



*This script is part of the BIRTH project managed by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, supported by the Oglesby Charitable Trust and originally commissioned by the Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester.*

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**UK:**

## **CHOICES**

by Stacey Gregg

### **Production note.**

The text should be performed or read by one person as simply as possible. Ideally, the performer should create a warm sense of community. If it feels ok, soft houselights could remain on, so the audience is as lit and present as the performer.

Music may be played at intervals, really just to catch our breath. Recommended is MODERN GIRL by Sleater Kinney. Maybe there is a basic movement sequence to this that represents the visits to the clinic, the unglamorous vaginal scan. Maybe the performer joins in on some of the lyrics. You might want to use a microphone on a stand for some sections. You'll find suggestions for which sections to speak on mic written in bold.

*Choices* was commissioned for the BIRTH festival and first performed in October 2016 at the Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester UK with the following creative team:

Narrator                      Stacey Gregg

Directed by                    Emma Callander

Hiya. My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

It's so nice to see everyone here.

Hi everyone.

Sometimes I think how amazing it is people still come to theatre.

Sometimes I wonder what the point of theatre is. I wonder that quite a lot.

*A moment, waiting.*

Maybe you're also wondering what the point is. Or maybe that's too negative a place to start!

Well. Here we are, in \_\_\_\_\_.

Seeing you're all here, let's start it with you. The audience!

We're an audience, at a play.

Shouldn't be hard to imagine, right? We're all at a play.

The play is happening in Northern Ireland.

It's quite a traditional play. There's a fourth wall and lots of people pretending they can't see us and pretending to be someone else on a stage with a set.

The play is about men. Or, there are only men in it anyway. Tough men. It's a good play. You can hear a pin drop. A man is talking about when he was younger and had sex with a woman his mates had set him up with.

He's doing a monologue. About how he discovered later that the woman had gotten pregnant. How she'd had an abortion.

The woman isn't in the play, so we don't know how she felt.

Oona is in the audience.

Oona's floating above herself, watching herself watch the play. Her fingers tear at the edge of her ticket in her lap. She's thinking about how often she's seen scenes like this: men who are tough or misunderstood but have strong feelings about what a woman does with her body.

She's finding it quite hard to get back into the play.

Ok.

We're in a waiting room. Waiting.

The walls are wood paneled and on the wall with the windows there's a flatscreen TV with the news on low. It's the London news because we're in London now. There's a coffee machine, a water machine, and black soft seating.

On the wall are pictures of babies. Lots of pictures. Babies, babies, babies.

On the couch by the coffee machine, Hollie scrolls through Twitter on her phone.

She's been meaning to try to stop checking Twitter as much. But it's hard to stop because she enjoys it. All those voices. All those vines. She's watching one now of a small dog being showered in sweets. It plays over and over and gets funnier every time. The way its little paws tremble!

Look at its little paws!

The smell of coffee from the machine. Hollie decides to continue scrolling through Twitter, as a trade-off for having to give up her other addiction, coffee. She's not supposed to be having caffeine. No one actually told her this. But like most things she's learned recently, she discovered it by Googling.

Do you write Googling with a capital G?

I Google, you Google, he/she/ they Google.

Anyway. Hollie's been Googling loads lately. More than usual.

Hollie is 36.

In great health,

generally upbeat,

active,

doesn't smoke,

average consumer of alcohol,

successful job in marketing.

If you met Hollie, you'd probably be like, cool. She's really cool, and she'd remember you next time you bump into each other in *Boots* or whatever.

Let's leave her here for now.

...

We're back in Northern Ireland. In a terrace house, in a living room with lots of family photos on the wall, family, family, family, we're holding a cup of tea. We're gathered to have a chat.

Last night Oona came home from the theatre to her old room. Lay awake, a bird flapping at her rib cage.

This morning, now, Oona sits on the end of the couch and traces its pattern with a finger. Her hair falls down over her eyes. Maureen, her mother, brushes it away. Maureen's mother, Oona's grandmother, Bernie, sits on the single chair. She sits there 'cause it's easier to get up and down compared to the couch, which is too soft.

Bernie works on a Jaffacake while Maureen explains to Oona that she can't get the time off work, but it'll be ok, so it will. It'll all be ok.

And Bernie nods from the single chair. And Oona really feels as if might be ok.

...

The nurse speaks warmly but quickly. Hollie asks the nurse to say it again, please.

