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Twelve Babies on a Bike

Written by Dot May Dunn

Published by Orion

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Twelve Babies on a Bike

Diary of a Pupil Midwife

DOT MAY DUNN

Although the events and the characters in this book are based on real experiences, all names have been changed.

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Prologue

The year is 1956, and in the war-torn slums of a Midland city a young midwife is completing her professional training. Under the guidance of a strict but experienced supervisor, twelve babies must be delivered. To this end she has to go out alone into the dark and often inhospitable streets.

Carrying all essentials with her on her trusty old black bicycle, she encounters seedy slums, city brothels, Hitler's bomb sites, post-war council estates, and the genteel hanging on by their fingertips. With fortitude, the babies are successfully brought into the world.

Her diaries tell her story.

1

Monday 19th March

3.30 a.m.

A bell is ringing and I am pedalling fast, in fact I am pedalling so fast that I am gasping for breath, but still the bell rings behind me. The ringing changes; now it is the bell on a police car, loud and almost upon me. A bright light flashes across my brain, and a voice thunders above me.

'You've got to learn to answer the phone when it rings at night you know.'

I am sitting upright in a small, low-slung bed. The electric light, in its Bakelite shade, illuminates the lower part of the white wall that faces me, and with absolute accuracy and reverent precision, the shade manages to keep the icon of the Catholic Church in shadow. The voice calls out again.

'Well come on then, answer it, or it will be the chap on the other end of the line who will need your help, never mind his wife.'

I am out of bed, and as my feet land on cold linoleum consciousness hits me. This is to be the first delivery I attend alone; this is to be me, on my own, as a midwife. Mrs O'Reilly and I have carried out several home deliveries together, and she has declared me safe to try a solo run. Yesterday we visited all pending cases and discussed them at length and last night it was decided that I should attend the next case alone.

The figure at the door has gone, and the phone is ringing persistently, it is filling the small dark landing outside my door with its urgent call. I look from left to right; I had not paid attention to such detail on previous days. The low-intensity light snaps on and the space around me comes into view. I murmur, 'Thank you.'

The black telephone, which hangs on the wall just off to my right, is almost jumping out of its stand. My feet are bare, my pyjama legs drag on the linoleum, and my heart bangs loudly as I step over and lift the earpiece. I don't need to place the phone to my ear, I can hear the voice shouting 'nurse' as I hold the black Bakelite earpiece at arm's length. The word nurse brings me to my senses, and I know that I must gain control of the situation, so, with my lips to the mouth piece on the wall and the earpiece of the phone to my ear, I start the process.

'Hello! Mrs O'Reilly's house, Pupil Midwife Compton speaking, may I help you?'

The voice at the other end of the line is loud, in fact it is so loud that I can hardly understand it, and for a moment I wonder if I would hear the man better if I just listened out for him out of my bedroom window.

'Is that the nurse? Tell her to come, my wife has started. Hello! Hello! Are you there, nurse?'

In a quiet voice and with all the professionalism I can muster at this hour in the morning, I reply, 'Yes, I am here, now could you please tell me who you are?'

In an even louder voice he shouts, 'It's not me as wants you, nurse, it's the missus.'

For a moment I am lost.

'Yes, so what is your wife's name?'

Without a moment's hesitation he shouts, 'Clara, nurse.'

I shake my head to check if I am still asleep, and then ask, 'Is that her surname?'

'No, nurse, that's the same as mine is.'

Good, we're getting somewhere.

'Which is what?' I enquire.

'Oh! Right it's . . .' Brrrrrrrrrrr.

The long continuous sound of a dead line assaults my ear, and as I press the empty cradle of the phone up and down it is now my turn to shout.

'Hello! Hello! Put some more money in please.'

But nothing happens, and I stare at the now dead earpiece.

The light clicks on in the clinical room, and bright light floods the first floor landing below. Falling over my pyjama legs I drop down the single flight of stairs, calling out as I go.

'He rang off before I got his name. Will he ring back? Do you think that he will ring back?'

