Extreme Motherhood

The Triplet Diaries

Jackie Clune

Published by Pan Books

Extract

22 December 2004

I'm about to get the biggest shock of my life, which, in turn, is about to change forever.

We're sitting in Whipps Cross Hospital's ultrasound department waiting for my first scan. I'm already fourteen weeks pregnant and should have been seen earlier but various mix-ups between the doctor's surgery and the hospital have meant that we've been delayed. Never mind. It's my second pregnancy in as many years so I know the ropes. There's no rush. I know the weeks will drag on so it's good to spread out the scans a bit – it livens things up. The lady calls us in – me, Richard and our one-year-old daughter, Saoirse. The lady's a bit grumpy. Rich was on his mobile phone and she tells him off. Northern and working class, he reddens, apologizes and slips the phone into his pocket. He hates being told off. We joke around, old hands at this antenatal lark. The lady softens. She realizes we are all right really. I jump up onto the table and pull my trousers down around my hips ready to be smothered in the gluey goo they use to help the probe glide over your belly. As she tucks the rough blue tissue into my waistband I look at Rich and

think: 'This is going to be OK. We can cope with another baby. We're good.'

'I can't see the screen,' I complain, before remembering that they always tilt it away from you before switching it on in case they see something they don't like. In this moment I am filled with the terrible, heartbreaking stories of family and friends who have reached this three-month, supposedly 'safe' milestone only to be told, right there on the table, belly exposed and covered in goo, that there is no longer a baby, that there will be no labour, no pink or blue balloons, no need to redecorate the spare room. What an appalling thing to have to go through.

'Just a minute!' says the lady, mock-chiding my impatience. Saoirse is trying to climb onto the table with me. We all want to see this unexpected baby. The lady switches on the screen and places the probe on my tummy, swishing it around and around, looking for the fetus.

Her hand comes to rest and I crane my neck, anxious for the first magical glimpse of my baby. For the briefest of seconds I think I see two prawn-like blobs spooning each other.

No. Can't be. These scans are so hard to decipher. At the best of times the grainy black and white images look like bad footage of the first moon landing.

The lady sharply pulls the screen further out of view. I start to feel a bit dizzy.

'Erm,' starts the lady.

'Is everything all right?' I stutter.

'Is there . . .' *swish swish* 'a history of . . .' *glide swoop* '. . . twins in your family?' she asks with studied casualness.

Why is she asking me this?

'No! Oh God, don't tell me it's twins!'

I look at Richard, appealing to him to restore order. This was not in the plan. He already has wonderful nine-year-old twin girls from a previous relationship. He adores them but he swears he didn't sleep for two years.

Richard has gone grey in the face. He starts pacing the small, hot room. 'Oh Christ,' he manages quietly.

There is a small, gigantic moment. No one breathes. My head wants to burst.

The lady swooshes some more, this time down the right side of my torso.

'No,' she finally says.

'Thank Christ for that!' we chorus. But something is not right. The lady turns the screen towards me now.

'There's three of them,' she says flatly.

I never even particularly wanted children. For twelve years I was a lesbian – not even one of those dykes that mooches around Mothercare waving a turkey baster about. There's nothing wrong with that, but it just never occurred to me. Then at the turn of the century I had a change of heart and decided to go back to men. I know some people claim they were born gay, but for me it was a choice. I'd jumped the fence from straight to gay in the eighties after studying feminist theory at university. We all had dungarees and it just seemed like the logical next step. If men were the problem, why bother with them at all? We'd only end up diminishing ourselves either in their service or by trying to educate them. I'd always got on with women – why not get off with them as well? But a decade later it wasn't so black and white. I'd had very difficult and often painful relationships with women and decided that

perhaps the same-sex thing was no longer what I wanted. Perhaps the massive gender differences I had bemoaned all those years ago were exactly what I needed to foster my individuality. I didn't want to look at my lover and see a version of myself reflected back. I wanted that otherness that comes with heterosexual pairing. Paradoxically, I concluded, I had found it more liberating. So I jumped back over the fence and after a string of false starts – I think I dated the entire gamut of twenty-first-century male dysfunction in one year – I fell in love with a rugged and gentle northerner called Richard.

