**Hand to Hand**

Silvia Ranfagni

Translated by Lucy Rand

*The Body is wretched. He just wants to survive. Cement, pollution, sunburn, irritation; everything is waging war on him. He’s always too hot or too cold, having uniforms put on and taken off again. The Body’s cry is painful. Sometimes it’s because of the wicked sunshine, thirst, hunger; sometimes nobody really knows why. Sterilising, disinfecting, washing, even in the middle of the night, four times even before the sun comes up. The Body weighs three kilos but contains zero grams of compassion.*

*It wouldn’t be fair to call him ugly. He might get better, when his nose is less squashed and a certain proportion is achieved between his head and his shoulders. He is just an outline of a human. When he came out he was red like the devil with rattish limbs, a far cry from rosy perfection, and a long tail that was attached to his stomach and ended somewhere inside my vagina.* Voilà! *And all of a sudden, blood, faeces, mucus – things that up until this point were considered filthy – expected love from me.*

*After a clean the Body still disappoints. His skin is pale, his eyelids swollen from the pressure of pushing. His hairline is slightly too low, his lips are less plump than expected. A bluish vein sticks out on his temple. (It’s swollen, but microscopically.) His fingers are stubby, really stubby and pasty, becoming pink only around the fingernails.*

*Surrounded by green scrubs, halogen lamps and metal, he stiffens and screams, pure anguish and zero language. Words are banal* Pick him up. *This command, said and repeated endlessly around the world in every language, reverberates through a busy machinery of people who had all had something to do with the Body before, but now, suddenly, don’t. Where are you all going? You’re not leaving me alone now are you? In the tumult of the birth you flexed your hips so much that they arched. You were pushed, investigated, opened up. You want to tend to your body, but the other Body is there, damp and soggy. He has no grace as he overtakes you with his short and wrinkly limbs. You slam on the brakes, but smiling. According to the existential Highway Code he now has right of way, whether on a mule track in Barbagia or between the palm trees on Ocean Drive. As soon as you intersect him, you’re on the road without a licence.*

*Your belly was a medal, a queue-jump pass, a noble banner of the lineage of Incurable Optimism. It was a stage on which you were always in the centre. And now, devoid of the stuffing that was the Body, it has become a circus tent. The show the pregnancy had been for the world is over, and the stomach has been deflated. ‘All done,’ people seem to say. But there is everything left to do. Everything, truly everything. Beginning a pattern that would repeat itself long into the future, a woman lays her child on her chest. She is a mother, so we already know that she loves, we already know how she feels. We already know everything there is to know about mothers. Indeed, what even is there to know? A mother is a mother, her feelings are limpid, and too bad if they aren’t, because a mother cannot be accommodated by anybody. A mother is, by definition,* she who accommodates.

*He looks like a different species of animal, look at his wrinkles, look at his sagging skin! You say nothing and it’s somebody else who says, ‘The baby’s okay.’*

*\**

*If until this point you had been pushing outwards, now you beat at your stomach. Distance. Unfamiliarity. Faint disgust. Your breathing becomes shallow, your throat narrow. Fear. He must have it too. He shakes, but not like a human shakes. His tremors come from an abyss, somewhere unfathomable. They are movements from the viscera of the Earth and, although miniscule, the Body erupts with terrifying force. His cry is a shriek, his movements are lurches, the eagle and the frog are within him. Thankfully they take him from you. ‘We’re going to keep him under observation for a night. It’s routine in these cases.’*

*Far away, in another person’s arms, you notice his fragility, his miniscule dimensions, the upright tuft of hair on the top of his head. You see his little mouth stretch into a grimace, his fingers gripping and loosening in a dance. Only then do you say to yourself, ‘Of course I love him, he’s my son.’*

As you approach the glow of the incubator, the outline gradually appears, fluorescent in the dim light. One step, then another, and another, and there’s the Body trembling in a twitching slumber. It’s your first face-to-face meeting in the absence of strangers. You get down on your knees. You observe. On the other side of the transparent screen the Body is slightly out of focus. Your thoughts, too, are out of focus. You’re devoid of the divine that all mothers emanate. Perhaps they took blood, you think, seeing a plaster on his forearm. It’s probably routine to take blood. But his long pale lashes and reddish stains on his eyelids don’t seem normal to you. The Body isn’t so beautiful, not how you expected. He’s definitely better than he was; for a start he’s dry and no longer wet. He’s sleeping and not terrifying.