**Sorry – could you say that again please?**

There's so much information. So much information and the nurse is just reeling it off like Hollie should know!

The nurse is younger than Hollie, a tattoo whirling out from under the sleeve of her blue uniform, the holes of several piercings. She smiles warmly at the end of every sentence and Hollie smiles back. More forms to fill out. So many consents

and tests

and options

and the price list.

Jesus Christ the price list.

The nurse smiles and Hollie smiles. It kind of aches behind her ears. People laugh when she tells them this, but if Hollie smiles too much – she gets pains behind her ears!

- **Fucking hell, no way**, says Anna, swirling her pisco sour.

- **I know but like... it's just good to find out. I'm not rushing into anything**, says Hollie, a bit annoyed at Anna's tone.

- **I just think I'd be a shit mum**, says Anna.

- You would, thinks Hollie, and then tells herself off. You'd have agreed with her, you'd have agreed with her until recently. Plus, Anna's an actor, selfishness is a necessary quality.

- **Another drink?** asks Anna. Who doesn't know that in three years she'll have two babies she utterly adores and be doing lots of radio and voiceover work but no more TV or film.

...

Ok. We're in the departure lounge, near a *Starbucks*. I think we can all agree ***Starbucks* has peaked.**

Noticing them, we might wonder if this young woman and the old woman are going on holiday together. Those two, reading the same page of the magazine spread on Bernie's lap, Oona breaking an over-priced blueberry muffin in half into a napkin. There wasn't much choice. It's all pretty pricey in the airport.

They got here early because Bernie can't walk very fast. In the magazine there's a story about Jennifer Aniston being sad because she hasn't had children yet. The article reads:

### **TRAGIC JEN CHEATED OUT OF MOTHERHOOD, AGAIN**

Oona hums the theme-tune of "Friends" in her head.

**"I'll be there for yoo-ooou.**

**(when the rain starts to pour)**

**I'll be there for you-ooo**

**(like I've been there before)"**

- The flight is barely an hour. London isn't very far from Ireland. It's as quick to travel country to country as it is to commute across London, so they say. Oona's only been to London once before when she got a photo taken with a waxwork David Jason in *Madame Tussauds*. Good times.

Oona texts her mum to let her know they're boarding. With a smiley face and all to show her everything's grand. Everything is grand.

Next to Oona, Bernie quietly does the sums in her head. Or not sums - she can't do maths. She can't really spell either. School wasn't a priority when Bernie was a girl. But she knows the money she is spending on the flight and the hotel and the procedure and the *Pizza Express* is the money she was going to give Maureen towards the kids' Christmas this year. But then, that's what money's for. You can't take it with you. Oona tuts when Bernie says this. "You can't take it with you!" Oona doesn't like to joke about Bernie dying. Bernie thinks it's hilarious. She's already said it at least twice today.

"You can't take it with you!"

"When I'm pushin up the daisies!"

"When I kick the bucket!"

"When I shuffle off this mortal coil!"

Which is always the funniest one because she doesn't know what it means.

The only coil she can think of is the one you stick in yourself to prevent babies. And that's ironic.

...

Let's go back a bit.

A few months ago, Hollie met a man in a bar.

We're in the bar.

Hollie's had a few proseccos, a pal-to-pal with Anna.

There's this hole. It started quite small. But now everyone can see right through it. But instead of filling the hole, the hole she wants to talk about, its somehow grown, the bottom has fallen out of Hollie's stomach.

Anna is being lovely actually, listening and nodding, but the hole is so deep Hollie can hardly make out the sound of her own voice from the bottom of it. So later tonight Hollie has sex with the man.

Not awful sex. Silly sex. A quick ride. Not *romantic*...

They do it against a wall. Hollie's hair keeps snagging on the concrete! He asks if he can do her up the ... - but Hollie says: no thanks, just up the normal way please!

They have one more drink. But the mystery's gone and the guy keeps apologetically looking at his phone.

Hollie gets an Uber home.

Next morning, eyes closed in the bright sun, Hollie accepts something has to change. Something has to change. **You're losing the plot Hollie. You looper. What the actual fuck? What's this hole all about? What's this hole growing in me? Everything's just falling through this hole!**

**Can you see it?**

**Can you?**

*Pause.*

A few weeks later Hollie's at work and her knickers are sticky. The hole grows. She murmurs to Leonie who slips her a *Bodyform*.