Our first daughter was conceived in a sort of 'I'm 37, let's see if I can get pregnant – whoops! yes I can' kind of a way. Saoirse (an Irish name, pronounced Seer-shah and meaning 'freedom') was born in October 2003. Almost a year later and I'd started thinking about giving her a brother or a sister when whoops! there I was again, fingers covered in wee, staring at a thin blue line. I'd been playing Russian roulette with my ovaries after refusing the pill, literally running away from a clinic where I was due to have a coil fitted and forgetting to buy condoms. After the initial shock we were pleased – at least I would have it all done and dusted by the time I reached the big Four-Oh. I didn't want to be buying maternity bras when I should have been living it up in a Martini-soaked Kim Cattrall 'Life begins at forty' kind of a way.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' she keeps saying to no one in particular as she checks and rechecks the contents of my womb.

I am shaking. I feel angry. The minutes roar past and last a decade. How can this be? I can't have three babies. I can't. I'm

not a cat. It's not possible. Three babies. I can't, in this moment, remember the word for three babies. Triplets. It's never featured prominently in my life, why should it spring to mind now? Triplets. I play around with it in my head. It does not compute. An innocent word, nothing to do with me, now full of horror. Triplets. It sounds like a threat.

I keep looking at Richard hoping that he can sort all this out. If it weren't such a cliché I'd be barking 'There's obviously been some mistake!'

'I can get a second opinion if you like,' says the lady.

Of course – she's actually made a mistake. It's going to be all right. It's going to be all right.

'But I am certain there are three babies there.'

'Yes, please. Get someone else.'

It's all I can think of to do. We have to be sure.

The lady leaves the room and Richard and I say nothing, hoping perhaps that if we don't acknowledge what is going on, it will evaporate into the stuffy air. Saoirse points at the screen and lets out a cackle. I can't look. I don't want to see. If I don't see them then they aren't there.

Richard goes out to refill the parking meter. This is going to take some time. I am filled with a sudden fear that I will never see him again. He's probably in a taxi on his way to the airport now.

The door swings open and a second woman comes in. I note with irritation her dangly Christmas parcel earrings. How can she wear earrings like that at a time like this? Never mind, she is going to rescue us from this cruel false alarm.

She takes the probe and begins swooshing.

'One . . . two . . . and . . . yes . . . three,' she counts, like

she's in a particularly warped episode of 'Sesame Street'. So she's in on it too.

'Have you had IVF?' she asks.

'No!' I almost shout.

'No fertility treatment at all?' asks the first lady, as if I might have forgotten.

'No! The pregnancy was a complete shock.' I start to cry. Then I laugh. At one point I do that thing people do in bad melodramas – I laugh so much that I start to weep inconsolably. I try to stand up, an instinct to run away from the source of the pain, but they won't let me. Apparently I am very pale. Richard returns and I try to seek solace in his face but he won't look at me.

'Wow. This is only the second time in fifteen years I've scanned triplets. Have a good Christmas – it's the last quiet one you'll ever have,' says the second lady somewhat darkly.

I hate her now too.

'I'm sorry,' says the first lady again. 'I don't know why I keep saying sorry – it's not my fault!'

There is no sense of celebration in the room, just the feeling that a bad thing has happened here. I dry my eyes with some of the rough blue paper. The two women huddle briefly then emerge with a plan. They are as much in shock as I am.

'We're going to send you over to the antenatal clinic to see a midwife. Then you can decide what you want to do,' says the second lady. I have no idea what she is saying.

We stagger along the long hospital corridor. I am crying like a person in a hospital drama, not caring who sees me. I need the loo. I sit there staring at the lino floor. It's pink and speckled, like tinned Spam. What are we going to do? This is a

disaster. Instead of the joy, excitement and misty-eyed wonder the first scan normally brings I am actually horrified.

I feel furious with my body for playing this trick on me.