On the side of the incubator there’s a vent with rubber petals to filter the air. Advanced medical technology is protecting the Body from germs and temperature changes. You try inserting a finger. Your finger isn’t moved by the desire for contact, but by the desire for a rippling explosion of joy, the sensation accorded to motherhood that this Body, expelled with such difficulty, *has to* now concede. It is part of a tacit agreement, a *quid pro quo* in which He also needs to hold up his end, however small.

By violating the space of the incubator, your finger is seeking delight, but the Body immediately rejects it, and does so flagrantly, with a pounding of bones, a stiffening of hand against nose, a flexion of wrinkly feet. The concerto of nerves and muscles lasts only momentarily, as five miniature models of fingers suddenly seize the intruder. The microscopic phalanges become mottled in red and white with the strain of imprisoning the majestic presence. Your finger is not a stranger, thanks to something that only the Body can feel.

The opportunity to understand everything, really everything there is to understand, is already in front of you. It is not you who has a child, but the child who has you. Yet you haven’t quite grasped it, not just yet; you’re too caught up thinking to understand, to truly understand what the Body feels.

Down the road there are three sirens with dazzling blowouts. They also have impeccable nails and smile at you through the window of the hair salon. ‘Break the rules. But not your hair.’ They are so beautiful that their imperative makes you vow, ‘Yes, I will break all the rules. I’ll break them today. In fact, apologies for not having broken them before.’ Their glossy coiffures bob up and down around their angelicised faces and their cleavages reign over the top of rounded necklines like crowns on the heads of kings. Compelled to bow down in front of their perfection, we are forced by some petty residual rule into an inconsistency that passes through without leaving a mark – not even on the window of the hair salon.

You too, like other women, have now reached the age where transgression has already called the shots and you have transgressed that which you *had* to transgress. *Break the rules* is the only rule you’ve unerringly respected. Partners, homes and jobs have been bonds but never chains. There has already been too much alcohol, too much smoking, too much in general. It helped you to endure a routine that repeated itself over and over again. The best possible drug on the market, inasmuch as it was free and legal, was Romantic Love: tingles under your skin, light-headedness, butterflies in your stomach, fireflies quickly extinguished on the palm of your hand, one dose and then another, more and more again, a long Rosary of names, that heaven never heard until, as time passed, the horizon became so open and free that you felt dizzy. What could your life’s purpose be, you ask your reflection in the Negroni.

This was happening just as your organism was starting to reveal itself as a deficient country with no purchasing power, a vertiginous collapse of domestic product where every action came with a high rate of interest – from climbing the stairs to eating a pot-roast. Hangovers became small convalescences, requiring a long break before drinking again. The afternoons became barren, and all the films seen.

And so, how do you envisage a future that is not what is already apparent in your bathroom mirror? Your breasts are lower than they once were; an apocalyptic vision in which an unjust and heartless god, a deity unappreciative of your efforts, shows you your body’s journey by gesturing towards your bust, and you wind up standing over the precipice of the question, What is your body’s true intention? What is its extreme will? It’s a strange question, given that the body is *yours*, you *possess* it. It learned to crawl, walk, run, climb, swim, ski, play tennis. Until now it has been a slave to your will. Even lifting your head was a gesture learned in the cradle through repeated exercises to sufficiently strengthen your neck muscles.

On the contrary, the breasts in the mirror point downhill: This way please! Observing them you remain incredulous. “You mean me?” You ask yourself, gripped by the scandal that you are *ordinary*, in spite of the long thread of grandiose thoughts cultivated over time. The discovery that all bodies, including your own, have been moving towards nothingness since day one, is simultaneously surprising and banal. On that day, faced with the downward pointing breasts, your mind started to bleed into the flow of time that, from the aching outset of the menarche, had brought you to the dawn of the reproductive cycle’s completion. A closing act announced by fanciful creations of polyps and fibroids in the uterus, along with finding yourself involuntarily greeting midget-sized creatures in the street that used to irritate you.

