

NOTRE DAME

by
Stephen Volk

After today I can start telling people, Ruth said to herself as she zapped the car with the temperamental central-locking remote and walked towards the clinic. After twelve weeks, they say it's safe, don't they? She didn't know exactly why, biologically speaking, or whether it was some kind of superstition, but everyone said it was tempting fate to announce you were having a baby any earlier.

She went straight to the reception desk, unplugging the iPod buds from her right and left ears. Mott the Hoople's *All the Young Dudes* became a dangling hiss.

"I've an appointment to see Dr Gostelow," she said, giving the name of her consultant, then her own. "Mrs Danter. Ruth Danter. I'm a bit early."

"Yes you are," said the receptionist glancing at her watch. "But that's not a problem." She smiled and Ruth smiled back, thinking as she walked to a row of plastic seating that it must be difficult to smile seven hours a day. Maybe that had been in her job application. Hobbies: smiling seven hours a day.

She erased the image from her mind and picked up a three-month out-of-date *Hello* magazine. Not that she liked *Hello*, in fact she pretty much despised everything it stood for—shallow celebrity culture, body dysmorphia, the glamorous lifestyle of vacuous non-entities—but somehow she always had to pick it up and leaf through it when it was lying there in front of her like one of Christ's temptations. Very quickly the six-page spread of an ex-soap star's tasteless mansion and smug breast implants became too much for her and she consigned it back to the coffee table, for one unavoidable moment thinking of the *other* mags elsewhere in the building, in the room down the corridor where Seb had ejaculated into a pot.

She tried to eradicate *that* image too, but it was difficult. The very fact that she was sitting there meant everyone knew her problem. She felt her intimacy was on view every time she came to the place. Nice as they always were, she couldn't help feeling utterly raw and utterly exposed to scrutiny. And somehow scrutiny always went hand-in-hand with shame.

She straightened her back and gazed round the waiting room, needing one or two of the little soft smiles of sisterhood that sometimes bounced back and made her feel less alone and less freakish.

One man and woman were obviously there at the early stages. She could tell because they looked frightened and confused. Another girl had a blue bag with injections in, and Ruth thought: I recognise that. A third couple were smiling at each other, in for their six week scan, holding hands tightly.

A wave crept over her and at first she didn't know what it was. Then she realised she was looking at her past. It made her remember all she and Seb had been through as a couple and her eyes became hot and salty and she begged the tears not to come.

They'd had been trying for five years before consulting their GP. Hitting the age of thirty-four, Ruth had become all too aware that her natural fertility would start declining soon, then even more rapidly after forty. She'd had had crippling and erratic periods ever since she was a teenager. It wasn't unusual for her to take time off school at certain, predictable times of the month. The family doctor called it endometriosis and used the analogy that her insides were stuck together like a ball of elastic bands.

Their only hope was an operation. If the blockage of the fallopian tubes was minor, it could be addressed by electrical cauterly or laser to destroy the deposits. Ruth underwent the laparoscopy, knowing that the success or failure of the surgery depended upon the severity of what they found when they opened her up. But she had no choice if they wanted children. Afterwards the surgeon said glibly the proof was in the pudding. Heartbreakingly, they tried to conceive again but it still wasn't working.

As if to heap on the agony, when they started exploring IVF, it became clear that there was also a problem on Seb's side too. His sperm was weak. Ruth's mother said that it must be a relief it wasn't just her. Ruth couldn't believe she could be so heartless and stupid. People had no idea. They didn't understand that you go to sleep cuddled up to your husband and wake up with both of you weeping. They didn't understand how you see a woman in street with three snotty kids hanging round the buggy, smiling, happy, and think: Why not us? Why not *me*?

The clinic were great because at last here were people who understood, but everything moved at a snail's pace and Ruth was never more aware of her own ticking body clock. Blood tests, rubella status, anaemia, FSH and LH levels. Scanning her pelvis. Assessing her ovaries. Looking for fibroids. Looking at the motility of the sperm. Looking for any abnormalities...

Then at last they were ready to go for it.

The first phase was to stimulate Ruth's ovaries to produce a high number of eggs. The whole process was about convincing her body that something natural was going on when it wasn't natural at all. As far as she understood it, they were inducing a kind of false menopause so that they could manipulate the hormones in her body themselves and make sure the body doesn't reject the eggs when it needs to keep them.

