

The first time I met him was at the bottom of the sea.

Any religion or cult will tell you that the highest state of being is just merely being. Not having to bear petty feelings like jealousy or rage, not caring about material things. Well, there we were reproducing (no guilt about overpopulation or unfair consumption of resources) with purpose, eating and *being*, just *being*, in the darkness. Can you imagine how wonderful it was? Surrounded by water, everywhere its pressure, not needing to think beyond swimming around and around.

Seahorses and fish are philosophical creatures. So deeply philosophical that they can look at the same thing again and again and see it all in a million different ways. The object in view can trigger off a million different thoughts.

It was heaven, nirvana, call it what you will. We were the closest I think we veer to that man-made fantasy. We had been together for as far back as my seahorse being was. Maybe we were brother and sister too; it didn't matter then. Our home a rock with a hole in it, to dart in and out of and just *be* until we died. Which we eventually did.

I was re-born kicking and screaming and gulping the strange air. What I had done to deserve this I couldn't comprehend. It was bright beyond imagining, cold and bare and everything the opposite of how it was before. The very air that surrounded me frightened me. It all seemed too loose somehow, like my body could fly apart in any direction. Fly out around this mustard-and-black-flecked box and splatter on these strange creatures. Who promptly washed me. Which made it worse. It was like having my scales scrubbed off. They stuck me in a box while I got acquainted with the strange body and limbs. Which were impossible to control, jerking out all over the place. The noise that seemed to come from me, how awful it

was, but I couldn't stop it. I just screamed and secreted endless amounts of fluids, as the other strange creatures looked at me with as much dismay as I felt.

I kept up the screaming, cursing the world for plucking me from the depths of the ocean and pure being into this miserable existence, where I was hot and sticky and puerile and totally unable to fend for myself.

Something was rammed in my mouth every four hours on the dot, a nasty tasting rubber teat that leaked a congealed, milky-white substance. I slept as little as I could, trying to figure out a way to escape this hell and get back to the dark silent bliss of the home I had been plucked from.

The first time I slept, I thought the wheel had reversed its cycle and I was back. When I slept it was like being back there. He was there in my dreams, he who had always been. It was dark and peaceful. Waking up was like dying all over again and being reborn into this unbearable brightness. Then the screaming would begin again, with more intensity and fervour than before.

The hospital was bright. The fluorescent light shone above my cot and was blotted out only by occasional faces. My mother pale and drawn, too old for this birth and out of practice with babies. It had taken as much out of her as it had me. We were kept in for a week. She shuffled to the canteen as much as she could get away with and left the nurses to feed me. They were brisk and routine-like.

'Ah, she's left the afterthought alone again,' they'd say when she was out of earshot.

My mother's short, stiff perm was unmanageable without her twice-weekly blow-dry at the hairdressers. That week at the hospital was the only time she didn't wear make-up that I can remember. I think even my father had forgotten what she really looked like without it, and maintained his distance. Her dressing gown was the only bright thing, cerise pink with flowers appliquéd on the quilting.

And the matching slippers, all bought for the stay in the hospital.

She had done well only to have had two children up to now. Maybe she had been hoping for a boy this time, or maybe I was an accident. Either way, she was clearly disappointed when she stared over from the bed.

So were my sisters, though they only came a few times as the hospital was over an hour's drive away. They crowded over me at first, pawing at me, awkwardly picking me up. My screams and rigid body made sure they soon put me down. They sat at the edge of the bed side-by-side, staring, frightened of this ball of fury that did not belong to their little world. They'd stick their tongues out at me and roll their eyes. Maybe they were trying to make me laugh, but I never did. Not then or after.

When my father came he would stand awkwardly at the end of the bed. He was much hairier than them, more animal-like. But he kept his arms folded firmly and did not even try to pick me up. Though he seemed less annoyed by my presence than the others. I think he understood me then. Like me, he just wanted to get out of the hospital.

I hated prams, high chairs, shoes, baby grows and nappies. I fought to escape all the methods of restraint, all the cages that are used on babies. But as the days went by, I became more resigned to my fate, I became somewhat calmer. It got darker and the wind howled, soothing me high on the hill where the house was. I was still determined to do what I could to get back all I had lost. I cried with frustration at this useless human body, which could not swim or even communicate my request that I be thrown back into the sea and left there.

It was like my soul had been gutted from my body, like the poor fish I saw on the draining board of my new home, sliced in two, its insides pulled out, its lifeless eye gazing in despair at the Aertex ceiling. I remembered little about my death so perhaps this had