Once upon a time the idea of having a child was like the idea of living in an igloo, or walking on burning coals, or going on a pilgrimage to Međugorje: all very interesting experiences, but which would never happen to you. Your ovaries have long been acquainted with the silent chemistry of the pill or the athletic intervention of a coil, rarely the glove of a condom. Over the years billions of spermatozoa have triumphantly entered your vagina to be defeated by planning worthy of a Nazi general. It can certainly be said that you’ve experienced sex. Now you would like to trylove. But not single-use love, you’ve had enough of single-use sentimentality. You want Unconditional Love. Unfortunately, Unconditional means no restrictions. Unconditional can’t be sampled, tasted, tried. Unconditional is by definition all or nothing and you are not at all interested in Nothing.

Human International is an international franchise of sperm donors. Not a normal franchise. It claims to be the World’s Best Sperm Bank. A blue box on the screen announces, ‘Total Donors Today: 569.’ You’re surprised. In a single day there are five hundred and sixty nine men out there looking to get a woman pregnant, and you haven’t met even half of them.

You have searched high and low for this white knight of conception, from bars, to gatecrashed parties, even on trains. Every time you left the house you would say to yourself, ‘Today I will meet the father of my child.’ Dazzled by such depth of planning, your face would redden when confronted with a decent-looking man, leaning languidly against a door frame with a gin and tonic in hand and a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. Sometimes just a Hi or a flirtatious smile was enough to make you think, ‘Maybe this is the one!’

Between thirty-five and forty-one you tried to procreate with three different men. One was a card-holding obsessive compulsive, one a divorcee with three pending lawsuits, and one a dictator, who had seemingly learned how to have relationships with women on a fast-track course in Iran. But for reasons that remain mysterious the symbiotic unions all fell apart before any long-term plans were made. In fact, the unions falling apart had already happened long before any desire to reproduce. Your roaring review of male-kind – unfortunately rather too long to be recalled – included a John Wayne, a Sid Vicious, a Rain Man and a Caligula.

The surprise at the count of five hundred and sixty nine males ready to impregnate you without even knowing what you look like is colossal. For a moment you even consider that their intentions to impregnate are somehow related to the very fact of notknowing you. Then you tell yourself, ‘It must be the times. Oh, what a world we live in.’

When you conceive the idea of becoming a parent you are naked, of both clothing and expectations.

It is a Sunday, the worst day for thinking about life. The window panes are still vibrating from a passing motorbike with a large engine and, laying on the bed, you hypothesise that it’s a Harley Davidson – but only because you know no other makes of bike. Alone in a deserted house with no plans, you take the time to lift your head from the pillow and contemplate the clock radio. The red light of the display appears before your reflection in the ethnic mirror you brought back from Bangkok.

Smudges of mascara remain under your eyes. Pandas are at no risk of extinction. Among the cigarette butts, two wine glasses and the bottle of Extra Dry Prosecco, you search for any trace of the Brazilian Pilates instructor Joaquim, who is apparently better than Houdini at sudden disappearances. Only the used condom on the shelf, wrapped in a knot that makes it look like a surprise parcel, remains of him. You read in *How Crocodiles Do It: The sex life of animals* that ‘the reproductive process can be split into four phases: 1) courtship, 2) mating, 3) production of embryos, and 4) parenting.’ You have always stopped at phase 2, not even a hint of embryos, never, not even this morning. As this bible of yours illustrates very well, human reproduction is not an asexual matter like it is for mushrooms, and having sex with yourself like a worm won’t work either. But, once again, you’re alone.

You look for other traces of Joaquim. A message from him suggesting the possibility of another meeting would be ideal. There isn’t one. Not in the kitchen, not in the leftovers of whole-wheat fusilli with courgette and pine nuts, not on the shelf next to the front door. The attraction you experienced as a result of the seven per cent double malt beer, then the eleven of the prosecco, evaporates with the alcohol. (Actually, something of the alcohol does remain, in the form of a solid headache.) However if you want an embryo, you need a man. You decide to put pen to paper and write a note to deliver at the Postural Academy Pilates centre just down the road. There must be some paper somewhere. Surprisingly you find some on the desk. The pen is easier to find: right under the sole of your foot.