When egg retrieval day came it was with a strange mixture of feelings Ruth couldn't even begin to explain and sort of didn't even try. How could you put into words what you'd been waiting for, striving for, for so long, and now it was happening? It was the day you wanted all those hopes and dreams to finally come true.

Five hours later in the lab a microscopic egg was held in position by suction on the tip of a thin glass tube. The needle containing the single sperm approached the egg slowly until it pierced the nucleus, and the sperm was injected.

By then Ruth had been told all she could do was go home and go to bed, and the clinic told her to call between ten and eleven o'clock the next morning. She'd been taking the medications for months, sticking syringes into her thigh daily, sometimes in the middle of car parks because the timing had to be precise and they couldn't afford to blow it over something as stupid as getting *that* wrong. Then there were all the other do's and don'ts: avoiding smells, avoiding perfume, avoiding pets, avoiding *sheep* (toxoplasmosis!), stopping the spliffs—which was harder for Seb than her—laying off the booze, watching the food she ate, no unpasteurized cheese (listeria!), no caffeine, watching her weight, her BMI. Watching everything.

Now there she was waiting for phone call. Then it came. Six eggs had fertilized. They decided which were the best and which ones to freeze, and gave her an appointment to come back in the next day. Ruth hung up the receiver and Seb held her tight and they both said nothing. They were both thinking the same thing and couldn't believe it. They'd come all this way and now, finally, it could be real.

In the little room at the clinic she donned her gown and he put on his hair net and booties.

"Just try and relax."

Soon she lost track of the number of times they asked her to try and relax. Morris Gostelow showed them a screen and talked them through how the eggs had been graded and pointed out the two they'd picked, and why.

At that point, unexpectedly, tears prickled Ruth's eyes and she waved a hand in front of her face. Seb put an arm round her and kissed her forehead.

"This is creation. This is what we've been waiting for."

"I know," she said.

She lay back and they viewed her cervix via a speculum, then the embryo transfer catheter was delicately inserted. It was a hot day in June and Dr Gostelow was sweating. She thought: why's *he* sweating? *I* should be the one sweating. The fertilized egg was squirted through in its carrier fluid, the catheter withdrawn and they checked through the microscope to confirm that the embryo had been released. For ten minutes she lay there, not moving a muscle, until they told her she could go home and put her feet up. All done.

"Just relax."

She wished she could, but for the rest of the day she was so stricken by panic and euphoria she couldn't even go to the loo.

Two weeks later, Seb brought home a pregnancy test. No he didn't. He brought home four. And all four of them tested positive.

She rested back on the angled couch and thought of worries past and worries yet to come. The side effects of the drugs. The headaches and the soreness of the injections. The watching for ovarian stimulation syndrome. The bloating. The nausea. The not knowing what's normal and what's not. Presumably the anxieties would pass, or become easier to deal with as she went along. They'd better or she thought she'd go mad.

She heard voices outside and reached over and tweaked open two slats of the Venetian blind.

A young family was walking to their 4x4, dad in a North Face puffa jacket, three-year-old yanking at the limit of her mum's outstretched arm, five-year-old lagging behind doing a good imitation of a chimpanzee.

She smiled and let it close with a tinny rattle.

The room was clean, cold, anonymous. But she'd never quite felt *how* cold, *how* anonymous. She realised she really wanted Seb to be with her, now, and texted him again, even though they didn't like you to use your mobiles inside the building.

Nurse Bernadetta Pawlik entered briskly and Ruth snapped it shut. "Sorry." She was a tight-lipped and Ruth didn't like her as much as cuddly Nurse Glade: she was younger but spiky-looking and gave the impression she had a raft of personal problems she left just outside the door, and you were being a bit of a nuisance just by existing. She asked Ruth to sign a form, and tugged closer the small trolley with the ultrasound machine on it.

"Sorry," said Ruth. "Can we wait for my husband to arrive, please?"

Nurse Bernadetta looked at her as if she was talking some new and incomprehensible language.

"He's on his way. I think he must be stuck in traffic. I keep leaving texts."

"I have other appointments. I must get machine started."

"OK, all right. But I don't have to see it till he gets here."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't have to see the picture till he gets here."

