

Other women

by Gill Jackman

I told him she was a Queen because I knew that if circumstances had been different, if she was freed from the stress of pretending the marriage was alright, she wouldn't be bent double trying to prove it. She would sit with her head up, straight hair cascading to her waist like a waterfall parting over her smooth profile. I wanted to shout at her: "Stop frowning, you're only 28. Stop stooping like an old woman." but by the time she has let go of her concerns, the lines that furrow her brow will have become permanent. She will wear experience like a fifty year old man wears a tattoo on the back of his hand. It says nothing about who he is now, only about his past. So too, her battle scars will say she is a woman who has suffered.

It was very awkward really, seeing her camping in the rain, sharp chin jutting from the hood of her kagoul like a gigantic bottom lip. She knelt on the soggy ground throwing damp items of children's clothing through the door of the tent, defeat pouring off her like the raindrops that dripped from the flysheet.

And of course I knew what was going on.

The baby woke up. How could I not offer to take him? Me calm, with my hands free, while her toddler strangled her from behind and kicked his dangling wellingtons into her back. He had been wearing the only dry socks left. She had just enough will power to prevent herself from elbowing him hard away.

Her husband had been staying out nights and wouldn't answer her questions or help with what needed to be done and where was he now?

He was doing what he felt he needed to do to stay sane.

Aren't we all?

Other people's babies are easy once you've had one yourself. The experience gives rise to a principality where women can feel supremely confident because they know it makes no bloody difference so they might as well be. Polarizing themselves from the exhausted, needy dependency of

inexperienced motherhood they feel relief instead of unmanageable pressure as they look down the years; a long polythene tunnel of metamorphosis where each section the lines deepen and the heart opens. And it's true that relief is infectious. Petra let out a sharp sigh when I swung Ned up to my face and said, in a voice free of desperation, 'Oh hello. How're you doing?' His sudden smile creased those blue astonished eyes into a sparkle.

Petra pushed her hood back harshly with her slim hand. A fine mist of drizzle glistened on her hair.

"I don't know what to do."

The toddler yanked at her "Mum, mum" his voice increasing in volume, his tugs blind and angry. She spoke ever more quietly, the Slovakian accent underlining her resignation with that intensity a limited vocabulary seems to express.

"I want to find Tom. He said he would be here. It's getting dark."

"That's Tom for you," I said simply, because it was.

She nodded and looked at me knowing I was right, trusting my insight, not questioning that I only met him four weeks ago, while she had been married to him for five years. It's easy to be impartial when the truth doesn't really affect you.

"Will you keep Ned?" she said, staccato voiced. "I go to find Tom. I don't know what is the point but I have to do something."

I nodded, plonked him on my hip and took the kettle over to the water tap. But Tom did affect to me and his behaviour should have mattered because I'd been screwing him for a month and now I was holding his baby while his wife went to find out why he'd been avoiding her. Yet I felt distant. Nervous, yes. I admit to visions of Petra slicing through the canvas of the Bhuddist temple tent before pinning me to the central pole with the bread knife. I would if I were her.

The rain stopped, which was as well since the parachute Tom had erected to link our circle of tents was meant as a sunshade. Great globs of water

dripped through the thin silk. Stars, rainbows, bright lights in the sky. Tom was good for those, but now at this time in my life, I did not expect anything from anyone that I had not already witnessed and I had not seen Tom in a thunderstorm. I wondered, naturally, what would happen. I even hoped that he could make a clear decision, seeing the loss either way, but mostly I just waited. That was what was odd, to be in love, to have merged my soul with another and still to hold no illusions. Tom had made me no promises and actually all I wanted was for the relaxed lovemaking that lit up my body to go on; to continue, held in that mirrored smile. It sounds dreadful I know but what's far worse is it didn't feel dreadful, in fact it hasn't felt like a problem at all until now.

Ned seemed very content. As content as I did before Petra and Tom's war began to divide my loyalties. Still, what use is a festival of holistic healing if not to understand the mechanics of division.

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In the middle of the flinty field is a tubular pyramid frame. Chimes sway above me, tinkling and resonating like harmonious angels. Ned chuckles, looking all around. For all I know he can see seraphic figures dancing. He is Tom's son after all.

'If only I knew then what I know now.' That old saying is a longing for a dream that would make life meaningless. The impossibility of it keeps me safe; it is what will prevent Petra from cutting my throat. The real irony is that if I forget now what I learned then, I wouldn't blame her. But she is a nice girl, civilised enough to withhold her killer instinct while her grief takes over. Of course. She is a mother. She will understand all too well that grief is a boundless ocean; that its waters run right into one another at a specified depth, deep, deep at the water table. One day we'll all evaporate together.

I sound as though I think I'm doing her a favour, but I'm screwing her husband. I'm in love with him, so why am I so convinced that if it wasn't me it would be someone else? I mean, we're practically soulmates.

The chimes are laughing, but I'm laughing with them, at the idea. It's a merry sound, a million times lighter than the dense sound 'soulmate'. The sort of girly sound that makes men want to isolate and dominate us, anything but the dread of humiliation. I don't want Tom to be that kind of man, have to believe that he could be different. But hope, at my age is distinct from illusion so the best I can do is be in a state of suspended disbelief.