Naked outside, naked inside, you write:

*Dear Joaquim,*

*In the short time we have known each other I have found your knowledge of the female body to be rather thorough.* You falter on the repetition of ‘known-knowledge’, and immediately swap ‘known’ for ‘been seeing’. *In the short time we have been seeing each other I have found your knowledge of the female body to be rather thorough.* This is your plan. Phase 1: Play into his testosterone-fuelled vanity. Phase 2: Play into his testosterone-fuelled vanity with literary flourish. *The happiness of today feels like fear, since it will never be greater than this, there will only be the risk of its squander.* In reality the sex was rather dull and lacking in climax, but Joaquim was, nevertheless, an option. All in good time, you tell yourself, all in good time, you never know.

The world of dust is suspended in the sunlight beyond the window, the dance of fine particles – mostly pollutants, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and gaseous hydrocarbons – appear to be mocking your literary efforts to recover a person of average intelligence who has vanished in stealth.

Not knowing how to pass the day, you switch on your laptop and get your dose of neuronal saturation with some news about a massacre in Zambia, the effects of global warming on seals in the Antarctic, dreadful torture in the Libyan immigration centres and ‘Relationship Crises and How to Overcome Them’. The last article really catches your attention because, in the event that you ever did have one, a relationship, you would now know how to easily overcome any potential crises by using the seven tips devised by a team of – probably now divorced – Californian psychologists.

You switch on the sauna function in the shower and steam rises over your thoughts. You think low, you think nothing. About sweating, perhaps. You evaporate Prosecco. Prosecco and the aftershave that Joaquim left on you. The fog rises over the bathroom tiles. In the shower cubicle the shape of you scrubs away at itself with the exfoliating glove. You are putting in a lot of effort. The vigour of the gesture says, ‘Come on, start again from now’, ‘Cheer up’, ‘Don’t give into self-pity’. Then suddenly you freeze. You are a contemporary art installation. At ninety degrees, in the shower stall, you, your silhouette in the steam, you realise it’s your birthday soon. Another birthday, another year. The bell tolls, don, don, don, the sound of death.

Hair dripping and sticking to your face you say to yourself, ‘Ok, I haven’t had a child, but what have I done?’ You get up from your perpendicular position and start searching for things you can be proud of. You graduated from DAMS, worked for some years as a press officer, there was the brief NGO experience in Cambodia.

The diploma in Thai massage, though, was a waste of time. Apart from the fact you wanted to screw the instructor. You’ve forgotten that whole infinite sequence of micro-movements, first on the right then repeated on the left like choreography.

You return to listing your achievements, things to be proud of. The desire to paint wasn’t some grand intuition. No exceptionality, not a trace of it. Two shows in secondary galleries, you tell me. And you fancied yourself as a Van Gogh after a self-esteem workshop.

Luckily you made a career as a ‘content manager’ at Communication Ride – whatever it is ‘content manager’ means and whatever it is Communication Ride does.

Under the jet of the shower three shortcomings flow from your accomplishments: 1) they slip away, 2) they are few, 3) they are yours.

You apply a ‘mask for coloured and highlighted hair’, a blue skull cap. ‘Don’t get bogged down in desperation’. You wrap yourself in your Indian *khadi* as you have to leave the treatment in for a while. You wipe part of the mirror clean with your hand. A quarter moon appears transparent in the steam and you exchange a complicit glance with your reflection. Right. There’s no more time to lose.

The philosophy of Human sounds extremely hopeful: ‘To help the childless create new life.’ The company proudly states that it is in the Guinness Book of Records for the highest number of pregnancies in the sector. The presentation video renders Human in a reassuring light. The head office has well-lit corridors, beige carpets and artificial plants, where a couple of managers wander around in suits and ties. You’ll recall this image later because the humans walk upright and with perfect control.

