

**Stuart Hadow Short Story Prize 2020**

**SECOND CHANCE ELODIE**

By Kylie Shearer

My daughter is placed on my chest. Her body is a weight I can barely feel. I stare at her little face, squished and red, then I notice her warm breaths puffing past a tongue too big for her delicate mouth to hold.

‘What’s wrong?’ I croak.

The midwife’s tight smile doesn’t fool me.

‘She’s perfect!’ Michael says as he leans in to kiss his daughter’s wrinkled forehead.

He kisses my cheek in a mirrored fashion.

‘Elodie Paige,’ he says, his voice coated in love.

It’s the name we rehearsed in bed each night as Elodie floated her way around my uterus. I pictured her with dark hair like Michael, and perhaps my pale skin that would eventually freckle in summer. A female version of her brother, Jasper.

I trace Elodie’s lips and follow her almond eyes searching for me. She barely makes a sound but those eyes ask for everything. She scans my face unable to focus. I rub my thumbs over her cheeks, then down to her crumpled ears, low on her head. She looks nothing like Jasper. All those months I pictured our family of three becoming four.

She’s not the Elodie Paige I’d imagined. There’s something wrong.

‘Can you hold her?’ I lift her floppy body to Michael. He embraces Elodie and coos.

Two midwives usher him to the heated crib where they poke and prod Elodie. The euphoria from the birth drains like a battery as the staff whisper in their cocoon. Another midwife busies herself around my bedside, never leaving me, but not making eye contact.

Michael remains composed. *Why is he so calm? Doesn't he know?*

The thoughts are screaming inside my head. I want to press rewind and redo this, properly. Elodie is the life that was swimming and thriving inside me, only hours before. Now she's free, it's me who is trapped in a whirlpool.

My uterus throbs and cramps, reminding me it's now empty. Lavender oil wafts, mixing with the strange smells of birth. I can't quite place them, all I know is the potent blend makes my stomach heave, adding unwanted layers to the cramping. Florescent hospital lighting is flicked on forcing me to squint as I adjust from the previous candlelight. The ambience I'd created, despite the medicalised room, pointed towards a calm and peaceful entry for Elodie into this world. The music playlist I'd spent hours creating for my labour rolls in the background.

I adjust my body in the bed, muscles shrieking with each movement. Blood trickles between my legs leaving a crimson pool on the sheet. I didn't need stitches this time, a second birth that was easier in every way. So, why am I not rejoicing?

I skim the room and see the black maternity leggings and chiffon kimono lying abandoned on a chair. My ballet flats are neatly paired underneath the chair. Was it

Michael who straightened up the room? Will Michael take this skewed reality and straighten it for me?

More staff arrive. They introduce themselves but their names mean nothing. They're a blur of uniforms and taut smiles. They're here for Elodie.

'Tell me what's wrong,' I say with a voice, weak and shaky.

Michael has moved to the outer circle but he cranes his neck, furrows his brow. 'She's okay,' he gives me a reassuring smile.

'We're just doing the newborn checks,' my bedside midwife says, staring at my chin, unable to meet my eyes.

I catch words being murmured around Elodie - *palmer crease, low tone* - as she lies under the light that bathes her body in heat. She makes no sound. The screams in my mind are piercing. I quieten my head noise by replaying my pregnancy. From when we found out Jasper was going to have a sibling, to the first scan which showed Elodie's tiny, beating heart. Such relief I felt carrying a healthy baby after a miscarriage. That second ultrasound which showed a baby girl; those grainy images painted a healthy daughter. There was nothing wrong then.

I can't stop the questions saturating my thoughts. The 'what-ifs' muddy my head. What if we'd done the amniocentesis? Would we have been better prepared? What if we listened to the specialists who warned of the risks at my age? But we didn't dare

endanger this baby with intrusive tests because we didn't want to lose another. We would accept and love any baby born to us. It's what we promised.

Michael looks at me, my expressions must be sending a thousand conflicting messages. He smiles through the creases crisscrossing his face. His eyes are brimful of love, but they don't hide his growing concern.

Out of the corner of my eye, a white shirt approaches. It's only seconds but feels like hours. I close my eyes to block the shirt out. Like a child who cannot see therefore cannot be seen, I squeeze my eyelids shut hoping to open them to the world I once had.

'Michael, Amanda, I'm Maree.'

I inhale. Exhale. Open my eyes to a badge that says Maree, Clinical Midwife.

'We need to have Elodie checked by the paediatrician, run some tests.'

Her voice glides in a soothing tone. She's going to make it all better. I should ask questions, but I am mute, much like my daughter. I watch Maree wheel Elodie away.

'Honey, she's going to be fine. She's beautiful. You did an amazing job!' Michael cheers with the exuberance of an Olympic swim coach but I hear the minuscule crack in his voice.

I punch the pillow with the back of my head. It's too much. Nausea and cramping. Adrenalin and throbbing. Everyone else is treading water. I've capsized. Michael holds my hand. Steadies my body. His breathing is slow, steady, measured. Mine is gasping, erratic. We say nothing.

