

I leave the house and go downtown. It's a while before the bus goes but that's ok because I want to see if I can buy a teddy bear somewhere for when I reach the meeting. I enter a toy shop that's literally just opened, the entrance has huge amounts of dark blue on the panelling and large yellow bubble letters for the name. I'm the only customer in here, but the selection looks disappointing. It's mainly colouring and children's books around with a few plastic toys and big balls. Not what I want. I go to a charity shop instead as I once saw quite a nice teddy in there; the shop itself is cramped, it's quite thin with a number of handrails with clothes hanging off and fragile old women taking up the space (and also making me the only dude in here). I look at where the teddy was on the shelf last year and instead there's key rings and notepads. I'm about to leave when I see some teddy bears on the opposite wall. They're not as nice as I wanted, but I feel the softness of this grey one with a yellow bow and it's still above average and times short, so I take one and pay for it. I've seen Anna with other teddy's, and if there's one thing I want out of today, it's to see her with one I've bought.

Sitting at the bus stop I'm just assuming that one minute before the bus is due to arrive that it will simply be late like so many others at this stop. But then a man comes out of a bus with its engine off and turns to me and an old lady, the only other person waiting, and says, 'Anyone for Holt?'

I say, 'Yeah X44?'

'This is the one, the engines not turning on though you've got to push it. Haha I'm just joking come on in.'

'I could push. Don't have to be there till half ten.'

The bus journey is uneventful although I'm nervous as hell, the reason however is I might get lost, I've rationed my data this month so I can bring up maps and search taxi numbers if need be. The final stretch of my journey to Holt country park is the most daunting, I have to go down a country lane where there's no pavements and high banks. I must look like an idiot to the cars that drive past as I hesitate at the end of the pavement. Soon enough though there's a drop in the traffic and I run the three hundred metres according to Google maps to the entrance.

I'm still relatively in the mouth of the gravelled car park when a woman starts walking in my direction. This can't be the social worker, she's far too young, she has purple hair. But she says my name. 'Stephen?'

'Yes, hello.'

'Hi I'm Alison, good to finally meet you,' she says shaking my hand.

'Shall we go sit on those benches there and chat for a bit? Ian and Sarah are here, in the cars still. They'll join us in a bit with Anna.'

'Ok.'

'So how are you feeling about all this?'

'Ooh right now I've just ran down the road cos there's no pavements and the blind corners and such so sort of the main thing I'm feeling is out of breath.' I'm actually feeling excited, like the nerves have left and the excitement has stayed deep down giving my insides a feeling of a hot

chocolate that's completely calm with no ripples in the surface. Get to see a cute baby that I'm not really that attached to right now, so things seem good. But I still avoided the question just in case I say something wrong.

'Ok, do you have any questions you'd like to ask at all?'

'I don't think so, I might have thought of some stuff when thinking about this moment, but right now I can't recall anything.'

'Ok then so how about we bring little Anna over here. I'll be right back.'

A minute later Alison comes back over with a big man and an above average height woman, a baby carried in her arms.

The man introduces himself as Ian and shakes my hand; it's surprisingly light given the size differences and Sarah does the same although I don't look at her when taking her hand. I look at Anna.

'Aw she's grown,' Alison says after she sits down next to me on the bench and Ian and Sarah sit on the other side.

'Yeah, and she has hair growing now,' Sarah says running her hand over Anna's head.

Ian sits opposite me and places the ten-month-old on the table, 'Here you go you can sit like that.' And he spins her to face me. Alison is next to me and Sarah is opposite her, next to Ian.

'How's she doing then?' Alison asks.

'She's doing well,' Sarah says, 'had a little nap before coming here so she should be all awake now.'

'Aw that's good. Is she still a good sleeper?'

'Oh she's wonderful, never wakes us up in the middle of the night, ever. She's got a new dress on today.'

'Yeah, I was gonna say I haven't seen that one before.'

I just look at Anna

'Shall we get a drink then?' Sarah says.

'Yeah ok,' says Alison, 'Stephen do you want anything?'

'Ok,' I say.

'What would you like, hot? Cold?'

'Yeah cold please. I'm not too fussed.'

'A coke?'

'That'll be fine thanks.'

The girls go off to get some drinks and Ian asks how I'm doing.

'Yeah I'm liking this. She's gorgeous,' I say in the same tone I would say about a dog, but some dogs aren't cute. Anna is. She has big eyes and so blue that the sky would be jealous and with the little o face babies make with their mouths she looks like the cutest thing ever to exist. I try to reach out to her, to do that thing where babies grab your whole finger with their hand, but she pulls

away a little bit. That's ok, it would be a lot to ask her to be all extra cute for my sake and I'm satisfied with just stroking my thumb up and down the top of her forearm while the rest of my hand feels her podgy softness underneath.

'How are you feeling?' Ian asks.

'I've been holding back tears from the moment I saw her,' I say.

'Yeah, would you be up for doing it again?'

'I would, but Alison made it clear that this was a one off. That this is a goodbye.'

'Well not goodbye forever...now now come on there's no need to get upset.'

The truth is I'm not upset, I don't think so anyway. I'm not talking so I can say what I want to say when everyone's present, 'If I was in the position, if my life was organised enough, I would've had no problem dropping things to look after her, I mostly sit around on my butt all day right now so it's not much of a loss. It was just, I got a call in November from a counsellor saying you have this baby, the mother's not capable of looking after her, what do you want to do? And I was on the other side of the country at University so.'

'It must've have been really hard, putting her first and choosing to give her up.' Alison says, 'Did you not know at all about Anna?'