It is a spotless corridor, tidy, there’s not a smear on the paint or inspired felt-tip sketches on the walls, it is a grown-up corridor. The voice of the narrator recounts the first time sperm was frozen and the fact that Finns are statistically the happiest people in the world. (The two topics are related by the fact that the first freezing of sperm was carried out by a Finn – information that one day you will discover was completely unfounded and employed purely to seduce you. After all, you are a customer and thus you must be courted). A smiling Laplander on a sunny day, then some generic Finns on a sunny day, followed by a field of wheat swaying in the wind, in the sun. The sun is a typically Finnish thing. So is happiness, judging from their perfect smiles with bridges straight out of a dentistry manual. Beautiful people with recently washed hair. Nice place, nice weather, perfect world.

The male voice on the video doesn’t mention the criteria used to establish that, out of all the countries in the world, happiness is found in the midst of interminable winters and winds that freeze the bones. In Finland happiness has to do with Human. As a content manager you read *The Hidden* Persuaders, but you are fooled in spite of having studied Packard.

Hypnotised like a child at her first carousel, information about Finland rains down around you. It is really just tourism promotion with bays, coves and valleys full of saturated colours, until the narrator mentions artificial insemination. That’s it for the sun, for the overly carefree smiles, for bike rides.

Now it all gets serious, exact, the light becomes cold. Latex gloved hands extract test tubes from a whitish liquid. Cold vapour rises from the solution. They build the tension of an action movie in the moment that a bomb is defused, fast images, accelerated montage, technical details and, just when the emotion is at its height, suddenly, look, a baby.

It is exactly how you imagine a baby: smiling, big eyes, perfectly proportionate. ‘Human International will bring your dream to life.’ The new slogan sort of trepans between your neurons and makes its way towards the decision-making centre of the brain. You are making a *rest of your life, until death do us part* decision,but in your head it is really a *so that death remains distant* decision and a, ‘Yes, I want it!’ gushes mightily from your mind. Your ‘I want it’ is as real as the sound of a telephone’s ring in your eardrum. The Human International logo stops frazzling you and you swing onto the ring, moronic. Reaching for the writing on the screen, which strikes you in the face like a final hook, – ‘Find your donor today’ – your conscience is knocked out. You click.

Before proceeding to checkout – all major credit cards accepted – there is an order form to fill out requiring an accurate description of the desired goods, which will be sent by express mail. (The automatic irrigator instructions drove you mad, but you’re sure the insemination ones will be simpler). The sperm is conserved in a culture medium of potassium chloride, magnesium sulphate, sodium iodate, sodium carbonate, sodium chloride and human serum albumin, which is why there is nothing to fear, certainly not for preservation, nor the species.

The first question on the order form is about ‘race’. On the screen a nice green V has appeared, the response is preselected on ‘Any’. You are not by any means racist; race has never been an issue, if not now that you have to select one.

How open are you to the idea of mixing your genes with Asian, African, Hispanic or Middle-eastern ones? With a click you decide to remain in the Caucasus. You are undecided on hair colour, on the other hand: dark blonde and blonde and, why not brown too. Unfortunately the site only accepts one choice, and only one. The idea of a pasty little semi-albino horrifies you. You opt for dark brown. ‘Now search for your donor,’ says the screen. It says it directly to you. Well go on then, search for him.

Click. It is a movement of the metacarpal, the imperceptible lowering of your index finger. The physical gesture of clicking is almost invisible, so much that it seems a pure act of the mind. ‘There are twelve donors who match your search criteria.’

The camera icon allows you to see the donors when they were children. Click. Between six months and four years old they smile happily on the screen. Until this point you had struck straight lines through the choices to plan the perfect piece of work, almost as if it were architecture, but now, faced with the photos, the criteria are conflicting and confusing. What do you want it to look like? After removing Alpo with the jug ears, Hemmo with the buckteeth, Atro with the rat eyes and all the other defectives, only Mr 8303, irresistible with his frowning lips, and Ilppo with the biting cheeks remain.