Time hangs inert, until a man in a bright blue jacket and ridiculous bowtie returns with a folder, *Elodie Matthews* labelled on a sticker. He belongs, this man, to this alternate reality, where I've been dragged into a turbulent storm, without warning, expected to stand anchored while the waves rise around me.

He cocks his head to one side and sits on the edge of the bed, like a friend. He's not my friend. Michael stands on the other side. The pillar and the post. I grit my teeth and jam my lips together. If I could shut off my hearing I would.

'I'm Doctor Curtis. I'm a paediatrician. Firstly, congratulations on your new baby girl,' he smiles a stiff, I-have-to-say-that smile.

Michael nods and returns the smile. I dig my heels into the mattress.

'Elodie is showing signs consistent with Trisomy 21. It's a chromosome disorder often referred to as ...'

His voice merges with Norah Jones who is still singing softly in the background. The music nobody thought to turn off.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, more to Michael than me.

I stare at the sheets. The white sheets that replaced the bloody mess underneath me while they analysed my baby. The starched, bleached, worn sheets that have lined so many birthing beds, of women who delivered babies with all the right chromosomes.

I don’t need Doctor Curtis and his words. His meaningless tests and his cordial apologies. Michael squeezes my hand. The veins on the back of his hand pop – a blood takers dream – as he tries to detonate the eruption. There is no explosion. Shock has no fuse. The doctor leaves some pamphlets on my bedside table and mumbles something about a referral to a hospital social worker. Michael thanks him. *For what?*

Elodie stays in the Special Care Nursery while they undertake more testing. They assume I can’t give her the special care she needs here in this room. They’ve left me drowning in the guilt of my rejection.

Visitors come. They rally around. The red carpet of encouragement rolls out before me, barely camouflaging their awkwardness and sympathy. ‘She’s beautiful,’ they say. I’m unsure why the starring role is mine. We entered this together, this family thing. But Michael doesn’t need rallying. He already loves her. Just as she is. Why has he faded into the background with an air of acceptance while I am left here, on centre stage with my heart beating too fast in my chest?

There in that stark hospital ward, I pretend. I smile through dropped tears. I hug, strong, tight hugs as I’ve never hugged before. Squeezing out the pain, trying to scrub

the shame of being a terrible mother. Friends and family celebrate our baby girl, they lend me their hearts while mine is breaking. Then they leave. The huggers, the distractors, the lifesavers. Gone.

Michael goes home to relieve my parents who have been minding Jasper, loving Jasper, answering all his questions about the new baby. ‘We told him her name is Elodie and we love her,’ my Dad tells me on the phone. They love her too. Already. Just like that.

A midwife wheels Elodie back and leaves her there in her crib, next to the bed. We are in two parallel universes, my daughter and me. I look around the room. There are flowers, so many flowers, forcing mugs to be makeshift vases. Cards litter the shelves and bedside table. A purple balloon shouts ‘Congratulations! It’s a girl!’ across its foil face.

The beeping from machines in an adjacent room taps a beat in my brain. There are distant cries from fresh babies. I wonder about their entries into the world and whether they are what their mothers expected. I hear the busy footsteps wearing a path outside my door and gaze at the silhouettes made by the passing nurses.

Then there’s Elodie’s breathing, fast and nasal, laboured gusts of air. I lift her out of the crib, lay her in my lap. I fondle the hospital band that hugs her tiny wrist. I touch her puckered love heart lips but try as I might, I can’t meet her gaze. I flick off the lights. Just Elodie and me finding our way in the darkness.



The sorrow barges in. I gather Elodie close and kiss her. I want to soak her in. I smell her, stroke her, and tell her I love her, just like I did for Jasper when he was born. I'm desperate to feel it again, that immediate love, but the agony will not release me. I weep through the blackness, gut-wrenching moans that convulse my body and wake Elodie who had been lulled to sleep by the only sound she now knows from her mother: despair.

Nurses visit every three hours to help Elodie feed. She refuses to latch on. This is my punishment for not loving her instantly.

'She'll get the idea eventually,' they sing-song as if Elodie and I are choreographing a synchronised swimming routine.

Urging a mother-baby bond that has not come, I lay Elodie on my bare chest, skin to skin, fumbling for the automatic love that is strikingly absent. Michael and I have created a baby I'd not imagined, someone I was not expecting. What kind of mother cannot love her baby?

The clock mocks me with hourly interruptions that drag the truth back. I can't sleep despite the full-body exhaustion aching my bones. Elodie takes nothing from me. The nurses provide bottle feeds, which she sucks with gusto.

I don't want to see the morning yet splinters of light defiantly cut through the curtains. Michael returns, unshaven, wearing yesterday's clothes. He kisses me on the lips. Full, loaded love.

‘How’d you go last night?’ he asks. The answer is in the black circles under my eyes.

‘She won’t feed.’

He rubs my hand then moves to Elodie. She sleeps swaddled in a blanket.