Leonie finds tampons painful but is quite embarrassed about it, and she lives in fear of Mooncups because she heard they can get stuck up there. Leonie only has sanitary towels. She almost lies to Hollie she doesn't have any, to avoid revealing her big granny pads, but it's not cool to leave a sister in the lurch when it's comes to periods. **Riding the white pony. The curse. Jam sandwich time. Aunt Flo visiting. Blob o'clock.**

When Hollie's back at her desk she looks up fertility clinics.

She opens a link:

**Egg freezing lets you plan for tomorrow by preserving your fertility today. Protect your future with egg freezing. At our fertility center, we offer you the opportunity to stop your biological clock by freezing and storing your eggs during your fertile years, so those healthy eggs will be available to create your family in the future, when you are ready.**

Hollie thinks about the random dude.

We've all been there, haven't we? Done things, not necessarily bad things or big things, but afterwards, we've gone, who was that? **Or, what was I thinking? Or, who am I?**

**Who am I?**

**Like. Who the fuck am I?**

**Why do I feel like this?**

**Why are you all looking at me?**

**Why *are* you all looking at me?**

Sorry!

We're in a theatre!

Just. Bit close to home.

I mean it's quite hard to write.

I've taken this commission to write about birth and healthcare inequality, and I have all these ideas but ...

\*

London. Oona in the hotel room. Nervous. Look at the state of these curtains!

\*

Hollie, hungover, watching box sets.

She's one of those people who goes on about *House of Cards*, or claims literally nothing of value has been made since *The Wire*. Unwinding with an M&S meal deal, laptop on. It's all digital, immediate. Brilliant! Everything on tap, choices, consuming, devouring, *binge-ing*, *binge watching*, *binge-worthy!*

Sometimes Hollie tweets during shows. Fun! Like she's watching the show with a million other people. One big hashtag party. She'd like another relationship soon. Like, she's good at being single, but doesn't want to get too good.

Hollie doesn't go on Facebook anymore.

It has this way of reminding her she's in her thirties. All those photos of friend's kids and weddings and school uniforms. When did that happen? The ones who were the biggest twats at college too, snuggling their kids.

In a terrace house near Belfast, Maureen sits quietly on her bed with the door closed over so John doesn't hear.

She's surprised. Must've been carrying it around, it takes her by surprise as she peels off her work uniform, this big sigh.

Maybe its glancing family pictures in the hall she usually doesn't notice, the thought of her daughter and her ma on the plane. Maureen's never been on a plane with Bernie. Either way, best get the sigh out. Let it pass. Then she'll feel fine. Get the dinner on. She won't tell anyone, and once it's gone its gone. John'll be none the wiser.

Near London, Hollie's mother Barbara looks up from her latte, and sighs.

Barbara told Hollie she wasn't sure about *feminism*.

She knows that's not the thing to say. It'll only hurt Hollie to bring it up, but, she thinks, I did tell her.

**I did say.**

Oona blinks up at Baker Street and drinks it in. Whoa! The *diversity!* That's what they call it – *diversity*. Like on the BBC! She can see why that's all people in London seem to talk about. All the different languages and skin colours. She wonders how it must feel to come to London from a foreign country. All the opportunity. Possibility. She's feels like a foreigner and not a foreigner at the same time.

Like, if you asked Hollie she wouldn't know that Ireland is a place where abortion is illegal. Even Northern Ireland - *in* the UK. Not foreign at all. No one's ever told her and she's never needed to know, I guess.

Barbara composes a text to Hollie. She'll write another cheque. Of course she will. NHS waiting lists are ridiculous.

Hollie receives the text. She wonders if it would have been easier to have lived fifty years ago. Or been a child bride. Or had an arranged marriage. Or be one of several wives of a polygamist. Then she'd just have got on with it. This wouldn't have happened. She didn't realise she wanted – needed - until there was a possibility she couldn't - now it's all just - snuck up on her. Mum's right, feminism *is* shit! Fuck feminism. Stupid shithheads. Hollie wishes Barbara had been better at warning her, making her realise - she should've done this sooner! Why did no one tell me? **How come one minute I had everything you're meant to have and now I can't have the one thing you're meant to have?**

Hollie gets really mad at Barbara, standing here, in the chemist, clutching a tub of folic acid.

...