"Of course."

She angled the machine away from Ruth, and asked her to lift her top. Ruth told herself to relax, undid her draw-string pants and exposed the pale, freckled surface of her abdomen to view.

The small silver crucifix round the nurse's neck caught the slatted light from the window as she leaned over and spread the gel over Ruth's bump. She was always warned it might be cold but it never was. In fact it was quite soothing.

Which was when the Catholic priest walked in.

He closed the door, placed his slim briefcase on the floor and stood there next to the ultrasound machine, as if he'd been invited. Immediately his ankle-length *soutane* seemed like a black hole in the duck-egg decor of the examination room. He seemed totally relaxed amongst the medical machinery, even through his attire made him look for a moment as if he'd stepped from another century.

"Good morning, Mrs Danter."

"Good morning," she replied automatically, given little choice but politeness, suddenly self-conscious of her exposed flesh, which was now rising in goose-bumps caused by the slight draught of the opened door. Frankly she was still trying to compute: was this normal or abnormal? Was this strange, or did it just *feel* strange? The hormones were apt to do that to her these days.

"How are you today?"

"I'm fine. Not too bad."

Who are you?

He looked at her. She saw nothing in his eyes, though the rest of his facial features told her he was smiling.

"You know why I'm here don't you?"

She laughed. "No."

"You don't know why I'm here?" He seemed genuinely amused by her puzzlement. "You really don't?"

She laughed again. "No. I'm waiting to see Mr Gostelow. I'm waiting to see my... my consultant."

The corners of his mouth tugged down and he raised his eyebrows as if that was a surprise to him, but fair enough. He walked to the corner of the room and dragged across a chair. Ruth looked at Nurse Bernadetta and wondered why the hell she wasn't asking this man to *leave*? And why was she avoiding her eye contact?

Bernadetta, look at me.

He sat, lifted his briefcase onto his lap and took out a sheaf of pink, yellow and white papers stapled and paper-clipped together.

"You're aware of the legal nature of the contract you entered into, Mrs Danter?"

"Of course, yes. Everything has a legal nature, I suppose. I had to sign lots of forms, I remember that. Confidential forms with confidential information. I'm sorry. I don't understand what you're doing here."

He lowered his briefcase to the floor and opened a small plastic wallet and offered it to her. It contained an ID card.

"My name is Claude Frollo and I work for the All-Faith Human Fertilization and Embryology watchdog, which, as you might know, is backed by cross-party funding so there is no political bias in our actions or those of our officers." His voice lowered self-mockingly. "I don't know why, but I always feel duty-bound to point that out, for clarification purposes."

"Look, father..."

"Actually I'm an archdeacon, but let's not split hairs."

"Look..."

"I think you know perfectly well why I'm here, don't you?" He stared at her. His smile was fixed now. "*Don't you?*"

"I think I'd like you to go now, please," said Ruth firmly. "Nurse, can you please ask Mr Frollo to go now, please?"

Nobody moved for a moment, and the priest's elbows remained on his knees and his eyes remained on her. It was Nurse Bernadetta who left the room, smoothing the front of her tunic and with her head bowed slightly, closing the door gently after her.

Ruth felt the gooseflesh again and this time it wasn't caused by the draught. Suddenly alone in the room with the man, splayed out on the reclining chair with her bare stomach showing, she was frightened now and exposed in every conceivable way. The room felt as chill as a dungeon.

"Where's the consultant? Where's Dr Gostelow?"

"Dr Gostelow won't be seeing you today, I'm afraid." Frollo stood up and wandered round to the ultrasound, looking down at it with mystified fascination. "Remarkable machine, remarkable technology. To see the first twitchings of life. The first stretch. The first blink. As God first saw of Adam in his clay."

"What are you doing here?" She tried to disguise that she was terrified. "What do you want with me?"

Frollo resumed a kind of breeziness. "As you say, lots of paperwork. But not everything goes in the paperwork does it, Mrs Danter?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh you do. I know you do. We have it on very good authority. You could say we have it from the horse's mouth. Dr Gostelow was very forthcoming. I'll amend that. Fairly forthcoming. He did not, shall we say, give of his gifts freely." Idly, the priest plucked upwards a bar of the Venetian blinds and looked out into the sunlit car park. "I carry a very deep Christian conviction, so it goes without saying that I disapprove of what you have done. Nevertheless as a human being I can of course pity the person who feels the need to take such a course of action, contradicting though it does every moral law I hold dear..."