Richard has gone into numbed coping mode. He is busy sorting out the buggy, the parking, Saoirse's nappy – anything but the mess our lives are about to become.

At the antenatal clinic we are ushered into a room where a nice Irish midwife tells us we will have to return to see a consultant in two weeks' time. Because of the delay in the appointment, it is now too late to do the usual nuchal fold test on any of the embryos – I can't yet call them babies – so we will not be able to determine the risk of Down's syndrome. The only other option is an amniocentesis, which, we are assured, is not possible with triplets. The midwife thrusts a help line number for Tamba, the Twins and Multiple Birth Association, into my hand, an appointment is made and we wander out to the car park – no fanfare, no bolts of lightning, just as if everything were normal. Behind us the hospital day grinds on. Patients sneak crafty fags standing shivering at the doorways, their IV drips quivering on their stands. Nurses scurry in and out, pushing sandwiches into their mouths, and visitors pull their coats around them at vandalized bus stops.

Back home, Richard downs the best part of a bottle of vodka, neat. No such luck for me. It is a very cruel irony that now more than ever I need a stiff drink but now more than ever I can't have one. Rich says it seems like as good a time as any to perform his yearly ritual of having a good cry over *It's a Wonderful Life* so he puts the video on and blubs into his empty glass. He says he feels like Jimmy Stewart and *his* life is over –

but for him there will be no saving angels trying to earn their wings. This is real. Too real. We have been together for three years and we will have four children to add to his existing two. He has no money, no job and a head full of dreams of being a successful actor. Until now I have been the breadwinner in the family, taking Saoirse on tour with me and spending weeks away from home in order to keep us afloat. How will I be able to do that with four young children?

But I have no time to let any of this sink in. I have to go to work this afternoon. I'm making a series of documentaries for BBC Radio 4 and I have to be in West London to interview a top Pilates teacher. I get on the train to cross town and stare at the other passengers, some of whom are drunk, all of whom are carrying Christmas presents.

'I'm having triplets,' I want to say. But I don't. I sink back into my seat and wonder how on earth my life turned out the way it did.

'I'm having triplets,' I think again, testing to see if the news has sunk in any deeper. It hasn't. It still sits on top of my consciousness, bobbing about like an empty cider bottle in the canal.

There were a few clues, looking back. From about six weeks into the pregnancy, I felt incredibly sick and dog-tired. My legs would carry me to bed in the middle of the afternoon, where I'd lie moaning and burping. They say, the old wives, that extreme nausea is a sign of multiple pregnancy. The human growth hormone which sustains the pregnancy until the placenta takes over is created in vastly increased quantities, which,

combined with the fact that one's body is awash with progesterone, creates the constant vomiting. I didn't pay any attention to this belief. I know plenty of women who have puked their way through an entire singleton pregnancy, and several mums of twins who sailed through vomit-free. At around ten weeks I had started to show already, and my mum had commented that I looked big and was I sure about my dates? I put it down to the fact that the only thing that stopped the constant nausea (*morning* sickness? Pah! That's for wimps and rank amateurs – I once puked all day, on the hour, every hour, and ended up on a hospital drip) was to eat more or less constantly. It's one of life's great paradoxes – the more sick I felt the more doughnuts I had to cram in. I had chosen to ignore both of these signs – until today. Now there is no denying it.

I call-screen all day. I can't face anyone. Somehow I manage to work, asking questions and nodding and doing microphone sound levels and trying not to peer at my tummy in the many mirrors.

'It's not twins, is it?' my producer Emma, herself the mother of twin boys, asks laughing.

'Ha ha ha,' goes my voice, but I don't recognize it. Later, listening back to the tape, there is a hollow ring to my laughter.

The Pilates lady has taught celebrities such as Liz Hurley during their pregnancies, enabling them to get back into their tiny jeans weeks after giving birth.

'Have a go at this little lot,' I feel like saying.

