mysterious, you know. You've been working at a fertility clinic. Now you're pregnant.'

'Give it a rest, Jen,' she says, flinging the orange back onto the pile on the fruit stall. 'I was going to ask you to film the birth but ...'

'I don't mean to imply anything. I'm just concerned for you.'

'No need, I've got my own friends. Even discovered a long lost cousin out there. Lost when Mum ran off. She didn't just deprive me of a mum, she took away a whole half of my family!'

'So Daze, he's not—'

'Jen, did I say a male cousin?'

'Good, okay: not that wise for cousins.' She gives me a look: I deserve it. 'Daze, come over if you like, we'll have a coffee—or a herbal tea—or something?'

'You're such a lady bountiful,' she says. 'Like Mum. Like *your* mum.'

So then, I totally lose it: 'Mum took you in and looked after you and brought you up! Is that the thanks she gets?' Both of us forget about the shoppers and the browsers at the stripy-awned stalls as I shout, 'The thanks I get for being a sister to the new girl on the block?'

'You fucking loved doing it, didn't you?' Daze yells. 'You fucking enjoyed doing your caring act.'

It's not a caring act: it's genuine. But Daze is one of the few people I know who, when you try to be nice to her, bites your head off.

And now, the promising day's turned chilly. I am so ashamed. I walk home with the words we'd flung at each other ringing in my ears. The fight was everything bad. Immature. Degrading. I'm a Cambridge graduate (almost), I'm just twenty-two, I'm about to launch myself on the scientific world and hope to do research, but I screamed like a fishwife at my stepsister.

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Later, I'm eating supper alone—tinned tomato soup, housemates both out—when my father turns up.

'Jenny,' he grins when I open the front door, 'last days in Cambridge? But you'll be back, won't you? Can I take you to the best restaurant this side of the border?'

'Which border?' I ask.

'Any border. County boundary, anyway.'

'I've just downed most of a tin of cream of tomato.'

'Aw, baby, and alone? I've brought you something. Very exciting. Bring a friend.' And he hands me tickets for his latest venture: an academic forum, *Towards a Baby for Every Infertile Couple?*

'Tomorrow?'

'Yeah—you busy?'

'Not really ...'

'Come then—things to learn, people to meet.'

'Dad, did you know Daze is pregnant?'

He hardly misses a beat. 'Well I'll be—' he says. 'Daisy.' Laughing, he adds, 'Does it suit her?'

'Be serious. I don't think Des or Mum know. Did she—did she have anyone? In Colombia?'

'She ran around with one of the technicians a bit: he was keen on animal rights. English. Everyone else there is American or local.'

'So maybe?'

Dad shrugs. 'Maybe,' he says.

MAX. CAMBRIDGE, 10 JUNE 1988

Maybe sharing a house with a genetic researcher is not the wisest move I've made. But I needed short-term accommodation. And there was the advert on the med student bulletin board: *House share, large airy room available March-September. Contact Wil du Plessis.*

Sometimes, I feel as much a refugee as Wil. South African politics drove Wil here: his skills as a researcher and teacher in the expanding biotech area are keeping him here. And back in Cambridge after four years, I am so relieved to be escaping First Truly Reformed Presbyterian, and family ties. Newcastle had no places for prospective GPs to take the necessary paediatric rotation.

But Wil turns out to be teaching Jenny Guthrie—with the big specs and strawberry blond hair! Do I or do I not want to make contact again? She's not only sweet, and amusing, she's a sharp inquisitive mind. She was a perfect foil for Dad's views on science, religion, and women. Jenny represents the evil which lurks within all three. Together we once attended a lecture on the newly discovered Hox genes.

Forget that: I'm wrestling with a reply to a letter from my Uncle Euan in Hexham, coffee and a cigarette as aids to this. The front door bangs and Wil appears, making appropriate remarks about the willing and conscious destruction of my cells.

I get up, stretching. 'Aye, and my Uncle Euan expects a good Christian guy to join him in his practice once I'm qualified. As my father says, "*if you havena' a Call then medicine's a grand second-best*".'

'How about this?' Wil slaps a flyer down on the kitchen table. The blurb describes a day forum on fertility, open to post-doc research students and others in the field, at the prestigious Drey Clinic. Medical Director Dr John Guthrie will speak about new developments in this rapidly expanding biotech area.

If I were to attend this day-long academic meeting, would Jenny be there?

Wil reaches into the fridge, and brings out two cans of lager. He pulls the ring on one and hands me the other.

'Guthrie's rumoured to be into cloning: in certain quarters, people are concerned. We—the academic geneticists and embryologists—should know more about what is being done on our doorstep. Even you generalists should.'

'I'm concerned we've an empty fridge tonight. Why's it always me who buys the provisions, man?'

'Family eldest: exaggerated sense of responsibility for others. Shall I buy the take-away?'

I chuck my empty ciggie pack at him, and tell him I have an older sister. He says, 'So introduce me sometime. And scratch that itch.'

'What itch?'

'Did you not tell me you used to date Miss Guthrie? I discern there's a remaining interest—or do I?'

How far does Jenny go along with her father? Do I want to meet her again? Last chance, before she graduates and moves on.

JENNY. SATURDAY 11 JUNE: THE DREY CLINIC, CAMBRIDGE

In my four years at University here, I've learned that impressive as I thought he was, my father—dynamic practitioner and researcher at a privately funded clinic—is regarded by the brotherhood of the academic community with a slightly jaundiced eye. Since Carter, American Presidents have been less keen on some kinds of scientific investigations. So after years across the pond, Dad returned to England, financed by some huge biotech organisation who appointed him Medical Director of their labs and attached clinic. Where? Down the road from where I was studying!

I'd not connected him with Daze until she mentioned her plans for after graduation. A few months admin working for my Dad. At a clinic in an out-of-the-way South American country where he's giving some of his time to an experimental programme. It really was weird: why'd she want to go there?

The Drey clinic has its own lecture theatre for conferences and symposiums, the auditorium—windowless, air-conditioned, fluorescently illuminated by concealed lights—slopes downwards to the usual long desk, podium and blackboard.

And it's filling up. Today, the university scientific establishment's jumped at the chance to view and critique Dad's private setup. Dad sent me three complimentary invites: I'm here with my housemates. Laura, who's writing a thesis on Immortality. And Maeve, a just-finished Nat Sci like me. Maeve's a real eye-opener. My first week in Cambridge, October, 1984, this Irish girl knocked on my door, smiling, 'I'm College Rep for the Christian Union and I'm here to invite you to our Freshers' Squash.'

'No, thank you. I'm not religious.'

A few weeks later, in lonely first-year mode, I went to M and S, to buy a nightshirt. Retail therapy. I learned it at Mum's knee when Dad left: it remains her, and my, medicine of choice.

There's Maeve by the racks of glam knickers!

'Sure it's for my bottom drawer, Jenny!' Nudging me and grinning. 'Sure you imagined being a believer would mean I wear white cotton cross-your-heart bras and full briefs? When the work gets me down I come away to add to my outrageous underwear collection. Wouldn't