Dr Ramirez crosses at the lights composing a keynote speech in her head. We'll find out about that soon, but for now we'll interrupt her by putting a crack in the paving sto -

Do you ever stop, in the middle of the street, and think about what everyone's story might be?

I'm telling you a story now, but part of my brain is wondering what other stories are here. In this room. Here. How many stories are here in this room?

Some of us will have experiences that are kind of similar. Some of us will have no idea how the next person got to where they are.

And we're all at the centre of our own stories. That's amazing. I find that mind melting. We're all at the centre of our own stories, our own universes. Massive egotists!

Sometimes, we're told how to tell ourselves, in our story. Without even realizing.

We're at the centre of our story, but we're not always the ones controlling how it's told.

If it were Oona here, telling you this bit. She might stumble a little. Lots of people have told her story for her, or stories like hers. If you Google the Dail in Ireland, or the Assembly in Northern Ireland, you'll see quite a lot of grey haired white men in their fifties. If you take a panel of any sort - comedy, current affairs, policy makers, by and large they will have a bottle of *Old Spice* somewhere in their home. They will tell us our stories and we will not think twice about it.

There's that verb again, to Google. The corporate word has replaced the word, to search. We search on-line, using search engines that are owned by people who design algorithms to rank what they consider most important or valuable and at the top of those structures, the very top indeed 96% of the Fortune 500, that CEO will be a man.

Anyway - what Oona mightn't tell us is that she went on-line searching for pills.

She read about bleeding and complications. Caesarians and epidurals.

She thinks about that time her mate asked a new mum "how labour went?" and someone elbowed her and everyone looked elsewhere.

And Oona quietly understood that we don't ask that.

The most effective taboo is one that is itself Unspoken.

We simply, quietly do not talk about the trauma of birth. We see the photo afterwards, when baby has been cleaned and mummy resting.

Oona knew from the moment she saw the blue line on the test that she is not ready for this.

Not ready. She wants to study. Wants to be a social worker. First one of her family to go to college. She doesn't know if she'll ever want kids. She knows this is an Unspoken Conversation, happening right now all over the country in sitting rooms. Four and half thousand women travel from Ireland to England a year, ten a day. That girl in Belfast who got a suspended sentence for taking abortion pills. The headlines and phone-ins and picketers. Jailed for life, the law threatens. Illegal. Prosecutions. That woman who died in Galway, Savita, because they wouldn't give her an abortion. Thousands demonstrating on the streets of Dublin. Savita's bereaved husband. Oona had marched with friends from college. Laughed with Irish women tweeting Taoiseach Enda Kenny about their periods, seeing the state takes such an interest in their vaginas. "Get your rosaries off our ovaries!" "Repeal the eighth!" Those awesome pensioners from Derry who went to the police station and said "arrest us then. We bought the pills for the girls who were too scared to get them themselves!"

These women give Oona courage.

**But Oona's too far along for pills.**

**You're being good at listening.**

**I guess that's one thing theatre is good for. That's a good reason for us to be here.**

**In this theatre.**

**This clinical theatre.**

**Where the walls are white.**

**Look how calm it is.**

**Waiting.**

**You're waiting in a theatre.**

**You've slipped off your clothes,**

**Your shoes.**

**Your knickers.**

**You're in a gown, but you can't reach the last tie so your butts flashing every time you move.**

**You wait.**

**Smooth FM plays quietly.**

*(sings)* "If you're lost and come looking you will find me"

Relaxing.

Relaxing you... before your lady bits are cranked open with an eye wateringly large speculum.

Your fanny spot-lit, a womb with a view!

I swear to God, Hollie tells Anna, I'm in the stirrups and the Doctor rests her elbows on my bare thighs and chats about Brexit! Right over my fanny. You couldn't make it up!

\*

*(Drink some water. Freer, even more direct with audience)*

\*

I miss my Granny.

Sorry, I didn't know she would turn up! She does that. Pops up when I'm writing. Or I don't know. A tug on the part of myself that belongs with her.

There she is, poking the fire in her soft sandals, available, tall, a woman who Got Things Done.

I call dad to speak to mum but she's out. There's been a bereavement and mum is there, Sorting Things Out.

The women in our family sit forward, catch you out, gather in kitchens. My great granny was a body washer. If someone died in the street she washed and laid them out. My Granny was a problem solver. If there was beef, she was who you called. She was Hatchet Jinny, because she solved problems. With a hatchet.