'Yes but, well the way her mother got pregnant. She had a lot of problems, and when I first moved to uni she sent messages to a girl I lived with and a girl on my course both saying, basically, stay away from my boyfriend. And when I came back home for Christmas, she stopped taking the pill, but told me she was still on it.'

There's a few murmurs of "oh's"

'A friend of hers actually told me she kept a record of when her period was so she knew when she was most fertile and then she'd say those were the only days she could see me. After we broke up, she sent me a message saying she had lost the baby and then blocked all communications. But we had mutual friends on Facebook and such and so they told me she's still pregnant.'

I try Anna's hand again, but she still refuses, so instead I go for her feet, they're still soft to touch. Anna moves around a lot. Every robin and black bird that comes by she watches, every car that goes through the car park making that tyre on gravel noise gets her attention, turning her body, face so blatantly staring at a thing that it would be rude for any of the adults to do it. She's a nosey sod and I like to think she gets that from me.

'I got something for Anna.' And I take the teddy from the charity shop out and place it near her. 'Ooh she'll like that,' says Sarah, 'She likes soft things.' She rubs the fur against Anna's hand, but she doesn't grab it, however Sarah assures me she'll love it in her own time.

'So obviously I already told you that we've found a couple to adopt her,' says Alison, 'They're really lovely, they've adopted another baby a while back who's now five. Anna should be out of foster care and with them next month.'

'Ok,' I say.

'Who's that over there?' Ian says looking over at the car park. It's a traffic warden by the looks of it.

'I didn't know we had to pay to park here,' says Alison.

'I've got an idea; here you can hold Anna.' Ian picks her up and hands her in my direction.

'I've never held a baby,' I say.

'Don't worry you're not going to break her. There you go.'

I get a hold of her under her armpits and pull her onto my lap. It's a good thing she doesn't struggle or move too much because for the next minute I'm constantly wiping my eyes and my nose (don't want her getting any germs).

Ian and Alison leave to buy tickets, Sarah dangles the bear in front of her again, this time she grabs it and makes a giggle, shaking her arms. With my free hand I start stroking the top of her head, feeling the little strands of light brunette hair she's starting to grow. Because of this I can't catch the teddy when a robin lands on the table next to us and Anna just has to look at it, making her forget about the teddy. When Sarah heads under the bench to pick it up Anna makes her first "mwaa" sounds like babies do just before they start crying, luckily Sarah pops back up and Anna calms down. They play peek a boo with Sarah's head behind the teddy and it works just like the cartoons, Anna swings her arms up and down with excitement whenever Sarah pops up and then she starts banging her hands on the table which makes Anna laugh even more.

Sarah takes a thing that looks like a long Wotsit out of her bag and Anna clearly recognises and grabs for it. Her mouth still looks like black abyss but seeing her soundless noms on the orange Wotsit thing is so adorable that it adds like another three colours onto the rainbow that's been bouncing around inside me ever since she started sitting on my lap.

After she's had one bite of the whatever that food was, she drops it and then looks down at it like it was a surprise it fell.

'Does she still like to put everything in her mouth?' I ask.

'Pretty much.'

'What about keys? Does she like them?'

'I think so.'

I get out my keys and jangle them in front of her face, she giggles then grabs at them. While she's holding them, she puts the rubber ring attached to it in her mouth. She holds them for a little bit while I still run my fingers and thumbs over her arms and feet.

The others return and Anna drops my keys when another car comes into the carpark and Anna wriggles to see the noise. Her feet are up against the edge of the table and I can feel her pushing really quite hard. I guess Ian was right about babies not breaking.

After picking Anna back up, I flip her around so she's facing me. I hold her hands and she's standing on my legs. She now laughs and jumps the little baby jumps that they do and her cheeks are high and wide with a smile. Again, I have to let go of one of her hands to wipe my eyes.

‘Ooh hang on that will make a great photo,’ Alison says and leans round to get a good angle for her phone.

‘I think it’s time. We have to go now,’ says Alison, ‘you’ll still have letterbox to write to her every six months and her new parents will write back. When she reaches the age of understanding and if she wants to you, will be able to see her again.’

I’ve given her back to Sarah and then I hand her the teddy and she takes it.

I stroke her forearm and wrist one more time with my finger and she reaches out and finally grabs it with her whole hand.

‘Give daddy a kiss goodbye,’ Sarah says. I pause for a second. I’m daddy. And then my head wonders because of that if she’s ever been kissed before, or has she waited for me. So I try and come in at the slightest angle possible not to scare Anna with my big head coming directly at her.

I watch them drive off and keep looking for a minute with a big smile before I move.

When I get back home, I think about how happy I am. I let out a huge breath and I can feel a tightness in my chest which is weird because I’m happy. I can’t remember the last time, if ever, I had tears of happiness. And isn’t it just wonderful. What a sunny day. I’m holding back more tears now and they’re obviously of happiness. I’m never going to see her again but it’s fine. I’m happy and I knew going into this that I would only ever see her this once and I did. I went to see her so I could say I’m not a bad person and if that happened to be the best hour of my life well that’s just a bonus. This feeling in my heart and stomach is happiness.

My dog lies on the floor, wagging her tail at me; she’s out of range of even my legs and refuses to come closer. I pat my knees to indicate her to come, she sits up so her head is just within range of my arms but the moment I lean for her she drops back to the floor and rolls away again, looking at me expectantly, her tail thumping the ground making irritably consistent thuds.

‘What?’ It’s not shouted at her, but one rung lower on the ladder and it would be, ‘Either come here where I can reach you or stop looking at me.’

I turn back to the TV and tell myself I’m happy.