

A man and a woman are the central figures, dressed in baby onesies. The man is in a light blue onesie with a white collar and a blue bow at the neck, holding a baby bottle. The woman is in a pink onesie with a white collar and a pink bow, holding a teddy bear. They are both smiling and holding hands. In the background, a large group of people, including children and adults, are gathered in a room with wooden floors and colorful bunting. Some people are also in costumes, like a witch and a person in a green and yellow suit.

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

the baby trap

EVELYN HUGHES

The Baby Trap

by
Evelyn Hughes

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The Baby Trap

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Chapter One:

Samantha

The diagnosis had come on a Tuesday in March, which Samantha had always thought was an odd day for the end of something. Tuesdays were unremarkable. They belonged to dentist appointments and work meetings that could have been emails. They were not the days on which you were told, quietly and with a great deal of careful language, that your body would not do the one thing you had always assumed it eventually would.

She had been twenty-six. Gary had been in the waiting room with a magazine he was not reading, and when she came back through the door, he had looked up at her face and known without being told.

The word the consultant used was *unlikely*. He said it several times in slightly different configurations. Unlikely to conceive naturally. Unlikely that IVF would produce a different outcome given the particular nature of the problem. He was not unkind. He handed her a printed sheet with the names of support organisations on it, and she had folded it precisely in half and put it in her bag and thanked him, and then she and Gary had walked out into the car park and stood beside the car for a moment without speaking.

Well, Gary had said.

Yes, she had said.

They had driven home and made tea and sat at the kitchen table and talked about it sensibly and thoroughly, and Gary had held her hand and said all the things she needed him to say, and that evening she had gone to bed early and lain in the dark and felt

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something leave her that she could not name precisely. Not hope exactly. Hope came and went and was familiar in its motion. Something more powerful than hope, rather, a floor she had not known she was standing on until it was no longer there.

She had grown up in a house that ran on competence. Her mother was a woman who solved problems before they became crises, who kept the freezer stocked and the car serviced, and who could re-grout a bathroom and produce a three-course dinner on the same afternoon without visible effort. Her father was quieter, warmer, a secondary school geography teacher who read novels and coached the junior football team on weekends and who called Samantha *love* in a way that never diminished with repetition. They were not a demonstrative family, but they were a close one, and the house had always felt like a place that knew what it was for.

Samantha had absorbed from her mother the habit of doing things properly. She had been a capable, focused student, better at the sciences than the arts, though she had read widely on her own. She had studied dietetics at university, which suited her: it was a discipline that had real and practical application, that connected knowledge to people's daily lives in ways she found satisfying. She had not been the sort of student who stayed out until three and regretted it the following morning. She had not been dull, however. She had friends, she went to things, she was easy to be around, but she had a settled personality, even at twenty, that made some people mistake her for older.

She had met Gary at twenty-three through a mutual friend, at a birthday dinner she had almost not gone to. He was twenty-five then and working in logistics, and he had made her laugh twice in the first half hour, which she had always considered an efficient metric. He was solid-looking rather than conventionally handsome, with a calm manner that she had found straightforwardly appealing. They had talked for most of the evening and exchanged numbers and gone for a walk the following weekend, which turned into five hours and a

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Thai restaurant and a slightly awkward goodbye at her door, that they had both laughed about the following day on the phone.

She had not been in any great hurry about anything. She had assumed, in the way that people do when they are young and nothing has yet gone wrong, that the future was a largely settled matter that would arrive in the expected order. Career. Marriage. Children. She did not think of this as a plan so much as an expectation, an expectation she had seen the outline of since she was old enough to understand that life moved forward.

The diagnosis rearranged that expectation. It did not destroy it. She had given herself approximately three months to grieve what she thought she was grieving, and she had used those three months thoroughly and without self-deception. She had cried more than she expected to. She had been angry in a way she found hard to direct, which was unusual for her. She had sat one afternoon in the car outside the supermarket for forty minutes, not crying exactly but not able to go inside either, and she had thought, *this is what it is, and I can either become someone who is defined by it, or I can become someone who is not.*

She had chosen, with the kind of deliberateness that was native to her, *not* to be defined by it.

She and Gary had talked seriously about adoption. They had gone to information evenings and read the materials and talked to a social worker who was brisk and practical and not unkind. In the end, they had not pursued it, for reasons that were harder to articulate than either of them expected. It was not the process which they had both been prepared to commit to. It was something harder to name, a sense that they were not quite ready, that they needed to arrive somewhere together first before they could do it well. They had agreed to revisit the question in a year. The year had passed, and they had not revisited it, and after a while, its absence from the conversation became a kind of answer in itself.

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She was good at her job. She had moved from clinical work into private practice by thirty, building a client list steadily through referrals and a reputation for being direct without being dismissive. She worked from a consulting room she rented two days a week in a converted Victorian house on the better side of the city centre, and from home on the other days. She had a particular interest in disordered eating, which she had come to through a combination of professional reading and a close friend who had spent years in its grip, and she treated it with a rigour and a patience that her clients tended, eventually, to be grateful for.

The work filled her. That was not nothing. She had noticed, in the years following the diagnosis, that some of the space she had imagined a child occupying was taken by the particular attention she brought to her clients. It was not the same thing, not a replacement, but something real nonetheless, a way of being useful to someone who needed exactly what she had to offer.

She did not talk about the diagnosis with many people. Her mother knew, and her closest friend Jess, and that was more or less sufficient. She did not want sympathy from people who did not know what to do with it. She did not want to be handled carefully. She had handled it carefully herself, and it was, for the most part, done.