My mum was one of seven and she once said to me, a few years ago, sitting in the sun on the back step - that she felt cheated. Her children had left, no longer filled the kitchen the way families did when she was young, and she had no grandkids.

Cheated.

Such a strong word.

So clear and unusual for my mum.

**I stared into my tea, a hurricane inside. Did she have any idea how I felt?  
“Cheated?”**

**I eventually repeated it back to her.**

**She didn’t answer. She didn’t say it again.**

**She didn’t look at me.**

\*

Hollie’s friend Nisha works for Apple and they offer egg freezing. To empower their female staff.

Everything’s empowering now: looking great! Spa breaks! Egg freezing! Kale! So empowering.

Hollie had laughed when Nisha mentioned egg freezing a few years ago. They’d all laughed:

- sci-fi! Hahaha. That’s so sci-fi!

Hollie has a healthy, safe sex life. Works hard. Hollie’s done everything right like a good Millennial. And posted evidence on Instagram. And now she is in the two week wait of her third IUI. Intra Uterine Insemination. Had the donor jizz popped up there! Now The Two Week Wait. The wait

**wait**

**wait**

**wait**

waiting

to see if she’s pregnant or not.

Walking around, a giant MAYBE. The psychological circus of not being *too* realistic but not being *too* optimistic but trying to not stress *too* much about it cos stress affects your chances!

Hollie’s had tonnes of lovely boyfriends and one or two girlfriends and everyone always says how great she is, Hollie’s so great, but Hollie doesn’t feel great she hasn’t been feeling great she doesn’t want to go to Chris’s drinks. She’ll ask for a lime and soda and people will arch an eyebrow and ask more questions like “why don’t you just use Dan’s sperm!” or “ooh what do you know about the donor!” each question a thump in the gut what do you think this is flipping Bridget Jones? Think

she hasn't considered all of this over and over and over and she was excited with the first IUI because she just knew it would work because she's never *failed* before, she'd just glance at some jizz and get preggo but now this is the third try and she doesn't want to talk about it - doesn't want she doesn't want to to to - she won't go she won't reply to the WhatsApp group and she won't say she's around for flipping brunch on Sunday, ok?

\*

**I have a heart shaped cervix. Wonder if that's what Kurt Cobain was singing about when he wrote *Heart Shaped Box*.**

**It's also called a tilted cervix. Or a "swervix" as my friend calls hers. It makes smear tests a little painful. But it's pretty common. When the nurse told me, somehow I wasn't surprised.**

**Somehow the idea of me essentially being *tilted* doesn't surprise me.**

**I googled *Heart Shaped Box* and in fact Courtney Love once tweeted it *was* about her vagina. Then deleted her tweets. So maybe I was right after all. Good company!**

\*

Dr Ramirez licks her lips. She's about to give a paper.

The gist of which is:

- We're poised to offer more choice!
- More choice to women over 40!
- We must exploit this under-served corner of the market!
- The UK has to catch up!
- Yes there are health risks to consider...
- But in Texas they've got one-stop-shops for embryos!
- You pick your Ivy League egg donor and Athletics honors sperm and voila! The dream!

Right?

Voila!

\*

Oona had fancied Killian – let's call him Killian. Killian? Ok.

He was much older, he was funny, he made her feel sexy.

When she plays it over in her head she sees this memory from above.

Floating above her body.

He is taking off her clothes, he is steering her body into position, and she is ...

Looking down from above, passive, not saying yes, not saying no.

Still not saying anything after she wondered if the condom had slipped off. Eek.

Then her period should've come. A cold fear settles at the top of her stomach, the floor of her heart, beating fast against the forming bean in her womb. Not knowing what to do, as days slip by.

Just Oona now, in London, on the bus next to Bernie. All done.

Let's sit with her a moment.

.....

On-line, hollie79 sees happydaffy post again. Something about pineapple cores and womb lining? Fifth post this week! She's in the two week wait, obviously - losing her shit.

Hollie screenshots Happydaffy's post, sends it to a mate:

**- o god, another maniac!**

Hollie prays she will not get like this: life-rafting forums, posting minute details about her mucus.

**Mucus.**

**Vaginal mucus.**

You can tell a lot by your mucus!

Like some kind of magic eight ball! Just swirl a finger around up there, close your eyes and take a reading. Some women can tell their peak fertility!