"Stop. Stop it." Ruth's lower lip was trembling: the whole of her was trembling. "I'm... I'm really not interested in what you hold dear. I'm really not. Now, can you call the nurse back in here? Because I want to go home."

"Oh."

"I want to get up and put my clothes on and go home. Excuse me." She tried to sit up.

"Oh, I don't think you'll find that that's possible. It really isn't." He placed a palm on her forehead. "Your breathing has started to become irregular. I really think you should lie back and relax." He was already pressing her back firmly into the couch. "I can see you are in some discomfort, so I shall make this as brief as possible. I think long, deep breaths are the order of the day." He kept his hand in place on her forehead, like he was going to perform some kind of exorcism.

"Where is Dr Gostelow?"

He ignored her.

"I'd like to talk to Dr Gostelow." She tried to dismiss the fact that her voice was going up and down, fluttering like a leaf in the wind. "I'd like him to be here to hear what you're saying." He gave her a look of pity. "I'm entitled to have someone present."

"No, Mrs Danter, you're not. You'll find you're not protected by law in any way. It's clear that you jointly took certain decisions in breach of the Screening of Embryos Act, which, as you know, has made it illegal for parents to screen out unwanted, unseemly, genetic characteristics from their unborn child."

"Unwanted. *Unseemly*." Her voice was like a torn ribbon of anger now. "You have no idea."

"Oh, I think you'll find I have *every* idea of what goes on in the mind of a desperate mother, Mrs Danter. I assure you, I've seen many of them. Very many of them in your position, who've lost their faith."

"I don't share your faith. That doesn't mean I've lost it."

"Do you think so?"

"I think you people have taken faith and distorted it and made it ugly."

Frollo shrugged. "You're entitled to your opinion. And you're entitled to express it. We live in a free society."

"Do we?"

"Increasingly."

"Is it a crime to want to bring a baby into the world without it having all of the hardships of being disabled, or stricken by some disease, or some..."

"Yes," he interrupted. "*Absolutely*. Do you know why? Because the ability of human beings to choose what kind of child they have takes that choice away from God."

Her laugh was so bitter it was hardly a laugh at all.

"So your precious God gets to make babies malformed, sick, unhappy, with tragically shortened lives of incredible suffering and pain? Why? Answer me that."

"Why does God allow suffering in the world? That's always been the subject of heated theological debate."

"Why?"

"To test our faith, I believe."

She looked at him sadly. "Yes you do, don't you?"

He took the ultrasound sensor and placed it on her belly, just under her navel. She felt an involuntary ripple in her stomach muscles. When it touched her skin it was like his hand had done so. Her vagina tightened. With a sharp intake of breath she made an effort not to shut her eyes and stared at him without blinking.

"Get out. Get your hands off me and fuck off. *Fuck off*."

He panned his eyes to the monitor screen as if not even fully aware of his hand moving the object slowly over the convex dune of her skin, down to her bikini line.

"I'll tell you what I believe." Her breathing didn't falter now. She didn't let it. "I believe screening alleviates terrible pain and suffering in this world. You might say you know the suffering of Jesus Christ, but I tell you, you don't know the suffering people like me go through to get this baby. And you know what? You can do what you want with me, lock me away and throw away the key, I don't care. All I care about is my child."

"So do *we*, Mrs Danter. We care about your child more than *anything*." He gazed absently at the ultrasound screen in front of him, which was still angled away from her and didn't take his eyes from it as he spoke. "That's why we've put the outcome firmly back in the hands of God. We got here just in time."

Just in time?

"It is a serious offence to have faulty or weak embryos or genetic conditions weeded out. Which is why we approached Dr Gostelow several months ago over several breaches of the new code which had come to our attention..."

Several months ago.

Ruth felt an ice-cold trickle down her spine.

"Pending legal proceedings against him, he was obliged to follow the changes to the law to the letter..."

She thought of the catheter inside her. Of the substance shooting up inside.

"From that point last June the Multi-Faith Committee for Moral Ethics took over the clinic and impounded its assets..."

