

Libby: 5 weeks

Libby sat on a rock staring out to sea. She loved Darren, but did she want to spend the rest of her life with him? For weeks she'd been trying to imagine a forty-year-old Darren. His dad was balding, one of those comb-the-strands-over-the-head blokes, and he drank too much. Darren drank too, but he usually kept it under control. Would he always?

The idea of waking up next to Darren bothered her the most. Libby's bed was her refuge, a space for dreams. Having him there permanently would be suffocating.

Libby wondered if she could go through with it on her own. Images of single mums crowded her brain — all of them negative. She wondered how her friends would react and wished she could talk it over with Ashleigh. Then she thought about school, the exams and her music. A baby would mean giving all that up.

But what else could she do?

Libby had tried to convince herself that having an abortion would be easier. No one would ever know, but she couldn't do it. The tiny blob of cells dividing in her belly held life. Only God could take that. And Libby didn't think she'd be able to give up a baby for adoption, so that left only one choice.

An ant crawled over the rock beside her. Libby held her finger above it. She could kill it, or let it live. Just as she had power over the creature sustaining itself through a cord in her belly. Libby shivered. This decision would affect the rest of her life.

And what about its father? Libby remembered Darren's panic-stricken face when she'd told him her period was late.

'Sorry, Darren,' she whispered, 'but it's my body. This has to be *my* choice.'

Libby stood up. She took a deep breath and watched the ant scurry to safety.

Beth: 6 Weeks

Beth sat on a rock staring out to sea. She loved Darren, but did she want to spend the rest of her life with him? For weeks she'd been trying to imagine a forty-year-old Darren. His dad was balding, one of those comb-the-strands-over-the-head blokes, and he drank too much. Darren drank too, but he usually kept it under control. Would he always?

The idea of waking up next to Darren bothered her the most. Beth's bed was her refuge, a space for dreams. Having him there permanently would be suffocating.

Beth wondered if she could go through with it on her own. Was she strong enough to become a single mum? She kept seeing images of nappies, vomit and a flabby belly. They didn't fit her plans for playing cello and travelling. But if becoming a seventeen-year-old mother wasn't the right path for her, what else could she do? Beth didn't think she'd be able to give up a baby for adoption, so that left only one choice.

She blocked the memory of her gurgling baby cousin. The clump of cells nestling in her womb wasn't like that. It wasn't anything like a baby. Not yet. But it was growing all the time. Soon its seahorse tail would become a

backbone, and arm buds would develop into limbs. She remembered the photos in Ashleigh's human biology book and knew she had to decide soon.

An ant crawled over the rock beside her. Beth held her finger above it. She could kill it, or let it live. Just as she had power over the creature sustaining itself through a cord in her belly.

'I have to decide today,' she muttered.

Beth hummed a few bars of the cello piece she was learning and stared out to sea. She thought about her parents and Father Patrick, but there was no point asking their advice. Beth knew she couldn't go through with this pregnancy. She wasn't ready to be a mother. Not yet. Not when her life was just beginning. But was it fair to put her needs first? Beth sighed. Maybe it was selfish, but she couldn't give up her dreams. Besides, a baby deserved a mother who could give love unconditionally.

And what about its father? Beth remembered Darren's panic-stricken face when she'd told him her period was late.

'Sorry, Darren,' she whispered, 'but it's my body. This has to be *my* choice.'

Beth stood up. She took a deep breath, ground the ant into the rock and went home to make an appointment.

Libby: 7 weeks

Libby's days began at six o'clock when she scurried to the toilet to vomit. One morning her mother was waiting outside the door with a glass of water.

'When's it due?' she asked. Libby burst into tears. 'Blow your nose,' Gail said, fishing in her dressing-gown pockets for a tissue. 'Crying won't make it disappear. We need to talk.' Libby filled the tissue and stared at the floor. 'I s'pose it's Darren's,' her mother continued.

Libby nodded. She felt numb, as if her mind was floating above them. She tried to concentrate on her mother's words, but the surreal atmosphere only thickened.

