

Seven Degrees Hotter

Annie wants another baby. Lottie, her daughter, is such a happy, easy child, and so desperate for a sibling, it seems churlish to put it off any longer. But there's a snag: Annie doesn't want a boy, not really. It's not a pathological thing, she doesn't *hate* boys or even dislike them. But girls are somehow better—added value.

She finds something on the Internet: thebabyyouwant.com—a gender-planning system based on lunar cycles and ancient Chinese wisdom. She races through the explanation and decides it looks quite convincing, scientific even, so she taps in her personal details and credit card number and presses 'send'. Within seconds, a grid downloads on her screen; a patchwork of blue and pink with the odd square in yellow—her personal conception plan.

Thinking about the chart gives her a thrill laced with guilt. She doesn't speak about it with Seb. When the issue of a second child is raised, he insists the decision should be hers. He says he can see both pros and cons. He says life has given him so much already that he dare not ask for more, though one extra baby would be welcome. Sweet and noncommittal as ever.

But she knows the frivolity of the chart would bother him, so she tucks it under a stack of stationery in her desk drawer and only consults it when she has to—once a month, at the start of her fertile days. Best of all, it's easy to follow: on the days that say *boy*, she simply shrugs poor old Seb off. And Seb accepts this with his usual good grace: experience has taught him that a woman's desire fluctuates according to its own mysterious rhythms.

With a glow of certainty that her life is unfolding as intended, Annie turns her mind to maternity wear and names ending in the letter 'a'. As the lunar cycles roll by, however, and there's still no baby, she grows lax in her consultations with the chart's coloured grid until finally, in February, they have sex on one of those rare yellow days when the chart won't commit. *Boy or girl* it proclaims on the 6th.
Surprise!

As the new life blooms within her, her dice with fate starts to feel right. It's bad to cheat biology, she can see that now. She begins to consider the possibility that boys may be special too, in their own way. Before long, there are days when she can barely remember where it had come from, that petulant yearning for another girl.

At five months, her belly forms a gentle, graceful arc. They make their way to the hospital for the gender scan, listed in her pregnancy manual as the Structural Scan because strictly speaking, gender is irrelevant—no mother cares what she's carrying, *so long as it's healthy*. Annie wears mascara and a skirt for the occasion, and as the radiologist zooms up and down the foetus' body, counting digits and checking organs, it takes great effort not to fidget.

The radiologist heads south.

'Now Mum, are you sure you want to know?'

'I think so.' Annie giggles.

The radiologist glances up, unsmiling.

'So is that a yes or no, Mum?'

Annie rolls her eyes at Seb. *What's with the Mum?* Has she really been transformed by pregnancy into some kind of universal incubator?

She says: 'Um—it's a yes!'

'Right then.'

The radiologist prods Annie's stomach with her wand.

'There they are, the buttock cheeks, can you see? Now are you sure you want to do this? Okay then... and here, between the cheeks, we should be able to see either labia or scrotum. Move that leg precious one... and... ah, there it is, the scrotal sac. Congratulations Mum, you're having a boy!'

'Oh!' says Annie. 'Are you sure? Please check again. Might it be labia?'

The radiologist pauses in her work and looks at Annie, a hardness in her eyes.

'Scrotum,' she says, 'Quite sure.'

Seb gives Annie's hand a crushing squeeze, his euphoria soaking through to her bones. Annie glares at him. Traitor! He'd assured her it made no difference, boy or girl, but all along he'd been harbouring a cheap desire for a son—just like every other man. Annie feels the sting of tears.

She says: 'Well then. A boy it is.'

A girl and a boy. One of each. Everybody's idea of damned fine luck, though right now, Annie could weep for all the darling girls' clothes that will never be worn again.

'We'll dye everything blue!'

This is Seb's solution. He's cautious with money, though he doesn't need to be. She gives him a look. *Not likely!* But actually, she doesn't much care. Boys' clothes are so samey. Jeans and dungarees. Blue and red. Stripy everything. It hardly warrants a special trip to John Lewis.

It'll come, she tells herself, when the nesting hormones kick in.

When she's alone, Annie writes a list. Pros and cons.

CONS: What I'm scared a boy will do:

- 1 tear up the house
- 2 be slow, insensitive, rough
- 3 lack intuition
- 4 play with his Gameboy over dinner
- 5 not speak till he's four
- 6 have a tiny penis
- 7 develop lax hygiene habits, long yellow toe-nails, waxy ears
- 8 pull Lottie's hair, break her toys
- 9 have low self-esteem
- 10 be an underachiever
- 11 never write thank you notes or remember the small things
- 12 bring home girlfriends who think I'm possessive and call me that woman
- 13 leave home and forget about me

She starts to feel light-headed with the silliness of her project. This note is heading straight for the bin.