Mrs O'Reilly stands impassive, the light reflecting on her glasses makes it difficult for me to see her eyes, but I don't need to see them, the straight, hard mouth says it all. Now, as she pulls her maroon dressing gown around her, the words come.

'No I don't think he will ring back, the money he used to ring once was probably all he had on him. Do you think men around here have spare shillings in their pockets, Nurse Compton? Well, I will tell you they don't, and that is why you must answer the phone when it rings and not when you feel ready to get out of your bed to answer it. Did you get anything from him?'

Now I feel ready for tears, the confident, assured Registered Nurse, with six months midwifery under her belt, feels humble and at a loss, as I mumble, 'He said her name was Clara.'

She looks at me over her glasses, and for a moment the eyes soften.

'Then you'd better get into uniform before Mrs Burns gives birth without your help.'

The blue dress, with its high white collar, hangs on its hanger behind the bedroom door, and the round pillbox hat and navy blue mac hang ready for action. I fight my way into the dress with more haste than speed, and with my SRN badge pinned firmly at the neck of the dress and a good-sized ladder creeping down my left stocking, I fall back down the stairs.

Mrs O'Reilly stands in the clinical room, a set of notes in her hand, and beckons me over.

'We don't know a lot about Mrs Burns, she was with Mrs Quinn until last week, but as Mrs Quinn is expecting her fourth at any time we won't get much help from that midwife.'

I cross the small room, with its many white cupboards, small electric sterilizer, clean white tables and locked drug cupboard. It is crowded, but in this room I am at home and, with the smell of antiseptic around me, I feel more confident. I pick up the large black delivery bag, which I had packed with such care yesterday afternoon and, trying to sound professional, I ask, 'Is there anything particular that I should look out for?'

Mrs O'Reilly continues to peruse the notes. We have both already read these several times, and I start to feel a little annoyed that she should doubt my ability to understand the issues raised in them, after all I had taken third place in my Hospital Part One Midwifery Examinations and had obtained a merit in Clinical Examination. She cuts through my angry thoughts, as, with a hesitant voice, which is still directed at the papers in her hands, she mumbles, 'It's just that I have only seen her once.'

As if seeking some hidden information, or code, she turns the pages of the notes, and speaks to them again.

'It's her third, shouldn't be a great problem, the other two labours were fine.'

Eager to get going, and ready to prove my ability, I ask, 'Do we know where she lives?'

Pushing the notes at me she lifts a large brown wooden box. This box, which I had checked twice yesterday, contains the gas and air machine. Two small cylinders lie side by side, one with black and white markings contains air, the other with red and white markings contains nitrous oxide which is commonly known as laughing gas. I find this name ironic as most of the women to whom I have given the gas were doing anything but laughing. However, when a fellow pupil and I had tried it out in the labour wards at the hospital where we had completed our First Part Midwifery Course, the effect obtained had been better than a couple of gin and tonics. Mrs O'Reilly's voice is crisp as she brings me back to the job in hand.

'I know where she lives, and so do you, you visited her yesterday afternoon.'

As I take the gas and air machine I sink, the box is heavy on my shoulder, but, as I look at Mrs O'Reilly's face, the realisation of the enormity of the task that lies before me weighs even heavier. My journeys around the district with Mrs O'Reilly had been, to say the least, confusing. In much of the patch there seemed to be few landmarks or distinguishing points from which to navigate. Each street seemed to look exactly like every other one with long rows of houses, most of them three stories high, opening onto pavements or very small front gardens, and as we had turned corners and gone on our way I had soon felt lost. Mrs O'Reilly's area has undergone some development; new flats and council houses have been built in the few years since the end of the War. A small piece of land, which is proclaimed to be a park and playground, lies within its bounds, and from what I had seen on my

evening journeys, this park offers several types of sport, some of which could soon be causing Mrs O'Reilly an increased workload. Mrs Quinn's district, part of which we had just inherited, lies on the city centre side of Mrs O'Reilly's district. It holds no charms that I can distinguish, and like uncharted waters it appears to be unnavigable. On our first ride around Mrs Quinn's area Mrs O'Reilly had informed me that the morals of the place left a good deal to be desired. A girl who is on the midwifery course with me told me that her midwife says that it is the city's 'red light' area.