'Does Darren know?'

'Not yet.'

'Have you been to the doctor?'

Libby shook her head. 'I don't need to.' She showed her mother the tester and they stared at the thin, blue lines.

'Well,' Gail said at last. 'So much for going to university next year.'

'Is that all you can think of?'

'What do you want me to say?'

Libby wanted to cry, but her mother's fierce tone froze her sobs. 'Aren't you disappointed?' she mumbled.

'Of course I'm disappointed, Elisabeth. Aren't you? But telling you off would make me a hypocrite, wouldn't it?'

Libby nodded, but didn't guess what her mother meant. She hugged her arms to her chest. Her breasts were so sore.

'Well,' Gail said. 'We'd better ring Dr Fitzpatrick. Get dressed while I make an appointment.'

Libby changed into jeans and a T-shirt, then made a cup of weak tea.

'She can't see you until ten-thirty. I'll have to drop off the flowers for church on the way. Do you want to help me in the garden, or have you got homework?'

'I'll work on my English essay.'

'Right.' Gail took a bucket and her secateurs and strode out the back door.

After a few moments Libby's brother wandered in. He grunted in her direction then shook a massive serve of iron-man food into his bowl. Wishful thinking, she thought, looking at his lanky, puppy body.

'Close the door after you,' she snapped. 'It's cold.'

'Yeah, all right. Any more milk in the fridge?'

Libby passed him a carton and listened to the buzz of her father's shaver whining along the hallway. The thought of her dad knowing made Libby's stomach turn.

She tried to swallow some toast but it stuck in her throat.

'How come you've got your jeans on?' her brother asked.

'I feel sick,' Libby said, sipping her tea.

'You don't look sick.'

Libby ignored him as their father rushed in, smelling like a pine forest.

'Morning,' he said. 'Hey, what's up, Libby? No school today?'

'She's sick,' James muttered through a mouthful of cereal.

'Nothing serious?'

'Just queasy,' Libby croaked, trying to wet her mouth.

'Well, I've gotta go. First job's at nine. I'm off now, Gail,' he shouted through the screen door. 'I'll stop at the butcher on my way home.'

Gail waved her secateurs. 'Chicken breasts,' she yelled. 'Make sure he doesn't give you wings again.'

'Okay.' Jim grabbed his keys, then kissed Libby's head. 'Get better, Princess,' he whispered.

Libby nodded and dropped her toast into the compost bucket. She stood by the window watching her mother deadhead the daisies and wished she could disappear.

Beth: 8 weeks

Beth waggled school on the third Friday in June and caught a bus to the clinic across the city. She still hadn't told Darren, and her best friend, Ashleigh, wasn't speaking to her, so although they'd told her to bring someone, Beth went alone.

A herd of pro-lifers was circling the entrance, and Beth realised she'd have to push through them to get inside. There was a driveway beside the clinic. Alongside the driveway was a service station. If she jumped the fence, she could try and nick in before they saw her. Or maybe it would be better to wait until they left.

Beth glanced at her watch. Nine-thirty. If she was late, they might reschedule her. That would be ten times worse than running past a group of fanatics. *Fanatics*, she reminded herself. That's all they are. Why should I care what they think? It's my body and my decision. She repeated the words as she crossed the road. 'My body, my decision. My body, my decision.'

The service station was quiet. Beth bought some Life Savers from the bored attendant, then strolled towards the fence. She was in luck. The crossbeams were on her side. Beth stepped onto the first beam, took a deep

breath, then hurled herself over the fence. She pushed through the shrubs and ran towards the clinic door. The protesters spotted her, and one howled in frustration. He ran up and shoved the bloodied image of a foetus in her face, until his mate whistled him back.

‘Gabriel. Out,’ he yelled. ‘Quick, man, out of their yard.’

‘Baby killer,’ Gabriel hissed. He spat at her then ran back to the mob. Beth slammed the door behind her and flopped onto a chair. She wiped Gabriel’s spit off her shoe. She was panting, but dizzy with relief that she’d made it. The termination would go ahead. Nothing else mattered.

