

Hilton Hotel, Milton Keynes

The first time I met my mother it was also in a hotel. I sat in the waiting area near the reception and waited and waited. I told the receptionist that a woman would be calling for me, an Elizabeth Fraser, and told her where I'd be sitting. I didn't tell her that the woman I was waiting for was my mother and that I'd never met her before, though half of me longed to blurt that out to the receptionist, perhaps to make it seem more believable. I still wasn't sure my mother would definitely turn up, since we'd made several dates to meet over a three-year period, and she had kept getting cold feet. We were meant to meet in the winter of 1988, months after my son was born, then the spring of 1989, then the autumn of 1989, then the summer of 1990, and now it was the autumn of 1991. I had a three-year-old son by then. The first letter I ever received from my birth mother arrived three days before I gave birth to my son.

I'd become very curious about my birth mother when pregnant, perhaps prompted by all the medical questions that doctors ask you. Do you know which diseases are in your family? What diseases run down your line? I started

to trace her then at the age of twenty-six and had managed to find her sisters in Nairn in the Highlands. They'd said they would forward a letter from me to her and that I should wait to hear, and I finally did hear just before Matthew was born.

It's a bit like a blind date, waiting to meet your birth mother. I didn't know exactly what she looked like, though I'd been sent out-of-date photographs. I kept getting up from the leather-sofa seating area, and hanging around behind the glass partition to the hotel entrance. My mother could be any woman coming through the revolving door of the hotel. She could be somebody I've already passed in the street, or sat next to on a train, or held the door open for in a shop. She could be somebody I'd just missed, who had got on her train at Euston an hour before I arrived, somebody *I'd just missed*. It's freaky and alarming to think that you could have met your mother already and not even known. Because the truth is your mother is a complete stranger. She could be anyone out there. Before you found her she could have died. You wouldn't have known. Nobody would have told you; nobody would have known where to find you because you are a complete stranger too. You are both relative strangers.

My heart is fluttering. I think I should know her. I think I should recognize her the minute she comes through the door. Will she choose the revolving door or the sliding door? There's much that's peculiarly romantic about the waiting. What will her hair be like? What will she be

wearing? What will her walk be like? Will she bring me a present? Will she hold me close and cry? Will she be wary, cold and distant? The sensation I am most filled with though is not anticipation, but dread. I'm terrified. I feel as if it is all going to go horribly wrong. I'm terrified of meeting my mother. I'm not sure what calamity I think might happen, but if I hadn't arranged it all, I might run off. I suddenly understand all the cancelled dates. It takes some bravery to stay put. The clock ticks. She is now late: five minutes late, then ten minutes. All the waiting minutes are equally slow. Perhaps she's not coming. If she doesn't come, that might be a relief. I think to myself that if my mother *does* turn up, it will mean that she too has used all her courage to come and meet me.

Finally, a woman comes through the sliding door that I think might be her, except that she's with another woman much younger than her. The woman that I think might be my mother is carrying a plastic bag, a huge panda and a bunch of orchids, which is weird because I too am carrying a bunch of orchids. She's small in height, even smaller than me, and has reddish hair. She's quite well built, not as big as me, but not slight either. She's wearing a cream raincoat and a black-and-white scarf. 'Jackie?' she says and hugs me. Her eyes fill with tears. I expected tears might come to my eyes, but they don't. I would like to be able to cry. What is the matter with me? I hug her back and feel a little numb. 'This is Jenny from my church,' she says, introducing me to a thin young woman with straggly hair.

'Hello, Jenny.' I shake her hand.

'I'm just leaving. I'll be back for her in an hour,' Jenny says to me, as if my mother was a child and I was a worker in a crèche. I almost go to joke, 'I'll have her ready and her nappy fresh,' but I don't. Jenny gives Elizabeth a huge sideways smile of encouragement, and then takes her leave back through the revolving door, waving until she's disappeared.

Elizabeth and I go and sit down in the hotel's reception area on the big grey leather sofas that are facing each other. It doesn't feel right, but my hotel bedroom has Matthew and Louise my flatmate in it and we only have an hour, so there's no point trying to find somewhere less soulless. I've waited for years to meet her so I don't want to squander a single second. We sit down on the big grey sofa and Elizabeth hugs me again. She takes my hand and pats it. Her eyes are still full of tears. She says, 'I brought this for Matthew,' pointing to the panda, and we exchange bunches of orchids, laughing at the coincidence of the flowers. A little unnerving: I wonder if that choice has anything to do with genetics.

'I'll go and get him down in a bit so that you can see him,' I say. She opens the buttons on her raincoat and takes it off, folding it on the seat beside her. She's wearing a black-and-white cardigan and a smart black skirt. Her knees look round and vulnerable.

Elizabeth folds and unfolds the empty carrier bag in her hand, troubled, and anxious. 'Jenny came with me for moral support,' she says, and I nod. It doesn't seem

appropriate to bombard her with questions about myself, and everything that I was burning to ask her has suddenly left me. I can't think what I'd like to know. Opposite me is a woman in her fifties, quite well turned out, wearing a nicely patterned scarf. I can't see anything of my face in hers. Her lips are quite thin. I find myself staring at her features in a way that is probably unseemly. She's brought photographs of her children with her, and she shows me them. 'This was Royce,' she says sadly. 'He was a handsome boy. This is Aisha. This is Chloe.' I scrutinize the photographs. Her children are all the same colour as me because she has married a dark-skinned man from Singapore. I'd always imagined they would be white, with red hair, but they are not. They all have black hair and brown skin. One of her daughters, I think, looks a bit like me. I show her the ones I've brought. I've tried to select the photographs so that I can show her my life in pictures. There's me and my brother and my dad on the Isle of Mull. I'm four and we're playing at being Scottish soldiers. There I am, in Jessie Clark's back garden, doing a show, whilst my brother digs at a tree behind him. Me in a white dress, aged three, with my head thrown back laughing. There's my mum and me, me wearing a brown anorak, identical to my brother's blue one, on the ferry to Mull. There's me in Abercromby Place, Stirling, a student with an Afro. There's a photograph of my mum and dad in their thirties. My mother stares at my parents for ages, and says they don't look like how she imagined them to look. She sounds faintly disappointed.