PROS: On the other hand, a boy might...

- 1 love me madly—sad cow!
- 2 have a big willy—what's it to me?
- 3 defend his sister in the playground—unlikely with the age gap

4 mow the lawn—please!

She puts the list in the drawer with the lunar chart and pours herself a tumbler of red wine—small, of course, she’s taking no chances with her health—then she picks up the phone to share the happy news with her mother.

Annie’s seven months pregnant now and quite a fondness has grown between her and Mr Philip Burke, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, MBE. It’s a relationship that has been altered—both accelerated and compressed—by circumstance. It startles her to think they met just six weeks ago—when she was rushed to Casualty with break-through bleeding—yet he knows her more intimately than most of her friends.

Last week, he saw her at her worst. All those euphemisms—they’d been driving her mad. The ‘not thriving as one might expect’ and ‘seemingly non-viable’ and ‘developmentally compromised’.

Eventually, she’d shouted: ‘Our baby’s going to die! Just say it, goddamn it!’

The yelling felt good, though she’d probably looked a bit silly with her legs dangling over the side of the bed and her belly hanging out.

Philip had glanced at Seb then lowered himself onto his doctor’s chair, knees pressed together.

‘*Say it!*’ The anger was still there, quaking inside her.

‘Okay.’

Philip eased his chair to a non-confrontational angle with the bed. He ran a hand firmly over his wavy hair, but his fringe was following an entirely different agenda and it bounced straight back.

‘Right then.’

There was an ultra–softness to his voice. They were given training these days to handle situations like this, Annie had read about it. After decades of bungled disclosures, earnest effort had been made to render the system gaff–free.

‘This is how it is: your baby’s very sick and is very unlikely to survive. I’m sorry.’

Annie looked at her doctor. The studied calm. The glossy chestnut hair, rippled and jaunty. She wanted to slap him.

Annie and Seb were quiet leaving the ward on that occasion. A deferential hush had fallen over the hospital; theirs, it appeared, was the last appointment of the day. Their soles squeaked on the blue rubber tiles of the corridor. To their left and right, machines on stand–by blinked at them through the darkened windows. Seb seemed taller than usual, bulkier; Annie felt his enormous shadow fall all over her despite the fierce overhead lighting. She looked up at him but he didn’t return her gaze—he was a man on a mission, his eyes locked on the exit sign ahead. The pallor of his flesh against the spiky black of his hair came as a shock. There was something about his face and neck, an unappealing sponginess, that made Annie grateful for the distance that had come between them. If she touched him now he’d be clammy under her fingers, corpse–like in his response, and this she would find intolerable. At an earlier point in their marriage, during a less wretched time, such iciness would never have been allowed to settle. Seb would have reached for her hand, turning it this way and that in his own broad palm, folding her fingers into a fist then unfurling them again, waiting for her to defrost. Leaving the hospital, such acts of kindness seemed impossibly sweet and distant.

Seb called the lift. They waited for an eternity. Children's artwork mocked them from the wall above the nurses' station. Seb, such an avid admirer of his own daughter's scrappy drawings, showed no interest, but Annie found herself helplessly drawn. The wall was the undisputed domain of the farm animal. Horses, cows and—what were *those*? Moose?—gathered in colourful cartels, prevailing with hectoring grins over the flying saucers, the wobbly rainbows, the blushing princesses. Sailing boats jostled for space with birthday cakes. Jumbos overlapped with coned ice-creams. One serious-minded child had even contributed a bunch of purple grapes.

Amid all the colour and chaos, it was easy to miss the three pencil-sketched family portraits tacked to the wall but eventually Annie found these too. Characters with gigantic, splayed fingers and bushy hair stood in neat lines. Father at one end, mother by his side, then a gaggle of children, as many as eight, arranged in order of height. In one picture, the family tapered off so dramatically at one end, the littlest member had arms that ended in stumps; there was simply no scope for fingers, the infant was that tiny.

The elevator arrived. Annie stepped in after Seb and then the baby wafted in too, the one from the picture—Annie found it there when the carriage started its juddering descent. It hovered at eye level, face twisted in a soundless wail, ugly little arms pumping and flailing above its head. Annie's throat tightened with rage. Blast the little freak of nature! *Blast the artist!* She itched to slam her hand on the stop button, order the lift back to the sixth floor. She'd find a pencil and fill in the missing parts herself, finish the job.