Hollie's getting the knack of it. She can sense which ovary is ovulating. A dull, mid-cycle cramp. She types it into the comment box: c-r-a-m-

The lingo on IVF forums.

It is a big step from IUI to full whammy IVF:

BFN or BFP – Big fat positive or big fat negative. The meds. The LH surges. The ER's the ET's, the FET's. The follicles, the embryos, the blastocysts. The IUI, the ICSI, the IVF. Then there's the extras. The whey and protein and vitamin D, reflexology, acupuncture, sunny holidays, womb scratching – **yep, you heard, womb scratching...** who invented THAT?

Hollie thinks, I'm not that.

This isn't my story.

This couldn't be my story.

Hollie at the laptop screen, wearing exactly the same T-shirt as Happydaffy.

\*

This started as a story about birth.

You may have noticed the absence of births so far. Non-birth stories aren't as popular. They're kind of hidden in plain sight.

\*

Hollie is watching one of her shows.

Are you waiting to find out Hollie is pregnant?

That's what *should* happen isn't it.

Shouldn't it?

Is that what you're expecting?

It should though.

You paid to hear a story.

There's a reasonable expectation. A delivery of the goods!

Here we all are. We know how a story works. In the stories we tell each other, childless women are tricky. Not all childless women, but generally. Especially childless-by-choice women. Eek!

They are selfish, or bohemian, or dangerous, or sad. Stone-cold murderers, mad as a box of frogs, incapable of minding a real life baby, workaholics, sex addicts. Only

women like Ayn Rand don't want babies! You know, think *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*, or Dennie in *Rebecca*, the bunny boiler in *Fatal Attraction*, or Lady Macbeth, or Jennifer Aniston...

A character can only exist if they have a desire or a goal. That's how story works. There're books about it. I've read some! There's a thing called the 5 act journey of change paradigm. There are whole degrees devoted to it. It varies, but basically, there is a formula. That's why stories are comforting. Because whether we realise it or not we have certain expectations and when they are met we feel relieved, or satisfied and give a glowing review.

### ***A glowing. Review.***

Generally it goes like this: Dream stage, where our hero is living in ignorance of his need to change; Complication, where our hero is faced with a Call to Arms that he resists; Frustration, where our hero thinks he is making progress but not enough; Nightmare, where our hero faces his worst point alone in some cave and finally, the Battle, where he must overcome his flaw, reject his old self, embrace his true need, and win the girl.

The same template is applied to female characters. Like a second hand pair of socks. Comfy enough. And their goal is usually: baby.

Anyway, roughly, this is how stories work, from blockbusters to soaps. So, in order for this to be a successful story, Hollie needs to overcome her obstacles. We need to empathise, then she will battle her flaws and get Baby!

Like the character in the show Hollie is watching right now.

But today, Hollie's second IVF was unsuccessful.

Or, BFN in mumsnet lingo. Big. Fat. Negative.

Hollie stumbles across an article about (*monster voice*) "**Octomom.**"

"Octomom" gave birth to octuplets after an unscrupulous consultant in California was paid a fortune to transfer all eight embryos to her womb.

Hollie is strangely still. From the outside you would think she is simply engrossed in her show.

But inside, Hollie is thinking: (*the performer will have a version of this off book*)

**You fucking OCTOMOM - are you serious? With your million dollars and your million embryos and your million babies SUFFOCATE me! With your hyperstimulated your engorged ovaries! Cali-fucken-fornia man! I did everything! I did EVERYTHING I was told to - I have an accomplished cv! My womb is**

accomplished! What's wrong with me? Maybe if I just WAIT FOR SCIENCE we'll be growing some on trees I can just pluck one off the flipping BABY TREE and I'll have green eyes and brown hair thank you and

I was fine. Where'd that person go? Someone's replaced them with this rubbish me that wakes in the night heart banging like a drum and the dream-baby still warm in your bed in your head all day - another friend pregeroo. Why her? Why not me?

Eat three Kitkats, reassure the voice. The Baby Goblin. I'm ready, your majesty Why isn't this happening? This month I was –

Convinced there's a –

Inject myself - Busaralin, Menopur, Lubion - credit card - the beat in my head. My body stations itself at the laptop, months searching for answers, for spiritualists in Florida called Andromeda who give you options.

**TERRIBLE, CONSUMING, ENDLESS OPTIONS.**

\*

The brief for this commission was to write about healthcare inequality. There was a statistic that its safer to give birth in Bosnia than the UK. That's a shocking fact.