Oh God. What was he looking at?

Oh God. What did he see?

"Your eggs were not in fact screened or selected for malformities, as you planned was going to occur. I'm happy to say the egg chosen to fertilize was no stronger or more perfect than any other. The only choice was God's."

No. No...

Don't let it be true. Please. Please.

"Take a look, Mrs Danter." The priest at the ultrasound was positively beaming. He couldn't drag his eyes away from it. "The miracle of life. With all its defects and imperfections. As God's intelligent design intended, unsullied by the vagaries and vanities of science. This is your child."

An un-oiled wheel of the trolley squealed as he turned the contraption to give her a full-on look at what was inside her.

She quickly turned away from it, burying one cheek in the pillow and screamed until her lungs were empty. She screamed until her cheeks were red and her face resembled nothing so much as a new born baby herself. And still she screamed.

Frollo wasn't unaccustomed to this. It was a reaction he had seen before, and he had learned not to let himself get too upset by it. He took away the ultrasound sensor from her belly and wiped away the gel with a few sheets of tissue from the nearby box. If Ruth had been *compos mentis* she might have noticed that he did this with exceptional delicacy and, some might say, tenderness, after which he pulled her T-shirt into position like a father dressing a little girl.

When her screams had given way to shallow sobs, he reached into his briefcase and held a sheet of paper in front of her even though she was still facing the wall with her eyes tightly shut.

"This will explain terms and conditions and what is required of you for the remainder of your gestation." Frollo didn't allow himself to be distracted by the tears running down her cheeks. "On signature you will be given a stipend by Church decree to help you financially while you carry the baby to full term. Midwifery and hospital expenses are covered, as well as that of an approved birthing centre if that is your preference. Once born, however, the child will be a ward of the state, its future placement handled jointly by the Bullrushes Trust and the Department of Social and Moral Services." He reached across and took a long strand of red hair from her cheek, curling it behind her ear. She was beyond even feeling it. "Needless to say, your newborn will be given to more deserving parents. Ones with a long-standing record of obedience and commitment to the Christian faith. People who will bring him up in the requisite moral framework for a good and productive life."

She turned to him and opened her eyes. It was like a dead person looked at him and he knew his job was done.

He placed the sheet of paper on the ultrasound and clipped his briefcase shut.

"I know such people as yourself will often stop at nothing in their unholy endeavours, but I should remind you, in case such an idea occurs to you, that the elective abortion of a unborn foetus is now punishable by death. You know that."

She did. She did know.

Frollo stood, holding the briefcase in front of him.

"The eggs." Ruth's voice was a distant transmission. "The other eggs." It wasn't even a question.

"Because of your consultant's criminal act, and your complicity, all the eggs held here have now been destroyed. You were Dr Gostelow's final patient."

She held him in her eyes without blinking. An image sprang into her mind which she'd caught by accident on the internet. An IVF doctor is taken out behind a large brick building by thugs wearing Prada leather jackets with small silver crucifixes in their lapels. He is forced to his knees. His suit jacket pulls at the single button done up. His hair is unruly in the wind. He wears yellow socks—the kind his daughter

might have bought him for Christmas as a joke. A pistol is put to the back of his head and fired.

Her eyelids stayed open defiantly but she was tired now and wanted to sleep, but there was a life inside her that was awake, and there was that to consider. Her mind didn't feel full of things, it felt empty. Empty except for one question.

"Where's Seb? Where's my husband?"

The priest turned back, one hand on the door handle.

"Goodbye, Mrs Danter."

He opened the door and outside in the corridor she could see nurses passing. All the nurses who had not responded when she was screaming her heart out. As Frollo closed the door after him he heard her voice inside saying:

"God is wrong. God is *wrong*."

His shoes were shiny and his steps were even as he walked down the corridor away from the examination room. Nurse Bernadetta walked past him and he caught her gently by the elbow. He suggested to her that her patient might need sedation. She said she would see to that and he said he appreciated it. The milk of human kindness. It did not diminish a man to commit an occasional act of charity. Even Christ offered a helping hand, even to the most fallen of sinners.

As he walked towards the automatic doors of the clinic, he took out a small square photograph. At first it was quite difficult to make out—stippled, grainy. Then he slowly discerned the body, head and surprisingly long legs occupying the bottom right-hand side of a sphere. Looking round furtively he placed it back, deep, in his pocket of his *soutane*.