It was a slight disappointment to see how easily the conversation returned once

they'd settled into the car. Worst of all, it was the same old mundane chatter that filled the void: all about Lottie, and who'd cook the supper, and the need to stop for milk. Seb said that later he'd go round to John's next door to watch the qualifying match on the big, plasma screen, if she didn't mind. She didn't. Neither did she mind if he slept on the sofa when he returned—after a few beers he always snored and clasped her body too tight against his. Sleeping on the sofa made sense.

Eight months into her pregnancy, Annie glances up at the kitchen clock and it satisfies her to see she's running to schedule for a change. She awoke with a good feeling this morning; a sense of peace, almost—a promising omen, surely, for the hours ahead. She'll be an attentive mother today, a pleasant wife. She'll walk Lottie to school. She may even stop to gossip with the other mothers at the gate; she'll push her sunglasses up on her head and make spirited comments about the new IT suite and the extra funding for recorders. Afterwards she might even call the office, see if any of the girls can tear themselves away from their mood-boards and focus groups for an hour to meet an old colleague for lunch. Annie smiles to herself: yes, this is what she'll do.

Then Lottie spills her cereal and ruins everything. Milk and Rice Crispies fly across the kitchen, under the table, on the seats of the wicker chairs, through the fabric of her uniform.

Annie smashes her fist on the table.

'You silly girl!'

Lottie's meltdown is instantaneous. Tears spurt and puddle on the table.

'Silly silly *silly* girl!'

Annie swats at her daughter's blouse with a dishcloth, her big stomach a

bullying presence between them. Lottie's screams are shrill and escalating.

'Stupid girl!'

Annie's fury glows; the words scald her palate as they burst from her mouth.

'Idiot child.'

'I want my...'

'Don't start!'

'But I do! I want my Daddy! I really want him! I want my Daddy! Where's my Daaaaaaddy?'

'Shut-up! Shut-up!'

It takes all Annie's willpower not to lash out.

That evening, Lottie sits sullenly at the table poking at her bowl of buttered spaghetti. At the sound of the key in the lock, she clatters to the floor and scrambles to the front door. She throws herself at her father, pouring into his lap, and immediately they're in a whispering huddle. Seb lifts her and carries her to the sitting room. Annie can hear them pressed together exchanging outrages. She listens to the squeak of Lottie's breaking voice, the rumble of Seb's baritone reassurances.

'Darling girl,' she hears him say, *'Mummy will be well again soon.'*

Annie thinks: *If only.*

She leans back against the cool white of the butler's sink and closes her eyes. If she can just slow down her breathing for a moment; if she can focus on the stream of air rushing through her lungs, in and out, in and out, then just maybe she can start to believe it.

The baby is due on October 29th. So a little Scorpio if he's on time—*passionate, perceptive, focused*—or a Libra if he's early—*easy-going, romantic, urbane*— but either way a Rabbit—*affectionate, obliging, with a tendency to avoid conflict and emotional involvement*. Not that Annie allows herself to dwell on such matters these days (it's not her fault if a handful of useless zodiac facts have made their nest in her mind). The psychologist attached to the neo-natal unit tells her to take life one day at a time; focus on the pregnancy; live for the moment. She makes it her business to comply. The hospital chaplain assures her that all things occur for a reason. He also tells her that if this baby's spirit isn't ready to come into the world, as indeed it would appear it isn't, then this is The Will of God and acceptance of this fact would bring a degree of comfort. She tries to accept, oh she tries. The recurring thought that Rabbits are successful in business but also make good lawyers, diplomats and actors is something she tries to ignore.

With the future off limits, Annie fixes her thoughts on the day-to-day preoccupations of family life. She cooks casseroles and pies and packs them in the freezer, for the days when she'll be holed up on the maternity ward. She meets Lottie from school every day, heaving up the hill in her billowing cassocks, the steel frame of her daughter's scooter banging against her calf. She stitches together a purple witch's costume for Halloween, complete with felt conical hat. She wonders if Lottie will get lucky this year and play Mary in the school nativity. She buys 2 metres of pale blue calico in the sales, just in case.