The voice beside me is speaking.

'She lives at number 36, Turnbull Street, Flat 2. That's just inside Mrs Quinn's district so it's not too far for you to ride.'

3.50 a.m.

The large black bicycle, which I stand beside in the hallway, still looks as impressive as it had yesterday; in fact it looks even mightier now I am to deal with it alone. Mrs O'Reilly and I had done a practice run of loading the bike, but now the large wooden box and its cylinders seem not to want to be strapped onto the stand which lies over the back wheel, and the black delivery bag, containing all the tools I will need to do the job, seems to be too big to be wedged into a basket which lies over the front wheel. Having made noise enough to waken the dead, never mind the Stones who live on the ground floor, I am off. I negotiate my way through the front door and bump down the front steps. The door stays open behind me and the light stays on. Mrs O'Reilly appears to have gone back to bed. I attempt to lean the bike against a fence which lies on my right, but with its load the bike starts to fall over as soon as I let go of it. Catching the handlebars before they

hit the ground I pull the bike upright, and feel more of my stocking rip. With the bike now suitably placed I climb the two steps and close the front door. For a moment I had thought about slamming the door, but Mrs O'Reilly's face flashes before my eyes, and I close it quietly. There had been light on the path when the door was open, but now, as Mrs O'Reilly clicks off her bedroom light, I am in complete darkness. Claiming the bike, I head to where I know the gate lies, and banging open what remains of the construction I make for what I hope is the pavement edge. A gust of icy wind whips my legs and rain hits me in the face. For a moment I can't breath, and all my clothes, which I now realise are rather lightweight, blow wildly around me. The light from the bicycle lamp helps in the confusion; it lights up whirling flakes of snow and drops of rain, which are reflected back to me in a glitter. I stand and try to adjust my body to the cold and the dark.

There is hardly room for me on the bike, but I press my foot down on the pedal, and with a tremendous sway move from the pavement edge. With wobbly wheel and unsteady balance I move forward; the lamp goes out and I am heading to where I have no idea. Leaning over the delivery bag I give the lamp, or at least what I hope is the lamp, a thump with my gloved hand and a light shines again. I know that I must turn to my right at a small cross-roads, which lies just two houses up the road from Mrs O'Reilly's house. But am I now peddling up the wrong side of the road, or have I somehow got onto the wrong road? My light finds the corner, and I sigh sooner than I can say 'Thank goodness', as I turn and set off in what I hope is the right direction.

After a few pushes on the pedals I start to gather speed. Good, I can manage the weight. I know my midwife's home lies a little higher than the city centre house to which I am heading, but I had not realised how much

higher. Snowflakes whirl towards me; they are the only things that my feeble light illuminates. A beam of light from a window shows bright against the darkness, and for a moment I see a hedge in front of a house. The hedge passes, I am travelling quickly. I apply the brakes, nothing happens. I gather speed, the wheels swish as water spins out from them and, fighting to keep the bike upright, I whirl onwards into the next swirling cloud of light. For a moment I am in darkness, my lamp has gone out, so I lean over and hit it again. As I look up I see bright lights ahead.

The only road to have light at this hour in the morning is the main road into the city, and I realise that I am heading at some speed towards it. I know that I must cross this road in order to get to Mrs Quinn's area, but in my mind I had planned to approach it with more caution. Now I have no idea how I will stop when I get to it, or in which direction I will turn if I can't stop. But I have little time to worry about such issues, as the bike makes all the decisions. As it leaves the dark steep road, I am just a passenger; its weight propels it forward, and we both whirl headlong into the light. I gasp for breath and let go of my hat; it takes both hands to pull the bike around. Now I am riding on the white line down the centre of the road. Something dark appears on my left side and I start wobbling again, is it a car? I hear a voice, and risk a sideways glance. A policeman on a bicycle is riding at my side; a large gloved hand is raised towards me, and I can see more than hear that he is shouting at me. The road is now flatter, so, with a good deal more wobbling, the application of brakes and the pressure of my shoe sole on the road, I bring my vehicle to a standstill. With the sudden stop I find that I am unable to hold the weight of my load; I and my bike fall sideways. I had inadvertently moved over to my left and had been travelling very close to the

policeman. I catch him by surprise, and in a confusion of bikes, legs and uniform hats, we both land on the pavement.