Each one is in his own square, above the symbol of a megaphone. An ideogram of sound waves offers the option to hear his voice. Ilppo’s one says, ‘It told me to write something about myself and my reasons for becoming a donor… First of all I love sports, especially ice hockey, and I play in the second division, in Finland… But in the future I am ready to do more, only time will tell… When I imagine people who can’t have children, oh god… I can’t even begin to think of myself in that situation…’ – *very sensitive,* – ‘If I can help to make somebody happy… well, it will make me happy too… And then… I know that… if you’re looking for a donor… with everything that it involves, I know that you want a child, you really want it.’ *– Compassionate –* ‘Finally, I wish you a happy family’.

But only Mr 8303, identified by a mysterious signature, seduces you. He says his spiel with a thick Nordic accent and some uncertainty in English.

‘I was born in 1972, the eldest of nine brothers. My childhood and youth were happy… Then I was sure I would become the father of a big family. Over the years I had some girlfriends but none of them could think about being a fisherman’s wife.’ *A fisherman! How exotic, a Finnish fisherman! –* ‘I have never imagined being anything but a fisherman, and so all the relationships ended.’ *– Poor guy, so coherent, such integrity. –* ‘I am very interested in History, and when I look at the genealogy of my family, going back five hundred years’ *– damn, –* ‘I ask myself who will remember me in hundreds of years? That is why I become a sperm donor.’

Mr 8303 is thinking about a child that doesn’t exist, just like you are. There is a tinge of romanticism in recognising yourself in him. Mr 8303 lives a tough life on a fishing boat, the North winds giving him a hard time, the rigging to throw, the nets to pull in, the bow to head up, problems of port and starboard. To you it seems perfect that he works so hard, and even better that his father worked hard, and his grandfather before him, and that all the forefathers of Mr 8303 have known hundreds of years of cold, hunger, bad weather and wind, guaranteeing the biological result of rigorous Darwinian selection in that sperm. (This is necessary because nobody in your family has ever fished a sprat.) The speed of Mr 8303’s sperm was another factor that sealed the deal: 40 MOT, ‘Total Motile’, which is the number of motile sperm per millilitre after thawing: the sperm that survived the cold. The cold does nothing to Mr 8303’s sperm. Sure enough it costs more, a BMW speeding towards your uterus.

After putting in your credit card’s security code you feel like lighting a cigarette, but the responsibility of the event makes you opt for a herbal tea instead. Detox. (Tap water. Mug in the microwave. Thirty seconds. It’s already boiling. Viva technology.) In the time that the water in the cup takes to reach a hundred degrees you convince yourself of a power endowed by this solitary choice. You won’t compromise with anyone, you won’t have to discuss educational theories, and you won’t concede a millimetre on your beliefs. After all, *How Crocodiles Do It* contemplates the same question: why does it take two to reproduce?

You are at the Milan Natural History Museum, a nineteenth century building inside the park. It is a windy day, which is why you took the steps one by one, regardless of the weight of your belly. You are pregnant and you deserve a break. The atrium is bright. A large marble plaque looms over it reading, ‘It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most adaptable to change.’ All the ages, the men, the animals, the algae and the bacteria on Planet Earth coexist in a single paragraph, above you. Interdependence resides in this image. You are small under the evolutionary principal that allows you, truly you, in this moment, to exist. You haven’t yet understood that Charles Darwin knows the biological truth of the Body – made of matter, boluses, faeces and mucus – better than you do, and that its apparition on the earth’s crust will require a fight for survival. Adapt to change: that is what you have to do to survive.

Enthusiastic faces say, ‘There’s your son!’ while pointing at a monitor where pixels mark the outline of a dark shadow. It’s so black it looks more like a vampire – made of calcium, iron and zinc – than a human. A couple of times you try saying it to someone and that someone laughs, thinking you’re joking, and you say, ‘Of course I’m joking.’ This is pregnancy, where all truth has already been aborted.

Wald Tests, amniocentesis and cardiotocographies are the Scylla and Charybdis of your narrow uterus. Images are conjured of monsters with twelve feet and six heads, from whose mouths emerge six rows of teeth. The hunt for deformities fills the pregnancy with harpies, satyrs and griffins, occupants of your innermost thoughts. Be prepared to tackle a Minotaur in the event that any of the results differ from the values deemed normally human.