Standing at her bedroom window, looking out at the bare trees and the russet leaves eddying on the frosted lawn, she decides it's probably time to turn on the central heating. Lottie has started wearing socks to bed and Seb was in long sleeves last night, something that happens rarely. Only Annie, who has three

weeks to go, feels like she's stewing in her clothes. Sometimes when the others are out, she peels them off and waddles through the house in her massive underwear, throwing open windows, hunting for that elusive through-breeze. In the later stages of pregnancy a woman's body temperature rises by seven degrees, they say. Annie thinks: *Seven? And the rest.*

Last night, she lay in the bath and watched her son ripple across her abdomen. He was incredibly active: all knuckles and bony elbows. The two of them played a little chasing game: he'd nudge and she'd softly poke him back, then he'd jostle around a bit and nudge her elsewhere—*catch me if you can!* He seemed so robust within her, so ready to burst into the world. His terrible fragility felt remote, implausible. Every now and then her stomach would judder and she was sure he was having a chuckle.

The next day she's in hospital again—for another scan. Her 12th. It has become something of a joke between her and Seb: *This baby will surely die from radiation exposure!*

And now she's in the hospital again and he really is dead. She knows he's dead because of the stillness. She knows because of the absence of sickness. She just knows.

She's still perched on the bed in Radiography, the exposed dome of her belly stretched and shiny, when Philip delivers his line. He seems genuinely saddened by the news he's imparting. *Too grief-stricken*, Annie thinks. This is how he did it for the examining board.

She looks down at her belly button and the word *umbilicus* comes to mind and she thinks how ridiculous it looks, how obscenely flared and erect, and she

receives the news of her son's death with a mild sense of victory—*See! I know my body. When I say something's happening inside me, you can trust me that it is.*

Except of course she'd kept her knowledge to herself.

Seb's reaction makes her jump. He lets out a ghastly winded sound—*hoof!*—and creases over with pain. It's a lurching, masculine action, like the cartoon victim of a street brawl. Annie watches her husband buckle and sink to the ground, she hears him groan, and she feels vaguely sickened. Eventually he seems to remember she's there and he straightens up.

'I'm sorry,' he says, his voice clogged with grief.

Then he paws at her, tries to gather her in his arms.

'I'm so, so, so sorry.'

The tears and snot stream down his face unchecked and she doesn't like it at all.

Philip says he'd like the birth to be induced but Annie's not keen. Induction feels wrong: isn't it supposed to signify a beginning? He gives her 48 hours to go into labour spontaneously.

That night she lies awake, her dead baby curled peacefully inside her. Lottie is spending the night elsewhere, snatched away from the hellish and incomprehensible happenings in her home by her godmother, and Seb is in the lounge again—he hasn't even tried to explain why. Annie's on top of the duvet. Every now and then she gives her belly a prod but naturally there's no reply. The contractions come at 2am and the first squeeze is so violent, she feels like she's going to wet herself. Within a quarter-of-an-hour they're coming every three minutes. She prays for more time but her womb is done with this baby and her body

is prising open with a ferocity that scares her.

‘Help!’ she cries, the pain ripping through her. *‘Help!’*

Then she stuffs a fist in her mouth because actually she wants to be left alone. She hears Seb bound up the stairs. He explodes through the bedroom door, his pyjamas baggy at the crotch.

‘No!’ she screams, ‘Go away!’

But he’s already on the phone to the cab company.

Philip is waiting for them in hospital (does this man ever sleep?). He leads them to the delivery suite and gives her a quick internal.

‘Too late for an epidural,’ he says.

Annie notices grey at his temples, just a smattering either side, and she finds herself wondering what he’s like off duty and who’s waiting for him at home. She moans through a contraction then staggers over to a pair of straps bolted to the ceiling. She grabs them and crouches low. She waits for the next contraction and here it comes *oh my god, oh my god*, a knife lacerating her insides. The pain subsides and she’s almost herself once more but then the next contraction is rushing towards her; she feels the menace of its approach, then it’s crashing over her. She thinks: This will kill me. But a moment later the pain shifts gear.

It comes as a convulsion: a mighty, irresistible urge to push.

‘He’s coming!’

‘Okay,’ she hears the doctor say, ‘Take it slowly.’

She hangs off the straps again, bearing down, but with the pain now there’s a thrill too, as her body heaves and expels. She remembers this moment from Lottie; the enormous animal intent. She remembers too how hard it was to describe

afterwards. Seb had wanted all the details but even a day later it had been a struggle to find apt words. Now it has come to her at last: the perfect metaphor. Between contractions she twists around, looking for Seb, but it's no good. He's standing right back, his arms folded. His face is closed.

Lighten up, she wants to cry. We're having a baby!

Philip escorts her to her bed. She walks gingerly, as if her womb might drop out from between her legs. She hasn't seen or felt the child yet; didn't even touch his head on his passage out. She arranges herself on the pillows.

And she wants her baby now. She wants him.