3.57 a.m.

The young man adjusts the strap of his helmet under his chin as he reclaims his bike, and I press my pillbox back on my head.

'I didn't recognise you there nurse, you came at me so fast, almost took me with you, better be careful on these roads, lucky there is no one around at this time in the morning. You got an urgent case to go to?'

I am now able to breathe again and, as I pull my dress down to cover my knee, which is now sticking out through my stocking, and attempt to regain control of the brown box, which is continuing on towards town, I gasp my apology, 'Sorry, I couldn't stop.'

He looks down at me; he must be over six feet tall while I just made the five feet necessary for entering nursing. Taking a notebook from his top pocket he looks at his wrist-watch, and makes an entrance in the book. I blush, am I now to be arrested for knocking a policeman over?

'Where are you going, nurse?' He asks this without looking at me.

Now I remember Mrs Burns, and I reply as I struggle to get back on my bike.

'I am going to 36 Turnbull Street, I think that is the name of the street, I'm afraid I must hurry, her husband called some time ago.'

Putting the notebook back in his top pocket he swings his leg over his bike and starts moving beside me.

'You new around here, nurse?

Without waiting for an answer, he continues, 'Bit of a

rough area this is you know, do you want me to ride along with you?'

'Do you know where the street is?'

I had almost forgotten about the problem of finding the house; surviving the journey had taken all my attention. But now a knight on a black steed has come, and maybe he knows the way. He replies from his straight upright position as he throws his cape over his shoulder.

'I think that we might find it, nurse.'

4.05 a.m.

I see him standing in the doorway as we turn the corner into one of the grey, narrow streets. A morning gas lamp sheds its yellow glow on the front of the all-purpose corner shop, but no name adorns any wall, the street is nameless. The voice beside me speaks.

'This is the street, nurse, and by the look of him the anxious father is waiting for you.'

At the sound of voices the man moves forward, but on closer inspection of who is arriving he retreats back into the house. The policeman's voice sounds loud as he calls to the man who now stands in the open doorway.

'Mr Burns is it? Come on, sir, help the nurse with her equipment.'

I drop my feet and climb off the bike. A man in a collarless blue-grey linen shirt with an unshaven face takes hold of its handlebars. The now familiar voice speaks beside me.

'Goodbye, nurse, good luck.'

I watch the policeman disappear into the still-dark morning. His lamp throws light on the road as he passes and curtains in windows drop back into place. With the ease of one accustomed to such tasks, Mr Burns lifts the brown box and, without a word to me, heads up a flight of

bare stairs. Wheeling my bike through the door, I follow him. An elderly lady stands on the small first-floor landing. She is dressed in grey worn clothes and she wrings the apron she is wearing around her thin, lined hands. Mr Burns calls out as he climbs.

'It's the nurse, Mrs Megs. I think that we will be all right now.'

Pale eyes look down at me from a face that matches the clothes.

'God bless you, nurse. God bless you for coming. Shall I stay in case you need me?'

I am at a bit of a loss to know what to say, I don't know who she is. Maybe Mr Burns should decide, but the woman looks as though she has some experience of life, so I give it a second thought and decide that I had better hold on to her.

'If Mr Burns wants you to stay that will be fine by me, Mrs Megs.'

In the light of the first floor landing Mr Burns looks at me for the first time. I am as yet only twenty two years of age, my stature is small, and last week when I was going back to the hospital in my uniform the conductor of a crowded bus had told me to stand up and let an adult take my seat. Now Mr Burns looks from me and back to Mrs Megs.