Frollo expressed his concerns but the midwives told him everything was in hand. He fretted like an expectant father and in quiet moments alone, or in prayer, he was puzzled and inconvenienced by his own dubious and irregular anxieties. In some ways they were most unwelcome, but try as he might he could not dispose of them with any amount of intellectual rigour.

Her blood pressure kept fairly normal until the final few days, when sleeplessness due to back pain took her from eighty-four to over ninety. The idea of the birthing clinic, her first choice, was out of the question and they said she'd have to go to hospital to have it induced. As it turned out, with some gentle massage by the midwife, the boy came into this world unaided. Then was whisked away by the nurses, on strict instructions to do so.

Ruth Danter heard her baby's first cry echo down the corridor, but she was never allowed to see or hold him.

Frollo thought of how attractive she used to be. He had taken a vow of celibacy, but he was not above observing such things in an objective fashion. The temptress features. The slightly flared nostrils. Eyes as thickly dark as molasses. Pale skin dusted with freckles. Why did God make them this way? It was not that he had a distrust of women. They could not be individually blamed for their nature, which was essentially carnal. That was their power, whilst a man's was that of intellect and spiritual advancement. He simply had proof of that time and time again. For instance how she had reacted with such hysteria when he had visited her in the examination room. He, on the other hand, had remained calm and rational. Yes—rational.

He looked in through the observation window at the incubation units. The small creature was not there because he was premature like the pink and jaundiced caterwaulers surrounding him. He was there because the oral-facial cleft—an opening between the upper lip and lower nostril—made it difficult for him to breathe unaided, and the doctors were giving him oxygen and nutrients intravenously to boost his strength.

The young archdeacon pressed his nose and fingertips to the glass.

The first thing he noticed was the baby had the red hair like his mother—like Judas, but he didn't hold it against him. He didn't hold much truck with superstition. We lived in more enlightened times. The nurse who stood over the plastic cot looked up at the priest and smiled. She beckoned him in.

Even looking down at such a tiny infant—barely big enough to call that—it was clear he was special. He was *unique*. Suddenly Claude Frollo was overcome with the urge to genuflect, to bless him with two upright fingers, to murmur a prayer. A large outcrop of bone covered the newborn's right eye. His face was asymmetrical and the skull misshapen. His tongue poked out as if too large for its cavity. Frollo would learn shortly that one of the child's legs was notably shorter than the other, and the doctors had already detected congenital kyphosis, a structural abnormality of the spine, with the possible additional signs of scoliosis apparent in the thoracolumbar area.

Tears wettened the archdeacon's eyes at the frailty of what he beheld. This, after all, was the miracle of creation. He felt honoured. He enjoyed its ugliness as evidence of his God.

It was a symbol, and he felt a compulsion to love and cherish it like no other. He was absolutely convinced in that moment it was his duty so to do. He didn't quite understand why, but then God was, by definition, beyond understanding.

As he walked afterwards to his Lamborghini Gallardo, already late for his meeting with the Ecumenical Committee for Suppression of the Arts, he was already formulating his application to the Multi-Faith Archbishop of London to be the legal guardian of the child. He thought he stood an excellent chance of being successful, especially with a good word put in by Cardinal Budenmaier.

He slid a CD into the dashboard player. *The Apostle Speaks in Several Tongues* by Thomas Tallis. When the little chap was old enough he would introduce him to the joys of liturgical music. The choir even. Perhaps his ward would be given a job within the safe cloisters of the Cathedral—that would be perfect.

He began thinking about a name. What date was it today, the day of his birth? Octave day, the first Sunday after Easter. *Octavius*? No. Too pompous. It was also called Saint Thomas Sunday, after the doubter who placed his finger in Christ's side on the eighth day after the resurrection. But he disliked the name Thomas: it reminded him of a Jesuit who used to beat him. The other name for it was Quasimodo Sunday, from the Latin text of the traditional Introit: "*Quasi modo geniti infantes...*"—"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby..." from the First Epistle of Peter.

Quasimodo. Yes...

He would bring him up with every kindness and support a father could give. Education. Care. Faith. Hope. And love. For, as Saint Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, the greatest of these is love.