

Happy as Larry

'I'm so happy. After all these years I can give my husband a healthy son,' Norah Langdon said to the nurse. 'I shall call him Larry.' She was 46 and still a beautiful woman. For many years she and John had tried to have children, but it hadn't happened. She had always thought it was her who was infertile. Until that day exactly nine months ago, when she had this once-only affair with her student Larry Green.

She settled herself comfortably into the cushions and smiled at the baby in her arms, remembering how his father had stood, next to her desk waiting for her to finish reading his paper. She was a teacher in English literature and had given her students an assignment to write a piece about 'their first date'. Larry had written about a date between a student and his female teacher and Norah was impressed by its quality, eroticism and imaginativeness. Once she had finished reading, she looked up into his serious blue eyes. He had an open face framed by dark curls. For a boy of eighteen she'd found him extremely attractive and very mature. He waited, his lips slightly open, eager to hear her reaction.

'Okay,' she'd said to him, pointing her forefinger at his essay, 'let's go for a drink as you suggest here.'

They'd gone to a pub and sat in a dark corner, hardly talking. His shy hand had moved towards her thigh and crept slowly upwards. She remembered the butterflies in her belly and his sweet eyes, his soft pink lips and pronounced cheekbones. She'd combed his silk curls with her hands and soon they were kissing. Then she had taken the lead and urged him outside. They'd found a sheltered place in a park nearby and made love on a soft green bed of moss, just as he had described in his paper. It had happened so simply, that one time only. It had been the purest experience to Norah. The result of their union was clear the moment he'd planted his seed in her. This boy, Larry Green, had been sent to her to give her the son she and John wanted so much.

The nurses entered the maternity ward to collect the babies. The mothers had to rest. Reluctantly Norah handed over Larry to nurse Sarah. She didn't like that girl. Kitty, the other one was more cheerful. The nurses were changing nappies and putting the babies in their cots when Kitty said to Sarah, 'I have a date with Greg tonight, remember? That guy I told you about, who's so cute. He said, he had to see me tonight, but I'll be back before twelve, you don't mind, do you?' She'd met the man only last week and was absolutely infatuated with him.

'Well, no fine. The mothers seem to be all right, the babies are almost washed and fed. No problem, I'll manage, just go.' Sarah said. It was her first week at the maternity ward of Northside Hospital and she hated it. She'd applied for a job in the geriatric ward, but they needed extra hands in maternity and had placed her there. She panicked when a baby was born and horrified when she had to wash them. When they cried, she wanted to scream. But she couldn't admit that to Kitty. Here she had to keep her baby phobia a secret.

Around nine thirty Kitty left. Sarah made herself a cup of instant coffee and turned on the radio. More than two hours to kill. She lifted her legs and stretched them on the chair opposite her. Such a busy afternoon it had been. Seven babies were born, two girls, three boys and twins. Sarah had weighed and washed them, put nappies on, brought them to their mothers and put them back in their cots. Only now she realized how tired she was. Her legs felt leaden, her eyes stung and her nose was saturated with the smell of fresh baby faeces. She sipped from the tepid coffee and felt rather pleased with herself. She hated the work and detested the babies, every single one of them, but she'd done it.

Then she heard a soft whimpering. Sarah jumped up, cursing inwardly. She had to be there before the whole crowd of red, frowning creatures started to open their mouths in helpless howls. She hurried to the cot where the soft moaning came from. It was little Arthur Gereham, a big chunk of pink flesh, just like his father, his massive mother and brothers. That afternoon she'd seen five monstrous apes, under six years, climbing on and off their mummy's bed.

Sarah was about to shape her mouth to produce some consoling babble when she became locked into Arthur's blue eyes. They were as blue as the uniform she wore. They were the mirrors in which she saw herself as a girl. Ten years old she had been. Her mother had given birth to a son, her little brother, Billy.' After some weeks with this Billy brother in her life Sarah had been sick and tired of him and mum's constant demands to do things for the brat. The endless, 'Sarah, get Billy's bottle; find his dummy; get a nappy; play with Billy; hold him,' had got on her nerves. At night when Billy cried, Sarah had heard mum pass her door, mumbling comforting words like: 'Coming sweetie' and 'oh you little bonky bear, are you so hungry'. Mum never kissed Sarah anymore, she only shouted. There was no place on mum's lap when Billy sat there. Sarah wanted to get rid of that thing, that brother, that made her life unbearable. She wanted mum's love back.

She'd found an easy solution. In the cupboard under the sink was a bottle with a little drawing on the label; a skull behind a cross. She knew that once you drank from that bottle you'd die. Mum had taught Sarah how to prepare Billy's bottle and Sarah only had to add a few drops of the lethal bottle to Billy's milk. Soon Billy had become ill and within a week he was dead. Sarah remembered how relieved she was. She'd driven him from the throne and would be the apple of mum's eye again. But that never happened. Mum was inconsolable. She didn't stop crying and she didn't want Sarah near her.