'Yes, you can stop, Maud, if it will help the nurse.'

The room is of a fair size. It is sparsely furnished, clean, and it holds the marks of a home well cared for. To my left a dressing-table with a cracked mirror stands before a window, its once dark brown surface has lost some of its veneer. Pale finger-marks stretch inwards from its edges, showing light against the polished veneer. Small brightly coloured doilies do their best to hide the faults. The lower half of flower-patterned curtains disappear behind the cracked mirror, and a small box with a cover to match

the curtains stands before the dressing table. The far wall is dominated by a dark oak coloured wardrobe which, like its partner the dressing-table, has a few missing sections of veneer. Holding my bag before me, I enter the room. I had been here yesterday with Mrs O'Reilly so I know that a large double bed lies behind the door and takes up much of the remaining space in the room. The furniture, I know, will be arranged as requested for the confinement.

I had not heard Mrs Burns as I climb the stairs, and wonder if she has yet taken to her bed, but now, as I round the door, I see her lying on the bed. Drawing her knees up to meet her greatly distended abdomen she reaches for the upright poles on the back of the bed and, pulling hard on them, she starts to shout out. I drop the bag and hasten to her side as I call out to her, 'All right, Mrs Burns, breathe in and out, big breaths, in through your nose and out through your mouth, come on big puffs, blow hard.'

With one hand I feel her abdomen, it is hard and she looks at me through round pain-filled eyes. Sweat stands out over her face and neck, and I call out over my shoulder, 'Mrs Megs, get me a cold flannel, quickly.'

I hear shuffling, something damp is pushed into my hand, and as I put the cloth to Mrs Burns' brow I recognise it as a piece of someone's old cotton vest. The contraction recedes and Mrs Burns starts to relax. Now she looks at me and offers a weak smile. I give her the piece of cotton vest and she wipes her face.

'Thank God you're here, nurse, this is a bad one, I can't remember the two boys being this bad.'

She is, according to her notes, a woman of thirty years, but now she looks a good deal older; with her brown hair stuck to her forehead and her pale face lined with exhaustion, she could be forty. She turns to her husband and holds out the piece of vest.

'George, can't you find a proper face cloth for the nurse and not this old rag?'

George steps towards her with a bemused look on his face, but before he can do anything about the cloth his wife shouts out and, grabbing for the back of the bed again, she pulls her buttocks off the bed. I call out as I throw my coat over a chair which stands beside the wardrobe, 'Mr Burns, put the gas and air machine on the bed; put it near to your wife so that she can use it.'

He looks at me with startled eyes, and I shout as I wave my hand towards the box which stands upright near the bottom of the bed.

'The brown box, will you put it on the bed and open it up, please?'

Opening my bag, which stands on the floor, I take out the foetal stethoscope, but there is no time to listen to the baby's heart, the contraction is at its height. I head around the bed. Mr Burns stands by the open box and looks down at his wife. The smell of the gas rises as I twist open the valve on top of the cylinder, and the gauge, which denotes a flow of gas, springs into action. Leaning over the woman, who is now arched like tensile steel, I push the mask over her face.

'Breathe in and out, Mrs Burns, take some big breaths, as big as you can.'

She grasps the mask and, as I push her finger over the hole at its base, she gulps at the gas. Like a drowning woman gasping for air she pulls and the machine makes its familiar rattling sound as gas is drawn through the valve. Mr Burns has started to retreat at my approach, but, grasping his sleeve, I halt him and pull him over.

'Sit there by your wife, Mr Burns, and every time she has a contraction you give her the mask and help her to keep her finger over the hole. When the contraction ends

she can move her finger so that she will just breathe fresh air.'

For a moment he looks from the cylinders to the mask and back, and then he nods his head and sits. Now he has something to do, something he understands, a piece of machinery that makes a familiar noise, he can go to work. Mrs Burns' voice breaks out from behind the mask.

'I want to push, nurse, I must push.'