The marriage.

She could not have said precisely when the warmth in it had begun to thin. It was not a single thing. It was gradual, the slow drift of two people who were not unhappy exactly, not unhappy enough to do anything about it, but who had stopped finding their way back to each other after the ordinary frictions of working lives and tired evenings and weekends that never quite became the thing they might have been.

She had kissed a man at a conference in Edinburgh. It had been two years ago now. She was not proud of it, and she did not excuse it, but she had looked at it honestly and understood it. She had needed, in some way she could not access in her daily life, to feel

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wanted. The man had been a colleague from another trust, personable and interested in her in an uncomplicated way, and she had kissed him once, outside a hotel bar, and gone back to her room and lain awake for an hour and then gone to sleep and not contacted him again. She had not told Gary. But a month later, she kissed another man, and this time spent time in his bed, feeling the intimacy she was lacking. The affair was purely about sex and little more, and they both realised it. After three months, they ended it amicably.

She did not know, and had never discovered, whether Gary had done anything similar. There had been a period, about a year after Edinburgh, when he had been distant in a particular way that she had noticed but not probed. She suspected something, but she had not asked because she did not want to be in a position of asking while carrying Edinburgh herself. So they had simply allowed whatever it was to pass. She was, however, convinced that he was having an affair and secretly hoped that it was like her own, just a desire for sexual intimacy, but not romance.

They were not enemies. That was important. They were fond of each other in a residual way, fond in the way you are of someone who has been significant to you, who knows your parents and your history and the shape of your days. They ate dinner together most nights and talked about their respective days and occasionally watched things on television. They had sex very infrequently and without real attention. They were polite about the small inconveniences of shared living. They were not actively unkind to each other.

But something had been missing for long enough that Samantha had begun to wonder whether it was recoverable, or whether this, this pleasant, moderate, slightly muffled life, was simply what they had become. And so she found yet another man who was happy to screw her, make her scream and then go home. It helped... temporarily, but after it was over, the same problems remained.

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It was Jess who had told her about the party. Marcus and Tina were doing a fancy-dress thing, themed around the idea of second childhoods. They were both forty that year and making something elaborate of it. Jess had called it *chaotic and ridiculous* in a way that meant she was already planning her costume. Samantha had laughed and said she and Gary would come. She was quite fond of costume parties. The idea of being someone else had always appealed, and as her relationship was failing... it had even more appeal.

She had not expected much, however. She had expected a glass of wine and some dancing and a taxi home. She had not expected what the evening would set in motion, which was something she could not have articulated at the time and could only describe afterwards as the sensation of a door, a door she had not known was there, opening a fraction in the dark.

Chapter Two: Gary

Gary had been a bedwetter until he was fifteen, which was long enough to shape a person. It was his secret humiliation and horror.

It had started early, early enough that he had no memory of dry nights as a baseline, no before to measure the problem against. His mother had handled it without drama, which was the word he would use as an adult when he allowed himself to think about it: *drama*. There had been none. The plastic mattress protector was simply there, the same way the nightlight was there, and the glass of water on the bedside table was there. Practical provisions for practical realities. His mother, Elaine, had been that kind of woman.

She changed his sheets with the same brisk warmth she brought to everything, making his packed lunch, signing his school forms, sitting with him when he was ill. The bedwetting was not discussed in tones of concern or disappointment. It was not discussed much at all. When he was seven, she had started waking him at eleven each night to take him to the toilet, and this too became simply part of the rhythm of the house, so unremarkable that Gary in later years was not sure whether he remembered it happening or remembered being told it had happened. He had never wet himself at school. He had never had an accident outside the home. The problem was contained, managed, ordinary in its way, and because his mother made it ordinary, it was just that. Not a problem.

He had a younger sister, Denise, who knew nothing about it. The door to his room was always shut. The sheets went into the wash early. There was a culture of silence around the whole thing that Gary absorbed without being taught, understanding instinctively that it was private, not because it was shameful, as his mother had never

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shamed him, but because it was his, and it was between them, and that was sufficient.

The nappies began when he was nine.

His mother had suggested them matter-of-factly, in the context of a family holiday to a cottage in Wales, a week away, in other people's beds, with all the impracticalities involved. She had bought a pack of the largest children's size and shown them to him without ceremony. *Just for sleeping*, she had said. *So you don't have to worry*. He had accepted them in the same spirit in which they were offered.

What he had not anticipated was the other thing. The way that wearing them produced something beyond their practical function. The first night in Wales, he had lain awake in the unfamiliar room and felt something he could not have named, a kind of warmth, not physical, not entirely. A settling. As though some low-level vigilance he had always maintained was briefly permitted to stand down.

He had wet the nappy without intending to, without waking. He had become aware of it in the morning, the strange heaviness, the warmth already cooling, and he had felt, alongside a faint embarrassment, something else he also could not name. He did not try to name it. He was nine years old.

When they returned home, his mother had simply continued with them. The nappies were easier, she said, than the two a.m. waking, and she was not wrong. Gary wore them each night, and his mother changed the sheets far less frequently, and the subject became even less of a subject than it had been before. He grew into it. The nappies became the last thing before sleep and the first fact of morning, as unremarkable as shoes.

Except that they were not unremarkable to Gary.

He was twelve when he understood that his relationship to the nappies was not straightforwardly medical. He had understood for some time that the bedwetting itself was likely to stop, in the way that the doctor had said it might, as he got older. What he had begun