

## Step-baby

Over the years, many things had been left on Gavin's doorstep. Telephone directories, the odd bunch of flowers, litter. And once, before he came south and just after the neighbours had found out he was gay, a pile of what his mother called 'dog mess'.

Never a baby though.

Even from down here on the pavement he could tell that the straw shopping basket up by the front door contained a baby. He was hardwired to recognise that Moses moment just like anyone else. Perhaps more than anyone else.

He realised that he was frozen mid-climb like some cartoon of surprise: one leg up on the first step, one leg down on the pavement and his front door key in his hand. He quickly climbed to the top of the steps and looked down into the basket.

He wanted to be able to sneer at its tacky purpleness; whip out something Gavinesque about the missing taste buds of the person who had picked it, but his heart was all over the place and he was having too much trouble trying to claw his way out of the bathroom back in Doncaster. He saw himself down on his knees by the toilet where the lino was worn away by all those feet facing forward, facing backwards. His sister was panting. Quietly.

This baby was asleep though; its features folded in on itself. It was tiny, days old at most.

Only when his heart had calmed to something like its normal rate did he think of turning his head to scan up and down the street. The last of the day's sun was

dazzling off windscreens and wing mirrors; London was grinding its way home in the background. No one was skulking away with tell-tale baby vomit down their back.

He thought of Maxwell and his career and the need to act correctly, and reached for his mobile phone.

His thumb hesitated over the '9'. When the police arrived, blue lights flashing, it would make this seem too important. Someone had merely picked a doorstep and left a baby on it. Could have been any of the doorsteps on the street.

He'd ring the police station instead.

There, it was easy enough to twist the kaleidoscope, tilt the telescope; refuse to look at that other Gavin. Just keep to the script of now.

Skirting around the basket as cautiously as if it had been ticking, he slid the key into the lock and pushed open the door. The baby moved and he held his breath. It stilled again and Gavin saw that the little fists were now out, clenched on top of the blanket as if it was incensed that it had been abandoned.

Best not to think about that.

He bent down and slipped off his trainer and, wedging open the front door, walked lopsidedly along the hall.

Already the baby was changing things. Now his first impression of home was not expensive polish or hand-blocked wallpaper, but how his foot in its sock slipped on the wooden floor. He was glad to get into the kitchen amongst the cold comfort of the granite.

Except the baby kept pulling him back along the hallway.

He couldn't decide if it was the posh postcode, the antique furniture, or a spell on a Diversity Awareness course that was keeping the police officers in check. Both young, the guy not bad looking in a boy band kind of way, they were playing it straight. It looked like it was killing the woman though, her eyes roving over the room, totting it all up, putting a price on him.

Unfortunately, they had brought the basket, and therefore the baby, inside. Now they were all perched on the sofa and chairs with that hideous purple thing centre stage, like some screamingly kitsch piece of art. The emergency social worker was on her way.

Gavin had given them the facts of the discovery and shrugged his way past whether he knew of any reason why the baby had been left on his doorstep. It was, unusually for him, a genuine gesture: he really didn't know why the baby had pitched up there. It had to simply be a random act. Nothing personal.

Who'd heard of Doncaster down here, anyway?

He sat up straighter, lifted his chin. Everything would go back to normal as soon as they took the damn baby away. Once the baby was out of the house, you could forget about it. That's how it worked. He'd done what he'd needed to do then; the police would do what they had to do now.

The baby started to cry and the sound stormed into the quiet corners of the house and up the walls.

'Don't look at me,' the policewoman shouted, doing a strange thing with her hands as if she was pushing away air. 'I don't know anything about babies.'

Gavin felt the crying reach inside him, tearing away at things he didn't want touched and so he got up quickly, scooped the squirming, scrawny thing out of the

basket and held it against his chest. It was swamped by its pink Babygro and Gavin struggled to get a grip.

Maxwell appeared in the doorway.

‘Jesus Gods!’ he said, glaring at the baby. ‘What the hell have you done now?’

Waiting in the queue for his sandwich and espresso the next day, Gavin re-examined the row that had flared once the social worker had removed the baby. Maxwell hadn’t rushed to apologise for that comment which had made Gavin look like an idiot in front of the Police. And when he had, his warm mouth on Gavin’s neck, it felt insincere and fuelled by a much baser motive.

The frost on the sheets had still been there this morning.