I am beside her with hand on her abdomen, I speak close to her face and my voice is urgent.

'Not yet, Mrs Burns, breathe hard on the gas, don't push yet. Mr Burns, help your wife breath through the mask.'

Over my shoulder I shout to Mrs Megs.

'Can I have a kettle of boiling water, quickly please?'

She may not look much, but she knows her stuff, and I am very relieved when, almost before I have finished asking, the large black kettle is carried into the room. I hear water being poured into the large basin I have placed on the floor by the chair, and a small table, which I have covered with newspaper, now holds my delivery bag. I cannot say that things are now automatic, it is, after all, the first time that I have worked so totally alone. However I now start to sense that I am on known territory, and with a feeling of confidence I wash my hands, open the delivery bag, and put on my white delivery gown. Mrs Burns' contractions are now arriving with great rapidity, and I make the assumption that the baby is due to be born, but I know that I must check that all is well before I can safely ask Mrs Burns to do her job and push her baby out.

When the next contraction recedes, I tell Mrs Burns that I am going to examine her to see if the baby is due to come.

'It won't take a minute, and then we will know if you can start to push.'

I don clean surgical gloves, apply the right amount of lubricant, and with my surgical mask covering my lower face, I turn towards my now silent audience and start the examination. I fully expect to feel the round, firm top of the baby's head waiting inside the cervix, but now I stand in bemused disbelief, what presents itself is not what I had expected. The round, smooth top of a head is not there, at my fingers lies a soft mass whose outline I cannot discern. Is this a baby at all? Mrs O'Reilly had been right that we knew little about this pregnancy, and since I arrived I have had no time to make an external examination. Now my fingers make out something hard and, as I traced it along, I dare hardly let my mind accept what I think I am feeling. Scarcely daring to breathe, I feel again for the singular, pointed edge, and following it down I find the curved arches. My mind whirls through all the clinical teaching; it can be but one thing. I withdraw my gloved hand, and cold disbelief hits me, the baby is trying to be born with its forehead first. I swish my hands in the now cooling water in the basin, and my mind feels blank as I stare at the damaged wooden surface of the wardrobe. But I must think, I must make my mind work. Placing my wet gloved fingertips together, I turn and walk towards the door, and then, turning, I walk back to the wardrobe. Water drips from my hands, and I pull the gloves off with a sharp snap. The baby will not be able to make it, even though all is ready for it to be born. In this position it cannot get through the birth canal. The man's eyes meet mine as he rises to standing. Pulling my mask down I speak in what I think is a calm voice although a wobble sounds.

'Mr Burns, go and phone the midwife, and tell her to get here as quickly as she can.'

Bemused, he continues to stand by his wife and look at me. Now I shout, the stress of the moment forcing urgency into my voice.

'Run, man, run as fast as you can. Tell her it's a brow.'

He is up and heading down the stairs, his feet banging on the wooden steps; a child's cry sounds as his steps recede. Giving me a weak smile, Mrs Megs leaves the room, and I hear her feet ascending the wooden stairs.

'Is everything all right nurse? Has something gone wrong? Is the baby dead?' Mrs Burns asks.

Mrs Burns is rising up in the bed and, as if to climb out and take care of her yet unborn child, she struggles to get up.

'Everything is all right, Mrs Burns, I just want you not to push yet.'

She continues in her effort to rise, but the next contraction throws her back to the bed. I lean over her and push the mask over her face as I almost shout, 'Don't push, don't push, some big breaths, Mrs Burns, come on, big breaths.'

I know that I have to slow things down until the midwife arrives. My mind races through lectures as I help Mrs Burns hold the face mask. Seeking for inspiration, I try to recall lecturers' voices and lecture notes, why had I not been more attentive? Pethidine is the only answer I can come up with, but this might affect the baby's chances of breathing after it is born. My mind races and, as I pace the small room again, I know if I don't do something the baby won't get a chance to be born, and its mother may die. I call to Mrs Burns as I draw the fluid into the syringe.