On the train home I feel full of grief, a knot of it eating away at my stomach. It takes a while to identify the feeling, and when I do I am still unsure why I am feeling this terrible

sense of loss, of an ending, not three beginnings. Then I realize what it is I am mourning. It is myself. My life as I have known it is over. I will have to give up huge parts of me – ambition, hedonism, recklessness – in order to bring these three lives into the world and sustain them through to adulthood. These things are how I define myself. I have always been very self-determined. My mum tells a story of how, at the age of six, I was spotted hitch-hiking to the local sweet shop on the first day of a family holiday in rural Ireland. The nearest shop was a mile away and the owners had a large family. As soon as the delivery came in, the chocolate would be devoured by their children, who would leave only the Silvermints, which no one wanted anyway. I knew this from the bitter experience of walking a long country mile only to find the shelves bare. I was determined not to miss out on the Dairy Milk this time. It being rural Ireland, where you can't fart without the next village knowing about it a week in advance, a farmer spotted me and had reported back to my aunty before I even got to the shop. I wasn't punished – just praised for my determination. No harm would come to me there, and I got the chocolate. The story has become how I am defined in my family. Nothing will stop me from pursuing my desires. But how can I carry on with this old, comfortable version of myself with four young babies? And if I can't be myself any more, who will I have to become? One of those lumpen, downtrodden women you see in cheap supermarkets, their hair greasy, their clothes covered in chip fat, hundreds of shaven-headed children hanging off the shopping trolley? It was what life had in store for me until, by sheer force of character, I dragged myself out of my Essex compre-

hensive and got myself a life. So was all that effort – all the studying, all the classroom jibes about being a swot, all the terrifying nights on lonely comedy stages – a waste of time? Should I have just stayed where I was, resigned to my ultimate fate? You can take the girl out of Essex but . . .

I keep trying to tell myself that it won't be that bad, that we can adapt and include the babies rather than let them take us over, but the reassurances ring as hollow as my laughter. I already feel invaded.

Walking slowly home from the tube my phone rings again. 'Mum and Dad' flashes up on the display screen. It's the third time Mum's called today, unusual for her, so she must be worried. I normally ring her straight away after a hospital visit and it's been eight hours since our appointment. But I can't take the call. I'm a crap liar and I don't want to tell them on the phone. We'll have to go and see them.

In silence we drive to tell my parents. As we come in, Mum is sitting at the table wrapping Christmas presents and quickly hides one. It strikes me as a ridiculous gesture – how can their surprise of socks and scarves compete with the bombshell we are about to drop? Depression has made us narcissistic. It's all about us now.

'Everything all right?'

'Well, yes and no.'

'Is it bad news?' asks Mum, suddenly worried, the present dropping to the floor with a dull thud.

'No, it's . . . interesting news.'

I'm not trying to string it out or play with their feelings, but I just cannot find a way of telling them. I feel as if we are

teetering on the edge of two lives. The moment I utter the words will be the moment our future is made concrete. It's the first time I'll say it, and, once said, it will be true.

'It's triplets,' I say simply.

Mum laughs. Dad raises his eyebrows. Within minutes they are cracking open the Jameson's and my dad, a strong silent Irishman not given to outbursts of sentiment, says he thinks this will be the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't believe him yet but I am grateful for their immediate support and lack of hysteria. We sit around the table and they drink the entire bottle until they are declaring it's the best news they've had in years.

'My dad had twin brothers,' says Mum. Now she tells me. Is this the genetic link?

In my bag I have the number for Tamba.

'Call them,' says Dad, once again surprising me with his sensitivity. A very religious man, despite his emotional reticence at home, he has a strong sense of community, especially in a crisis. I remember the many Vietnamese 'boat people' he helped during the eighties.

So I take the phone upstairs and dial the number for the voluntary support group.

A woman with a very kind voice answers and I tell her my news. I think I use the phrase 'diagnosed with triplets', making it sound like a potentially terminal medical condition. She tells me that I am the second woman tonight who has called to say she is having triplets. Instantly I feel a competitive spirit rise up in me.

'Were hers naturally conceived?' I ask briskly. Maybe I'm getting used to the idea.