‘Are you okay?’

Beth looked around. She hadn’t noticed the nurse behind the reception bench.

‘Yeah, I guess so. I’m Sally,’ she lied, passing over her cousin’s Medicare card. ‘Sally Jones.’

‘Right then, Sally. Sorry about that.’ She waved her hand toward the door. ‘Some days are worse than others. We’ve received your referral. Our counsellor’s expecting you. Now, if you could just fill in these forms, we’ll have a quick check-up and chat in the consulting room.’

Beth’s skin prickled. ‘What ...’ she tried to say, but her mouth was dry. ‘What ... are they for?’

‘The forms? Oh, just routine,’ the nurse smiled. ‘Doctor needs to know if you’re allergic to anything.’

‘I’m not,’ Beth said.

‘Good, well then, just fill in the forms, dear. And we’ll

need a signature at the bottom.'

The pen slipped from her sweaty hands and Beth almost vomited as she bent to pick it up. She looked around. Someone was watching her. The other girl in the waiting room was young, but her eyes weren't. Wise in a tired way, she had the world-weary look of kids on the news. Kids caught in wars they didn't understand.

Beth held the pen, ready to sign her cousin's name, but writing a false name made her hesitate. As if she was formalising the lie. Giving it life. Am I doing the right thing? she wondered again. Then she thought about the rock by the sea. I need to give my dreams a chance, she reminded herself. I can't bring a child into the world until I know I can look after it.

The protesters began chanting again. '*Save the babies! Murder the murderers!*'

Beth shuddered.

The nurse turned up the music, but not before the other girl started sniffing.

'Your turn, Marina,' the nurse said gently. Marina flinched. 'Do you need more time?'

'No, it's just those people outside. They told me that what I'm doing is wicked. They pushed blood-spattered things at me. Things they use to kill babies.'

'It's okay. They say those things to upset you. It's part of their tactics. Just take a deep breath. That's it.' She took the girl's hand and led her, milky-faced and trembling, behind a partition in the corner. 'Only you can

make this decision, Marina,' the nurse said, 'and if you've changed your mind, it's okay ...'

'No! Of course not,' Marina snapped. 'As if I'd want *this* child! It's just ... Can't you get rid of them? I couldn't bear going past them again. Not later, not after ...'

'I'm sorry, Marina. As long as they stay outside the gate, we can't do a thing about it.'

'But they said they'd follow me. Get my name.'

'They can't do that.'

'But they said —'

'They said they could, but they can't.'

'What about when that doctor was charged? They had names then.'

'We lock our records, Marina. You don't have to worry. Please believe that. Now, you said that your sister is coming to take you home?' There was a muffled reply. Beth felt bad eavesdropping but she couldn't stop herself.

'Well then, she can park at the back. We'll help you to her car afterwards and that'll be the end of it. Okay?' The nurse led the girl to a chair near Beth and smiled.

'Okay,' she repeated. 'Feeling better?' Marina nodded, but she still looked shaky. 'Now, wait here and I'll see if the counsellor is ready.'

Despite the blaring meditation music, the room seemed quiet after the nurse had gone. Beth snuck a sideways look at the girl.

'Bastards, pricks, bastards,' Beth heard Marina mutter. 'They should parade in front of my uncle's office, not here.'

Her uncle's office? It took Beth a moment to realise what she meant. Then she glanced at the girl again. Was she even sixteen? Beth felt she should say something, show solidarity. Show her that she understood. But she didn't understand. Beth couldn't blame anyone. It was her fault, hers and Darren's, that she was here.

'Shame! Shame! Shame!'

The pro-lifers had raised their voices. Beth wondered whether knowing Marina's story would soften their rage. Probably not. She'd read too many letters to the editor in the Catholic newspaper to believe them capable of compassion. The rights of incest victims were less than an embryo's. That was the bottom line. Beth shook her head. Her mind was a mess.