'I'm just going to give you an injection, Mrs Burns, it will make you relax a little.'

The injection is in. I hear feet thumping on the stairs. Mr Burns enters, his face is flushed and still. He throws his arms out sideways and, expanding his lung enough to allow him to he speak, he gasps, 'I couldn't phone, I haven't got any money.'

4.25 a.m.

The truth of Mrs O'Reilly's words hits me; he had used all his money for the phone call which got me out of bed. The next contraction is here, for a moment Mrs Burns gulps at the gas and air, and then she almost shouts, 'I've got to push nurse.'

With a cry she falls back on the bed and pushes. I must stop the pushing or the baby will be damaged, and Mrs Burns will soon become exhausted. Frantically I sift through a sea of knowledge which I have gathered throughout my years of training and which, until this moment, had seemed to be almost superfluous. I had worked for some months on a medical ward which was run by an older sister. Some of the younger sisters had said that she was getting a bit past it; 'time to retire' they had said behind her back, but I had liked her style of nursing and I was pleased that she did not retire before my time on that ward had expired. Now her face swims before me, and I hear her voice.

'Raise the foot of the bed if you want to take pressure off the abdominal organs. Help defy gravity,' she used to say.

Would defying gravity help here? We could try, the pethidine has taken the edge off things, but the contractions are still strong. So, more with hope than any professional expectation, I call out, 'Mr Burns, I want you to lift the foot of the bed, please.'

He is standing in the doorway, his face no longer red, is now a deathly white. Without question or hesitancy he walks past me and he lifts the bottom of the heavy wooden bed two feet off the ground. Mrs Burns slides backwards, and as I remove several pillows she arrives close to the head of the bed. A contraction comes and goes, Mrs Burns' urgency to push has lessened, maybe the pethidine,

I think. A child cries somewhere above us and then is quiet. Mr Burns does not flicker, he holds the bed.

I looked at him as, with less than steady hands, I pull the top of clean gloves over the sleeves of my now not so clean, gown.

'You can put the bed end on that box, Mr Burns, if you want.'

He half smiles, tension showing in his still white face.

'You do what you've got to do nurse, I'll hold the bed.'

I now feel calmer, I don't know what I expect to find when I do the examination, but I do know if things are unchanged the next step is a sprint to the phone box and a 999 call.

There is less pressure on the soft mass, it is not bulging as it had been, and I again seek for the pointed edge, the point which will tell me that I am feeling the forehead. I do not find it, now the arched ridges of the eyes are there, and as I trace them along they begin to feel more central and prominent. For a moment I am unsure, and then, like the first cords of the 'Halleluiah chorus' ringing out, the truth hits me. My mentor smiles at me and as I mentally thank her for her careful teaching. I almost shout, 'Push, Mrs Burns, push now, push as hard as you can.'

With the pressure taken off the last contraction had caused the baby to tip his or her head backwards, just a little lift of the chin, but that little has done the job, and now our protagonist is going to appear nose first, we can make it.

4.55 a.m.

The slit eyes and the red swollen face lie before me. The little pink body begins to move, I lift her, and the cry comes. I call out, 'It's a girl; you've got a girl, Mrs Burns.'

The voice behind me shouts, 'We've done it, Cla, we've gone and done it.'

Mr Burns is still holding the bed. Everything had happened fast, and I had forgotten the bed and Mr Burns, but now I could hug him.

'You can put the bed down, it's all over now, we've made it.'

Without a word he drops the bed-end, it lands with a resounding thump, and although his face is white the smile is large and real.

Wrapped in a surgical towel, the baby lies in her mother's arms.

'Isn't she beautiful, George? Just think, we've got a girl at last, won't the boys be excited.'

Mr Burns stands some feet away from the bed, and looks across at his wife and daughter. He looks at me, and I can see the glint of tears. With my mask pulled down, I smile at him.

'You can sit by your wife, and hold your daughter if you'd like to, Mr Burns.'

Quickly he moves his eyes from mine, steps over to the bedside, kisses his wife's forehead and looks at the baby's swollen face.