Sarah covered Arthur's eyes. With her thumbs she closed the eyelids over the eye ball. She couldn't bear to look in them any more. The whining became crying. What to do, how to stop this terrible noise? Sarah closed his mouth and pinched his nose. Then the other experience recurred to her, six years after Billy's death. Almost seventeen she had been and she was invited to her first school party. One of the boys had asked her to dance with him. After two songs he'd said to her, 'I feel so dizzy and hot. Let's go outside.' Sarah had never been alone with a boy in her entire life, had never spoken to one either and was excited he liked her. They walked into the cool night, out of the spotlights that lit up the facade of the school. In the shade of a tree he kissed her. Sarah liked that, he wanted her. Suddenly he had pushed her to the ground. Before she had understood

what had happened, her dress was pulled up over her face, her underpants ripped apart. She felt a piercing pain between her legs. The next moment he jolted in her. Then he had gone.

The following months she grew and grew, she hid her belly under wide clothes. Nobody had a clue she was pregnant, least of all mum, still in mourning over her lost son. One night Sarah delivered a boy on the floor of her room. He had the same blue eyes as her dead brother Billy. Before she strangled her baby she had said, 'you would be the perfect replacement for my little brother, but I won't let you. I can't stand a mite like you near me '

With both hands Sarah shut out the last air from Arthur's mouth and nose. His face turned beetroot red. His eyes bulged out like two lapis stones. Sarah whispered, 'it seems as if these little blue-eyed bastards pop up every six years.' When the light melted out of the blue, she stepped back from the cradle and watched the stiff and soundless baby.

The tone from the intercom brought her back to reality. 'Nurse, can I have my little Arthur with me, just for a few minutes.' God, what to do, Sarah quivered with fear. She couldn't walk into that room with the dead body of Arthur still warm. She looked at the six cribs neatly positioned in a row. She remembered there was one other boy with blue eyes. Her mind quickened to operate at top speed and she acted without further thought. Sarah undressed dead Arthur and removed his nametag. She went to Larry Langdon's cot, undressed him and pulled Arthur's nightie over his sleepy head; put Arthur's nametag on his left wrist, and then took little Larry to Arthur's mother.

Mrs. Gereham pressed the baby to her huge breasts and babbled all her sweet nothings into his tiny ears. Sarah watched the scene for a little while, a wry smile on her lips. She went back to the babies room, dressed dead Arthur in Larry's terry jumpsuit, put him in his cot on his belly and put Larry's nametag around his left wrist. A glance in the other five cradles assured her that all the 'rabbits' were sound asleep. She went back to Mrs. Gereham to fetch the baby. He had just opened his blue eyes and watched his surrogate mother seriously. Rather unwillingly, Mrs. Gereham handed him over to Sarah saying, 'such a sweetie, so different from my other five boys.' Sarah put Larry in Arthur's crib and went back to the coffee room. Half past eleven, one half an hours left before she could go home, at last.

At quarter to twelve Kitty rushed in, her cheeks flushed. She had left with immacutely painted lips, now they were bare again. However smears of pearlish pink were still visible on her chin and near her right earlobe. Kitty gave the cots a quick check, but was too excited to notice any changes. The mothers were asleep and so were their babies.

At twelve o'clock Theresa, a very experienced nurse took over the nightshift, together with Lily, a trainee of eighteen. Kitty and Sarah left the maternity ward together. Kitty happily chatting about her cool chap and Sarah relieved because finally she could leave this hateful hospital.

Two hours later Lily discovered Larry Langdon's death. The baby's first night feed was due at two. Lily was supposed to bring the babies to their mothers. She shrieked when she lifted the boy. He was cold and as stiff as an ironing board. Theresa ran to her and examined the boy, who

strangely enough had turned on his belly. 'Cot death,' she muttered, 'must have been already dead for some hours'.

Theresa first calmed Lily. Then she took the dead bundle in her arms to Mrs. Langdon, with shaking knees. 'Mrs Langdon, I am so sorry, I can't find the words. But your little Larry went back to God again.'

'What do you mean,' Norah Langdon said, still sleepy and not religious at all.

'Larry is dead,' Theresa said, more bluntly now.

Norah's face changed from rosy sleepiness to an ashy grey. Her eyes first showed disbelief then anger. She reached out for the bundle in distress. Then an enormous sad and painful look came into her eyes.

'You're wrong, my baby is as healthy as a lion and happy as Larry,' she said.

Theresa put the baby into her lap, with tears in her eyes. She saw the mother sniffle his neck, caress his cheeks, move his toes and little fingers.

'This is not my son,' she then said without any emotion left.