They both knew there was an imbalance at the heart of their relationship: class, age, achievements, wealth, but Gavin didn’t need to have his nose rubbed in it. To be slapped down in front of an audience as if he was a young lad always causing trouble.

Or perhaps he was rattled because he’d feared there was something lying beneath Maxwell’s comment, something informed?

He moved forward in the queue. He had to stop chewing on this. He’d spent years perfecting this version of Gavin. Nobody, including Maxwell, cared about the earlier one.

The queue moved forward slowly. It was always like this when the sandwich woman brought her daughter along; a large, dreamy girl, often missing through ill health, she was back and fumbling over change.

At the head of the queue, he ordered, and she gave him a loose, not-set-properly smile. People said she fancied him and he wondered if they were right.

Putting his sandwich in a bag, she spilt a little of his coffee, her hands momentarily touching his. He turned away quickly and headed back upstairs to the office.

Everything disturbed him today. He was a toned-down version of himself. Normally any out-of-the-ordinary incident would have him perched on the edge of his desk, caught in an imagined spotlight and acting up every little detail.

But his lips were sealed about the baby on the doorstep.

Too close to home.

Over a week later, he still couldn't get the baby out of his head. How sweet, the way she had felt against his chest. Her hand had curled in his. The delicate shell pink of fingernails against his palm.

When he walked into the sitting room it seemed as if that hideous basket was still on the rug. He saw Maxwell lower his paper and give him one of his looks.

Gavin was moving lopsidedly again: one foot in London, one foot in Doncaster.

He determined not to think about it again. He couldn't stop thinking about it.

It was a sign. It wasn't a sign.

A punishment?

A chance to make amends?

On Sunday he gave Maxwell everything he wanted; lavished his body on him until the poor guy looked punch drunk. Then, baby-step by baby-step, he began.

‘Maxwell, have you ever thought about, you and me? Adopting?’

A basilisk stare.

‘What’s all this about?’

Gavin moved his hand to Maxwell’s chest, trying to pat his good mood back into place. ‘That baby, made me think. We could, you know.’

Maxwell rolled out from under his hand.

It escalated; Gavin escalated it. Maxwell was always backing away. It was all part of a pattern. They had not permanence. He was just R&R, wasn’t he? Someone young, entertaining, slightly rough around the edges.

Bitter words. Doors slammed.

‘Lot on my mind,’ he told the daughter of the sandwich woman when she asked him what was wrong.

She nodded and handed him his change.

Three weeks after the baby incident, Gavin arrived home to find a truce had been declared. Fanned out on the kitchen worktop were brochures about Japan.

Maxwell poured wine and handed him his glass; one of the very best ones, heavy even without the wine. His smile was assured when he saw Gavin look towards the brochures.

'Well, we've always wanted to go, haven't we? Couple of days in Kyoto, do the temples. Travel to Hakone to see Fuji. Then a week in Tokyo.' He clinked his glass against Gavin's.

Gavin looked towards the brochures again. They were an envelope of dirty tenners, a gag, a sticking plaster.

Was he really that easy?

Apparently, he was. He caved in, gave in. Earned himself an upgrade to Business Class and a Saturday in Selfridges shopping for holiday clothes.

On Monday, he was back on the edge of his desk in the spotlight, entertaining everyone with a vignette about trying out his two Japanese phrases on a tourist in Oxford Street.

At lunchtime, standing in the queue for his sandwich he felt light-headed with the promise of what was to come.

The daughter of the sandwich woman gave him a mournful look.

'You're going away.'

It was touching really.

'Yes,' he said, in his kindest voice. 'Japan. The Far East.'

'It will be hot there, won't it?'

'It will.'

'I thought so.' She nodded and turned away to get his order together. Did not smile when she handed him his coffee or his sandwich in a bag.

Back at his desk, he reached into the bag and pulled out a small pink sun hat along with his feta and roasted pepper on wholemeal.

Not random then, that leaving.

A baby passed to him in trust. Another one he'd let slip through his fingers.

He didn't go home that night, ending up instead down on his hands and knees in a fetid flat with someone he knew would treat him as badly as he deserved.

When he eventually slunk back, Maxwell was standing by the fireplace, one hand in his pocket. He studied Gavin as though he had always known he would turn feral.

'Where the hell have you been?' he said.

'Bit late to play Daddy isn't it?' Gavin shot back and went upstairs to pack.

Ends