'Better not hold her, a big lump like me, might hurt her.'

His wife smiles up at him, and then looks back at the baby. I know I have some explaining to do.

'I'm afraid she got a bit squashed on the way out, she didn't come head first as she should have, she decided to lead with her chin.'

Mr Burns bursts out laughing, as if letting out all his tension. His wife looks at him in amazement.

'What's the matter, George, you gone mad?'

'I was just wondering who she looks like with that

round face and slit eyes, it's your mother she takes after, and if she led with her chin, it's certainly your mother.'

For a minute Mrs Burns is not sure whether she should take this declaration as praise or insult. But the moment is happy so, after further examination of her daughter, Mrs Burns replies, 'Yes, she does look rather like my mother; she will be pleased when I tell her she's got a granddaughter who looks like her.'

'Have you decided what you will call her? Maybe she can have her grandma's name,' I say as I start to clear up and put the delivery bag back together. It is Mr Burns who replies.

'Can't have her name, it's Maud. What's your name nurse?'

I look over my shoulder at them. Mr Burns still stands by the bed, he looks pale, but his eyes sparkle as he smiles. Intent on completing the notes before I forget the times of events, I reply without much thought.

'Oh! It's Dorothy Elizabeth.'

Now I feel quite embarrassed, and I can feel myself blushing as I rearrange the face mask that is hanging down my front. They both look back at the baby, who I am pleased to say has now started to move her head around a little, and Mrs Burns speaks, 'I like Elizabeth; maybe we can name her Elizabeth Maud.'

Before anything else can be said the door opens with a creak, and two small figures peer tentatively around its side. They are followed by the face of Mrs Megs. When he sees his mother the smaller boy bounds over, and throws himself onto the bed.

'Mind your baby sister,' his father shouts in mock chastisement, and Mrs Megs calls out.

'Oh, you got a girl, I told you as how girls was always awkward, told you it had to be a girl.'

'A cup of tea for the good lady I think, Mrs Megs.'

She smiles an almost toothless smile at me as she looks up from the baby.

'Kettle's boiling as we speak, nurse.'

As she passes me, I speak only for her hearing, 'Thank you for your help, Mrs Megs, couldn't have managed without you.'

She touches my arm in its white delivery gown, and then shakes her fingers as if to apologise for touching me. I take the grey-clad arm and squeeze it.

6.05 a.m.

Tea and biscuits are served to all present, and Mrs Burns leans back against her now clean pillows. The boys are back in their room and I take time to attend to the baby. Mr Burns stands behind me; I had not heard his approach.

'Touch and go there for a minute, eh nurse?'

I not sure how to answer, so I am silent.

'Nearly buggered it up, didn't I? Not having the right money like.'

How could I tell him that it was I who had wasted his money?

'Mr Burns, you did all you could, in fact you did more than enough, holding the bed . . .'

I get no further, a loud bang sounds on the front door, and a minute later I hear Mrs O'Reilly's voice as Mr Burns escorts her up the stairs.

She looks down at the baby's face as it lies placid on my lap.

'It was a face presentation; she was fully when I got here, so I couldn't do much.'

Now I realise how tired I am and what great risks I had taken. I feel exhausted, both physically and mentally. What if the baby is damaged, what if she is blind, what if I have given the pethidine too late?

'When I arrived it was a brow presentation and she was pushing, I gave her pethidine to slow things down.'

My voice fades; she looks at the baby and touches its face, the baby turns towards the finger and the swollen lips purse.

'Awake enough to feed, she is, I'll get the doctor to pop in and look at her, should be all right, not the first face delivery, and it won't be the last.'

8.15 a.m.

My legs feel like jelly. How I will ride home I'm not sure. Mr Burns has loaded the bike, and now daylight awakens the dull, grey street, and the sight of the dirty gutter and the wet, slimy pavement does little to raise my flagging spirit. I set off. At least I now have one point of reference in this mass of grey; a picture of the Burns house will remain lodged in my memory for ever.