'How can it not be your child?' Theresa said embarrassed. 'He has his nametag on, he was in his crib.'

'Someone has changed him with another baby'. She stepped out of the bed, pushing the dead child aside. The curtains around the six other beds were closed. All the mothers were feeding their infants. Enraged, Norah Langdon tore open the curtain around the bed next to hers. The mother with the twins, one child on her breast, the other on her belly, looked anxiously at her. She'd heard every word of the conversation and felt horrible. The next bed was occupied by a mother adoring her baby daughter. Startled by the sudden commotion she stared at Norah's anguished face. Opposite that bed was a mother who screamed, 'leave me alone, go away.' She hid her baby under the blankets. Norah grabbed them off her and saw a baby girl. Blind with rage she tore open the next curtain. Arthur's mother sat like a matron, fat and heavy in the cushions. The little boy sucking on a huge brown nipple. She smiled with pity at poor Norah Langdon. As if she wanted to say, 'sorry, I have six, you have none now, but I am not going to share any of them with you'. Norah slapped her hands on the bed, desperately screaming, 'show me the baby.'

Mrs. Gereham moved her aside with her foot, covered with the white hospital blanket. She wouldn't let Norah get near her. Theresa grabbed the resisting Norah by the arm and hauled her back from the bed.

In the last bed the young girl looked so alarmed and anxious, her face wet with tears, that Norah knew she must have her boy. She plucked the child out her arms. When she looked into two brownish eyes she returned the boy. Theresa pushed Norah to her own corner where she threw herself on the bed screaming and pounding on it. She was so distraught. She went to the babies room, inspected all the cots, came back and slammed her suitcase on the bed, almost on top of the dead baby, whom she totally ignored. She took out his little clothes, his teddy bear and threw them on the bed. She put on her trousers and a pullover, grabbed the bag and left the room,

without a word or another look at the five shocked women. Down in the hall, she asked the receptionist to call her husband, John. She waited for him with a blank face.

She didn't speak for one year. Every minute of the day Norah thought of her little boy. Could he walk already, what did he say, had he brothers, sisters? After that year she pulled herself together with all the mental effort she possessed. She went back to work teaching English literature. John and she considered adoption. But as they were nearing their fifties they were rejected by several orphanages. Norah bore her life, she even laughed again. She went out with friends, she knitted little socks for her nieces. She seemed to enjoy life, but there was a bereft mist in her eyes that never left her. The knowledge that her son was exploring his life in someone else's house was sometimes unendurable.

John died in the year Larry would have turned twenty. His death was a tough burden to carry. He had just retired and they were planning to make a journey around the world. John and Norah were looking forward to spending more time together. Half a year later Norah turned 65 and stopped working. These first months of her retirement Norah felt extremely empty. She dawdled around, not knowing what to do with her free time.

The day Larry would have turned 21, Norah sat on the couch, pondering about the past, when the telephone rang.

'Mrs. Langdon? I am Arthur Gereham. Today I received the most extraordinary letter. I think it is important that I show it to you!'

'Yes, sure but who are you, do I know you, are you a former student?' she said.

'Well, no, uh, yes, uh, it is better you read the letter, when can I come along?'

'What about next week, someday.'

'Rather today,' Arthur said.

'Today? No, I don't think that suits me.'

'It's my 21st birthday today, the letter says it's urgent I talk to you today.'

'21? what's your name again?' Norah said, wondering about the coincidence that this boy was just as old as her Larry.

'Arthur, I live quite close. I can be there in half an hour.'

'Okay, so you know my address?'

'Yes, it's in the letter.'

Norah put down the phone, with her hand on the receiver she stared ahead blankly, until the doorbell rang. Norah opened the door and looked into the blue eyes of a very handsome lad. What she had assumed was true. The boy was a close copy of her student, Larry Green, who had been in her class over 21 years ago. That boy, right in front of her was her son. Norah was so exhilarated she forgot to breathe.

Norah opened the door wider and gestured him in. In the sitting room he looked at her curiously and passed on the letter, without a word. Norah unfolded the paper and flew over the few lines of handwriting.

To Arthur Gereham,

Your real name is Larry Langdon.

21 years ago, on the day of your birth I exchanged you with the dead body of Arthur Gereham. Your biological mother is Norah Langdon. 12 Bankstreet, Wolverhampton.

Make sure you show her the letter today, on your birthday.

Sarah White.

Norah stared at the words, then at her son and said in tears, 'I knew it. I knew you were alive. Everyday I thought about you, how big you were? What did you eat? What did you say? Were you taught alright?'

'Is it true, then?' he asked. 'Am I not Arthur Gereham?'

'Absolutely not, you are my son, my only son, Larry.' She went to him, her face wet with tears.

'Forgive me, boy, may I hold you just for one moment?'

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