The doctor acts as an intermediary, passing the silent infant from father to mother. He's swaddled in a towel like a baby Jesus and she feels the approval pluck at her heart and the sorrow churn her bowels. Seb hovers over her, his face a blotchy mess. She'd like to swat him away.

'Please go,' she says, and she's pleased that it comes out softly. He opens his bruised lips to protest but the doctor takes him by the arm and they're gone. She lowers the baby to her lap and loosens the folds around his face. She smiles down at his perfection and runs her fingers over his nose and swollen lips, around his eyes, which are shut and puffy, and over the compact sphere of his head. The hardness of his skull surprises her. She wants to kiss him, kiss him all over, make him hers. She peels back more of the towel, sliding it over his shoulders and off his body until every bit of him is exposed. She takes him all in: the strange flatness of his torso, the bowlegs, the soft, pale down covering his whole body, the baby penis. It's the sweetest thing she's ever seen, that penis—a perfect teardrop. She wonders if she can kiss this too, if it's allowed, but then decides no, best not. She

says: 'My boy', and it comes out in a whisper, the whoosh of the words so alien, she can't believe they belong to her. She wonders if the baby was born with closed eyes or if someone ran a hand down his face, like they do in the films. She needs to know, desperately, but there's no-one to ask. She feels a great pressure under her ribs, then there's an ugly sound in the room and she realises it must have come from her.

And suddenly her mother is with her, at last, covering up the baby, holding her, saying never mind, never mind. But she does mind, she minds very much, and she's sure her mother does too, and she must tell her one day what a stupid expression that is, what a fucking dumb way of offering comfort, but for now it's okay, because it's her mother and her mother understands.

The hardest part, she'll say later, is leaving the hospital. Letting her traitor's feet carry her through those revolving doors; past the orderlies and the nurses, past the no-hopers loitering on the pavement in dressing gowns hunched over cigarettes, past the women with big bellies shuffling in for their ante-natals, out into the sharp air to the waiting world. And where is her baby? He's still in there. In that dirty monolith of a hospital, in the deep freeze, wearing icicles for booties. And here *she* is, swinging her night-bag into the boot of the taxi, lowering her still-voluminous body onto the backseat, telling the driver to take her home.

The second hardest part is the milk. Standing at the bathroom sink while colostrum—the good stuff—drips from her engorged breasts. And she looks up at her face in the mirror, at the harsh creases between her eyes, and she thinks: You're too old for this.

And the third hardest part, if she really *must* put these things in order, is

visiting the mortician.

‘Now Mrs Isherwood, have you taken a moment to consider where you’d like your son buried?’

‘Actually yes,’ she says, ‘We were thinking Hampstead.’

And he nods sagely, like a sommelier, and says: ‘Excellent choice, Ma’am.’

The limousine is set to leave the House of Eternal Rest at 10.05 am, planning its arrival at the church for 10.30. Too early, she protests, the church is less than a mile away. But the mile must be covered at a dignified speed, and anyway there’s no accounting for traffic.

As there’s no protocol for moving a coffin the size of a large shoebox from A to B, Annie decides to carry it on her knees. Seb sits besides her, his left hand draped over one end of the casket, the head end. But *she* has Billy’s *entire body* on her lap! A light turns red. Annie glances out of her window and finds herself smiling up at a truck driver, who gawps back in horror.

They get to St Joseph’s in 3 minutes 48 seconds. The limo parks on the curb and Seb hops out and reaches in for the casket. She slides it across the warm leather towards him then scrambles out too. It’s a beautiful crisp day. There’s grass under their feet and Annie finds herself thinking how wasted this lovely garden is outside a church, and how beautiful these sloping grounds would look behind somebody’s house.

Then she runs out of thoughts.

The driver has chosen to stay in the car. Their families are nowhere to be seen. She looks over at Seb and sees silent tears rolling off his nose and soaking into the collar of his smart black suit, but of course there’s nothing he can do

because his hanky is in his pocket and his hands are full of coffin.

A woman with a buggy ambles past. She looks up at the scene with the man and woman and the child-sized casket and then she's crying too, but noisily, not like a stranger at all. Annie thinks: I must write to this woman, apologise for ruining her day, but then she remembers that she doesn't know her, and the tears start spilling out of her too. She thinks: Where's Mum?

Then she moves towards Seb, the heart-broken father of her child. She pulls a tissue from the wad in her pocket and gently presses it to his cheeks and eyes. Then she wraps her hands around his neck, though it's awkward because of the box, and she strokes the tender flesh behind his ears. Just before her mother arrives, she hears herself say something kind to her husband, though she can't be sure of the words.

END.