**

'Sally Jones,' the nurse called. Beth stood up. 'Doctor Spagnoli is ready for your procedure-counselling session.'

'Sit down here, Sally,' the counsellor began, 'I'm Lucia Spagnoli. You can call me Lucia or Doctor, whichever you prefer.'

Doctor Spagnoli talked about the hundreds of couples waiting to adopt babies and told Beth about girls who'd coped with support from their families. As if I haven't thought about those options, Beth felt like yelling, but she listened quietly. Then Doctor Lucia discussed future contraception.

'I've decided to keep away from boys,' Beth said.

'Well, best to know, just in case ...'

Finally Doctor Spagnoli explained what was about to happen. Step by step. Beth could choose whether to have a local anaesthetic and be aware of the doctor's suction instruments, or be sedated intravenously and wake up when it was all over. The thought of watching someone remove the cell mass which would never develop into a baby was unbearable. Even though it looked more alien than human at this stage, it was sharing her body, and it did contain the building blocks of a baby.

'I'd like intravenous sedation,' Beth said. Nausea afterwards was a small price to pay for ignorance.

Doctor Spagnoli patted Beth's arm then led her back to the waiting room. 'Not long now,' she said. Beth watched the pro-lifers circling and shuddered. Why did they have to make it worse?

**

When she came to, Beth felt like her insides had been ripped out. That something more than physical had been removed.

'Hello, Sally.' The nurse was smiling at her. Sally? Who was Sally?

'I need to ...' Beth leant over the trolley bed and tried to vomit. But all that came out was watery dribble. She

gagged, then dry-retched, until she felt the back of her throat cramp.

‘There now, you’ll feel better soon.’

But she didn’t. Her belly ached. Beth tried to fold into a foetal position to ease the cramps, but that was worse. She wished Ashleigh was with her. If only she hadn’t called Spud a Neanderthal ...

‘It hurts,’ she moaned.

‘I know, dear. Try to be brave and rest for a while.’

Someone wheeled her into a recovery cubicle and Beth caught a glimpse of Marina’s face in the opposite room. She looked away, feeling like she’d trespassed on the other girl’s soul. It was as if someone had peeled away Marina’s everyday mask. Her expression was so raw.

The silence from the other cubicle strangled Beth’s sniffing. If that young girl could bear it, then so could she. Beth wondered whether Marina’s parents knew about the abortion, and whether anything would happen to her uncle. A stabbing pain cut into her thoughts and she let herself drift into a weird semi-sleep.

Heels click-clacking along the corridor roused her. She listened as someone whispered to Marina. Her sister perhaps. Then she looked at the clock. Twenty past two. Time to go. Beth rolled over and moaned. She’d had no idea it would ache like this. How on earth would she get home?

The nurse came in and gave Beth a smile. ‘You’ve got some colour back in your cheeks,’ she said before taking her blood pressure and checking her pad. ‘Now, who did

you say was picking you up?’

‘No one,’ Beth muttered. ‘No one’s coming. I’ll catch a taxi.’

The nurse frowned. ‘But I must have told you on the phone ... We like our patients to be accompanied. Are you sure I can’t call anyone?’

‘No, please just call me a cab.’

‘Will there be someone at home?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Beth lied. She’d chosen a Friday because her parents would be late. Her mother’s landscaping class didn’t finish until six, and her dad would be watching James’ footy team lose again. She’d have time to get home and be brave. Whatever happened, they mustn’t guess. She couldn’t bear their disappointment.

‘Well, if you’re sure,’ the nurse said, ‘but I’d like you to ring when you get home, so that I know everything’s okay.’

Beth nodded and struggled to sit up. The room spun around, then up and down. She felt like a horse on a merry-go-round. She closed her eyes, almost expecting to hear the brash whistle of a calliope. Instead, she heard Marina and her sister drive away.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

Beth nodded and tried to forget Marina’s peeled-mask face. She took a deep breath and hoped the uncle would be punished.

‘Don’t forget to phone,’ the nurse said as the taxi pulled into the driveway.