‘Hi, little darling.’ At the sound of his voice, her face softens. ‘Time for Mummy’s liquid gold. It’ll help you grow strong so you can cause mischief with your big brother.’

He amazes me, this husband of mine. How does he do this so easily?

I beg myself to hold it together when Jasper arrives with his grandparents to meet his sister. Lying in a hospital bed in unfamiliar surroundings, my swollen eyes and ragged face unsettle him. His combed hair and pressed shirt are his special occasion clothes for this day, this monumental day when Jasper will be introduced to Elodie. I catch the tears in the back of my throat and beckon him over, bracing myself for his reaction.

‘This is your little sister, Elodie.’

Jasper stands on tippy-toes and stares at this peaceful doll. He tries to stroke Elodie’s head but can only reach with his fingertips. His touch has such tenderness.

‘Dee,’ he says and smiles at me. He loves her immediately.

I struggle through subsequent nights. They’ve kept us here longer, so we can establish feeding but maybe they are waiting for me to be the loving mother I’m supposed to be. Milk-engorged breasts are a constant reminder of my inability to nourish my child. My nipples bleed with the constant grazing of Elodie’s mouth across them, my stubborn attempts for her to take the milk that I’ve produced. She rejects my effort, instead screaming in hunger.

Nightfall returns the raw grief, and I allow it to drop down my face. Elodie forgives my shortcomings. She carries me through the night, awash with my tears, never once giving up on me. She nuzzles into my chest, even though she does not feed, she connects with my skin. She listens to my heartbeat and is soothed by its familiar rhythms. Perhaps it is a routine we are creating, after all, I just haven’t learnt her style yet, and am still muddling through my strokes.

I’m woken by the calls of ‘Dee! Dee!’ from down the hallway. Jasper peeks around the corner, wearing his favourite digger Tee. His face is a circle of light and innocence. Michael follows, clean-shaven.

‘Morning to my two beautiful ladies!’ he beams as he kisses my cheek. ‘How’s the feeding going?’

‘She’s still guzzling the bottle like a beer can but won’t have a bar of me.’ I fake ambivalence but Michael knows me too well.

‘Honey, you’ve done this before and you’ll do it again.’ He rubs my shoulder and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. I shrug and blink away the tears.

‘Hold! Hold!’ Jasper pleads.

Michael boosts Jasper onto the bed. I inhale my firstborn. He smells like fabric softener and happiness. Michael places Elodie in Jasper’s open arms.

‘Hold tight!’ Michael instructs as he takes a photo. Elodie squawks and Jasper’s face drops.

‘It’s okay, sweetheart, she’s just hungry,’ I reassure. I take her from his arms, then position for a feed, knowing it’s futile but I’m desperate to show Michael I’m trying. I place Elodie in the familiar hold and brush the side of her mouth encouraging her to open. She moves her cheek towards my breast but as I attempt to latch her on I’m met with the same flaccid response.

‘Keep going,’ Michael enthuses.

I muffle my frustration through gritted teeth. I stare down at Elodie, who is thirsty for love and nourishment. Supporting her head, I turn her towards the nipple once again. Her mouth is wide and I plant her face. I’ve tried this tactic before, thinking she has no choice but to latch. She has had other ideas. This time, she starts sucking and I feel the relief of my breast draining.

‘She’s feeding!’ I yelp.

Michael grins ear to ear.

Elodie feeds from one side. I want to hug her, squeeze all that milk out of her. I sit her up and rub her back as she slumps in heavenly milk defeat. I study Elodie’s flat head. For the first time, I notice the tiny curl at the back of her hair, just like Jasper’s, just like Michael’s. I finger the curl, wrapping it around and around, making sure it stays there despite my tampering. Dutifully, it curls back when I let it go.

Elodie rouses and after much squirming, burps. I lift her onto my shoulder where she nestles in like a baby koala. She fits so snugly there, breathing into my neck.

After an hour, Michael takes Jasper home, leaving Elodie and me to share our final night in the hospital. Amber light from the window dips in the sky and the darkness steals in. The staccato rhythm of Elodie’s short breath is hypnotic. I think about the mother I have been and the mother I can be. The shame leaks into my thoughts but I lay the sandbags to start forgiving myself. My love for Elodie was not immediate. I can’t change that. But I know I have the rest of her life to make it up to her. My second chance Elodie.

I’m determined to establish breastfeeding on that last night in our hospital room. I buzz the midwives each time I feed, absorb their advice and help Elodie practice latching. Each time she sucks, my body responds with fluid milk flow. As sunrise

beckons, I feed her again, this time she draws the milk like she's been doing it for years. I feel a calm cloak me.

Michael and Jasper pull up at the hospital entrance. Jasper looks so big in his toddler seat. My little boy is now a big brother. Elodie's protector; the one who loved her right from the start, without question. I click Elodie's capsule and tuck the waffle blanket over her. She stares at my face, taking me in, trying to focus on my eyes. This time I meet her gaze, confident my eyes tell the story of my heart. A heart with hairline fractures. The heart of an imperfect mother.

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