The continuous examinations, Aspartate Aminotransferase, Toxoplasma, Treponema pallidum, frighten rather than reassure you, but you can’t say it because the pregnancy isn’t yours, it’s a *coram populo* for everybody’s enjoyment. You have no idea what the HSV1 and HSV2 are, and the same goes for the TSH, FT3 and F4. The hormone levels, the glucose curve and the Cytomegalovirus are more comprehensible. The parade of investigations makes you feel that it is not life but death that portends the event. It proves the recklessness of giving birth; that it is an act foreshadowed by illness and death.

Repeatedly you are laid down on a table, a viscous substance is spread on you, and a pattern is twirled around on top of it in plastic. Now it becomes clear: a healthy body isn’t enough to generate another, also healthy, one. Instead tests deemed 79 or 95 per cent sensitive, and others with percentages close to a scientific exactitude, are needed.

The living thing in your stomach is threatening and the threat makes itself known with a footstep. It impresses on the skin of your belly, to then vanish. It happens once and only once. Then never again. In a single footstep any notion of control is booted off the pitch. One foot, just a few centimetres long but a foot regardless, appeared through your skin. You are possessed by a volition within you that isn’t your own. Motherhood is already willing your death.

You wouldn’t recommend this experience to other existential tourists. Your review never sees the light of day on your private mental Trip Advisor though. It rises to the surface like bits of onion in a broth and then, unconsciously, is immediately submerged again.

You know it’s a boy, that he already weighs more than two kilos – and they say this is good at your stage of pregnancy. They also say that he has no abnormalities, and this is really good news! (You would’ve liked to celebrate with a glass of champagne, but the Body was in the way).

During the wait a DJ reads a quote on the radio: ‘Pregnancy is God pulling a prank on women.’ (It was said by an important cultural reference in your life, Madonna). Your ankles are like aubergines, but considering you’re a pregnant woman you are more assertive than Madonna, and you snub her comment. Before the birth of the Body you consider yourself an excellent potential parent, but the fantasy eventually coincides with the animality of the birth. Blood, matter and pain mark the end of the historical period BB, Before Body. AB is a new era.

The Face is similar to the photo you pointed at months before, ‘I want this one!’ Click. It is identical in every way except the straw-coloured hair isn’t dark brown like you wanted. The facial features of the chosen photo are recomposed in slight asymmetry, gracelessly aggregated. A surge that cannot be impeded or dammed overwhelms you with the very fact of the Face. Every past choice leads into a single main stream: he is he, only he.

The Human International bill was so steep you wished gemmation was possible, like sponges or potatoes; and this becomes truer still when you look at the Body. There is not a trace of you in him. The Finnish donor destroyed the lazy southern genes like a burly rugby player taking out a line of weedy opponents, one after the other, at the speed of 40 MOT per millilitre.

Night after night you find yourself stooped over the Body weighing up every little distortion as if you were a baker with a half risen loaf. The smallness of the nose is right. The fineness of the hair is wrong. The Body addresses a glance back at you, but it indicates a ‘*from here on out*’: ‘in fifty years’, ‘in seventy years’, dates that didn’t belong in your life before this point, but instead belonged to the Tomorrow of Biology, the Climate, Finance and Medicine, disciplines with a capital letter. Resigned, you know the Body will outlive you. The weight of six pounds and eight ounces becomes unsustainable. The future is alive in your arms, and you realise with a sense of dread that you will not be in that future.

Before Body, it was always a double entry, a book-entry in which the balance was devoted to your personal fulfilment. Everything is different now, and what do you get other than the intense odour of faeces in a nappy? You observe the offering to analyse its colour and do a frantic worm hunt. Give me joy, give me gratification, give me, give me… you think, looking at the Body. But only when flesh responds to flesh, skin to skin, do you experience something beautiful. It is a sensation so intense it takes your breath away, but, ‘satisfaction or your money back’, and every other condition for the consumer’s benefit, is irrelevant for this piece of merchandise. The Body is a strange product. You can’t throw it away, you can’t recycle it, you can’t gift it and you certainly can’t consume it. Especially that: Do not consume. And for the first time in your life, instead of consuming, you feed.