But we're pretty spoilt in this part of the world really.

\*

Oona's home.

Her key on the dish by the door.

Everything continues as before.

Except that Oona isn't the same.

She has a story now, she keeps tucked away, an illegal secret she can't even tell her Doctor.

When she woke up after a sleep on the day of her abortion, Bernie already had the mini kettle boiling on the shelf and Murder She Wrote on the TV. **Edgy**, thinks Oona.

Bernie hands Oona a cup of hot, sweet, milky tea. Two star hotel tea. Outside, traffic and pigeons.

\*

Barbara, waiting in Hollie's sitting room, has landed up unannounced, sick of evasive texts. Upstairs the tap is running. Barbara in the room. The dirty dish. The blinds not fully open. The sharps box, the needles on the side table with her drug treatment plan and Hollie's careful little ticks, inked in after each date.

Barbara hasn't smoked in years but she wants a fag.

She imagines the pricks and bruises across her daughter's belly. She knows Hollie practiced on an orange because she told her.

Barbara suddenly thinks:

Where will this end?

Barbara wonders if she could have been less critical of one or two of Hollie's boyfriends. They weren't up to scratch, but they'd be a damn sight cheaper than endless treatment.

Barbara ignored the girlfriends. Silly.

**Where will this end?** she thinks.

Hollie screaming at Barbara.

*(very soft)* **Am I selfish mum? Mum?**

**Mum?**

**Mum?**

**Am I?**

**Is she?**

**Should she just get over herself?**

And then Barbara holding her, holding her close like she hasn't in years and years, and pressing her lips against her hair and whispering

**- sorry. I'm sorry my darling. It'll be ok.**

Oona's on her phone in bed. Onscreen is a picture of a mother in a hijab and a puffa, leaning out of a tent. A man in a fleece kneels opposite her and in the puddle stands what looks like a blue bottle of *Nivea*.

In the woman's brown hands is a pink newborn, tiny feet, tiny fingers splayed, back of head, little bum. Behind the mother, whose face is hidden, a boy of about four in a *Winnie-the-pooh* top peeps out of the tent at the baby.

**- Refugee mother forced to wash newborn baby in puddle as conditions at Greece's Idomeni camp deteriorate. Médecins sans Frontières estimate that more than 30 per cent of refugees are children.**

Oona thinks of the scent of Nivea. In the midst of that chaos.

Everyone knows that smell.

And her heart breaks for this mother, washing her newborn in a puddle.

And the nurses at the clinic were so gentle.

And Oona is so relieved. So grateful.

All the women, groggy after anesthetic, in little separate chairs.

Bayan, the baby is called. Little baby Bayan in the puddle.

\*

Ok.

At some point, Oona could have a break down. Like now. But she doesn't.

This could be the dramatic peak of her story. But it isn't. Cos she's ok.

Thousands of women live this story.

At some point, this piece will be performed by an actor who doesn't have a tilted cervix. Maybe Anna, even. Her last crack at performing before the twins. I don't have any control over that.

I don't have control over lots of things. Including my womb.

\*

Oona tries on a jacket in a shop. A girl she knew from college is suddenly there. They exchange a few words like "**hiya!**" And "**hey.**"

And out of nowhere, the girl says she **heard.**

Oona freezes.

Even years from now, she'll still remember the girl's voice, the way she says it.

Because it feels dangerous sometimes, to tell our stories. Because telling our stories can be dangerous.

Oona's new boyfriend Stephen wraps his soft strong arms round her and holds her. It'll be five months before Oona tells him one night, in clear, economic sentences, and Stephen will nod and hold her and tell her he's processing - such a geek word! Typical Stephen - "processing" - but he'll tell her its ok he's just processing, he understands.

And Oona will think, I love you.

Bernie holds her tea and thinks about the six babies, one stillborn, and two miscarriages she's lived through. In three years time Bernie will die in her sleep and no one will know about those miscarriages.

She'll take them to her grave.

Some stories are harder to tell.

\*

*(stands to leave)*

*(Then)*

Erin Kalob Kennedy, born a week premature at four twenty in the morning on the 7th July. Eight pounds and dark hair.

Hollie's old for a first-time mum. The birth is complicated.

But then, what isn't?

What story isn't complicated?

Maybe how we tell stories, what stories we tell, means something.