It all sounds so dispassionate, but what choice do I have? What choice does any woman have? In the sky blue belief of first love? With the bone-white fragments of a heart bled dry and ditched? In the exhaustion of new motherhood when focus stretches over night and day precluding even the chance for a cup of tea? And when we're independent? When we no longer have to rely on another for food, for help, for a roof over our heads? When we no longer have to rely on another not to knock the physical and emotional daylights out of us when it takes their fancy. Well then the choices vary. They vary according to what we've learned and what we've learned depends on what stage we're at. Lack of experience limits choice.

I have the choice to ignore what I know.

Take Susan. I could be as sympathetic as she was with my own disillusioned husband. Tom's as sick of the nagging, the anger and the tears as Rob was by the time he left me because I too shouted to be heard; I too sulked and spat and sunk. Susan will be at the soulmate stage now, Kama Sutra woman, believing nothing matters but love, that seeing things from his viewpoint is not dangerous, not even relevant to what *they've* got, particularly if she's as naive as I was.

Poor baby doll. I mean it truly. For years I dreamed of clubbing her to death but at this rate, by the time she ends up on my doorstep because he's moved on I will wrap her in my arms and feel, over a great distance, the pain that has formed the lines my empathic tears follow. One for the road. Choices? Yes.

I could encourage Tom. I could sympathise. 'She doesn't understand you? But you're so clear.' 'She snaps? Well that's aggression.' 'Poor you. She sounds a complete bitch, out to use you, eat you whole. It's not surprising you're losing patience and don't respect her. I know what you need.' I could

protect him from her dark face for long enough to get him looking at mine. If I was Susan I would believe that Susan and Rob were meant to be together forever; I would know I was *the* woman who could make him happy. I was Susan once, immortal, omniscient, young. Massive self-belief, no experience, no kids. Choices? Going backwards isn't one of them. I understand now. When people say 'you can't go back' they don't mean that going back is a bad idea, they mean it isn't possible. Trying to go back is really going forward but pretending you don't know what you do know. Psychological mutton dressed as lamb where a woman's health is eaten away by alternate cells of fear and desire, forcing her to fit the shape that worked before. A mutation. I'm not Susan now.

I'm not Petra either, and I resent being reminded of her.

I didn't mind when I hadn't met her. I wasn't betraying her then. I could tell myself their marriage wasn't my business and step in or out whether Tom left or stayed. Those bells are laughing again but this time they're getting on my nerves. Their dispassionate optimism jars against the guilt I'm so keen to argue away.

Ned is fidgeting, no matter which way I hold him. I shift him from my hip to my shoulder and rub his back but he grizzles. I hold him across my aching arms and rock him on his tummy as if I am a boat swaying beneath him but he wails, too hungry to be fooled for long. Jigging distracts from an empty stomach like making someone smile temporarily distracts them from the desire to weep. "Petra is always crying," said Tom. "She is miserable." I have techniques, knowledge. I could keep my own counsel, keep Tom dancing to my tune.

Irritation forms a wall separating Ned's hunger from my own; divorcing Petra from myself. We are all free here, at this festival. We are all responsible for ourselves. I could adopt lip service to new age policy; tell Petra there is a lesson in it somewhere and bugger off with her husband.

But the chimes have changed. They are warning me home; watching, reminding me that though it will all come out in the wash, the machine could be set on a long repetitive cycle. Their harmonies may tinkle unheard above the sudsy swish of the drum or the screaming spin of the dryer or the warm tumble that seduces me into softness, forgetting about the filth and

the scrubbing and the new biological warfare that went into getting the clothes clean in the first place. I can choose. I can choose to remember all that I know or I can cut the connection between how I have felt before and who I am now. If I cut, I forget what it is to be a wide-eyed, artless virgin; a vital mother; running, grabbing, holding, feeding; what it is to have a splintered hold on the carpet to avoid falling off the world. I forget the agony that racked my joints and bled into my soul, rust red, sword sharp. Enough iron forged to enjoy Petra's husband and to slice her in two. I could turn my back on the very roots that fed and still feed this vitality, these dark eyes and the fearless laugh that turns men's heads. It was sink or swim once. I learned how to swim on the back of my experience and I love it for holding me up. I am strong now, strong enough to trample Petra underfoot as a launchpad. I have the power but in betraying her I would be betraying myself, creating patterns with no crossthreads to anchor them. And look what happened to Arachne. However sublime the peacock blue and the seamless silk of her mortal weaving, the Goddess Athene still banished her to the cobwebbed corners where she passed her life tripping over her own eight legs.

Suffering gives definition, gives sharp edges when you need them, gives red shoes and the strength to dance so wildly that only the woodcutter's axe on my ankles will bring me back to earth, back to the pain that is life's catalyst, that makes it mean anything at all. The only difference between Susan and Petra and me is that their illusions are yet to be discarded whereas mine would need to be wilfully invoked. No. Blank denial will not do. I have to midwife them through their suffering or use my knowledge to divide woman against woman; past against present against future self, dancing until giddy carelessness starves me of the experience that is my birthright.

They will be back at the tent now, where nothing but Petra's milk will satisfy this infant. I have knowledge, yes, but wisdom watches and waits as only wisdom can.

As I stand back, my canvas shoes soaked with dew, feet cold and tired, I am not so sure the blessings of discernment are unmixed, but the chimes know better than to confuse purity with growth. They pour the full score of their discord with certainty, a sudden gust of wind creating an explosion of sound that surges over me as I approach the sinking fire and the two low-voiced silhouettes.

I interrupt for the last time, holding Ned out towards Tom.

“This is your baby,” I say.