'Okay.' Beth thanked her and waddled out alone, feeling braver now that the protesters had gone. As she hobbled to the kerb, She felt clumps of herself drip onto the thick sanitary napkin in her underpants. Clumps of her childhood, and the short pleasure of her time with Darren. Clumps of trust. Clumps of honesty. Clumps of faith.

The woozy feeling continued as they drove through the city. Beth bit her cheek and forced herself to chat with the driver. He sized her up in the mirror and answered slowly. She knew that he knew what kind of clinic it was, but she had to be strong. She still had to face her parents and pretend. Beth asked the driver to stop at the corner. Somehow she'd walk the last twenty metres.

Darren was sitting under a tree in her front yard. He put out his hand to help her, but Beth shook him off.

'You weren't at school. Is everything ... umm, okay?' he asked.

'It will be from now on,' she replied.

'Do you need money?'

'I don't know what you mean,' Beth hissed. 'Why would I need money? I told you. My period was late, but everything's fine now. It was probably that flu I had. They reckon that can delay it ...'

Darren stared at the ground. She could see he didn't believe her, and although he didn't say anything Beth knew he was relieved. Suddenly she despised him. Darren reached out to hold her hand. 'I'm sorry,' he began, but Beth pulled away.

'I'm late, I'd better go,' she said. 'See you.' After stumbling inside, Beth rang the clinic then collapsed onto her bed. She stared at the crucifix above her bed until it dissolved into evening shadows. When her parents came home she said she had a headache.

'Another one?' her dad asked. 'Perhaps you're overdoing the studies. It's going to be a tough year, Princess. You need to pace yourself.'

Beth nodded and walked slowly towards the bathroom, worried that jerky movements would bring on more bleeding.

'Darling, your eyes are red. I really think we should make an appointment at the optometrist's.'

'Mum, my eyes are fine. I'm just tired.'

'All right, Elisabeth, there's no need to snap. Do you want something to eat?'

'I'll be okay. I just need to rest,' Beth shouted. Her parents exchanged glances then took their wine glasses into the lounge room. When Beth heard them turn on the news, she went back to bed, buried her head under a pillow and sobbed until she fell asleep.

**

On Monday, Beth found an envelope with a hundred and fifty dollars in her school bag. A note was paperclipped to the money: *Can we talk?*

But Beth didn't want to talk. She just wanted to put the

experience behind her.

Darren had a job stacking trolleys. Beth knew he'd been saving for a wetsuit. She threw away the note and kept the money. He could afford to suffer.

When Darren rang, Beth told her parents she didn't want to talk to him. 'We've broken up,' she said. Then she went to her room and plucked at her cello. Gail waited five minutes before knocking at her door.

'I'm sorry, darling,' her mother murmured as she perched on the end of the bed. 'I remember my first boyfriend. He said he loved me, then went off with my best friend.'

Beth felt like screaming. If only it were that simple.

'I could never understand why he did that,' her mother continued. 'Why not just tell me he wanted to end things, and then go out with Deidre?'

Beth put down her cello, interested despite herself. 'What did you do?' she asked.

Gail laughed. 'The usual things. First I cried. Then I ranted and raved. Then I got over him.' She smiled at Beth. 'Is that what happened with you and Darren?'

Beth hesitated. She longed to tell someone. To be absolved. Have someone reassure her that she'd done the right thing. But her mother would have a fit if she knew the truth. Abortion was a mortal sin.

'Something like that,' Beth muttered at last.

'Well, if you want to talk about it ...'

'Thanks, Mum, but I just want to forget the whole thing.'

'I understand.' Her mother patted her hair, and Beth closed her eyes, remembering how she used to curl up by the fire while her mother brushed and plaited her hair. She sighed. That was a long time ago.

Gail kissed Beth's cheek then hugged her. 'You'll feel better after a while. If all goes well, you'll be at university next year and there'll be lecture halls full of boys.'

Beth faked a smile and felt old. She was glad she hadn't told her mother. There was no point spoiling things. There'd been enough damage done already.