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my life  
WORDS KATE ROTHERHAM

PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTOLIBRARY



# freefall

A short-listed entrant to our 2009 My Child/Parenting Express short story writing competition, this mother felt confused, primal and surreal while falling in love with her new little bundle

**U**nder a watchful summer moon of heavy silver, I birthed her. I stood at the lip of the plane, loosened my grip on everything that was familiar, and fell fast. Love, fear and a million unknowns hurtled towards me, pummelling my body and mind.

Then I saw her and my heart cracked open like a burst pipe. Tracing my finger lightly across her tiny nose, eyebrows and lips, my senses are overwhelmed by her perfection – our very own heavenly creature!

When my mind registers that she is not heavenly at all but limited by an earthly lifespan, I am filled with the nameless, unbearable grief of imaginings. Please, please may she grow and bloom into her own magnificent adult self.

The news on the hospital television is full of unfathomable evil. Will that be us one day on the court steps, clutching her photograph and each other, our faces haunted, our voices faltering as we thank the jury and the detectives and talk of honouring her memory? I look at her now asleep on my chest, her dappled pink cheek rising and falling in the softest of rhythms, and feel sure I would perish from grief.

On discharge, order and chaos battle for daily supremacy in our little home, now ruled by somebody not yet 50cm long. My much-chucked-up-upon pyjamas become standard day wear and US chat show hosts with impossibly white teeth are my new wise friends. Slapping three-day-old bread and plastic cheese into the sandwich maker for dinner ('Bon appétit,' my beloved says cheerfully), I see chaos smirking victoriously, chalking up another win on the increasingly one-sided scoreboard.

Long-held environmental convictions dissolve in a blink as I ignore the overflowing nappy bucket and tear open a pack of disposables while

choosing the "extra hot" option on the dryer. The mailbox is jammed with size 000 suits in every possible variation of insipid pink, and half-written thank-you cards are strewn across every surface.

My euphoria melts ever so slowly into flu-like exhaustion. Vast, lonely oceans of feeding, crying, vomiting, washing and settling surround me, and the distant horizon is peppered with tiny, tantalising islands of sleep. Some days I can't think above her relentless seagull squawking and my own fat, salty tears. I am drifting, bobbing and drowning in the endlessness of her dependence. Even my teeth feel tired.

We file into the run-down council building and make small talk and tea, weaving between the menagerie of prams. A six-week-old called Tyson sports denim jeans and jacket with lace-up gym boots and a baseball cap on backwards. Tyson's mum is back at the gym three mornings a week and loving the local musical discovery class for newborns.

Peeking in my pram, I am suddenly as blank as the sleeping white jumpsuit – a suspended moment follows, a flutter of nausea, then the surreal realisation that I don't know my baby's name. I rummage frantically through the nappy bag in a blind panic, baby paraphernalia spilling everywhere. An awkward pause and the mum next to me prompts: 'Your turn!'

The immunisation book falls out and I grab it: my oxygen mask in a plane disaster. 'Yes, hi, I'm Alexandra and this is Jessica Rose, she's five weeks old today. It's nice to meet you all.'

Nappies, wipes, blanket, spare singlet, spare jumpsuit, large posset-catcher, no-rinse soap, keys, wallet, phone. I scribble JR on the inside of my palm like a tattoo.

This week the topic is our birth experience. 'Well, it was amazing, beautiful and completely

horrific,' I volunteer while the others look at their toes and one mum picks a tuft of invisible lint from the mission brown carpet.

Afterwards I venture to the health food shop with Jessica in her pouch. She sleeps soundly with her ear next to my heart, which is beating with the faintest pulse of newfound confidence. I am reaching for muesli when an older woman swoops on me. Without a word she is suddenly much too close and then she touches me, fumbling at the clips, 'Your poor baby can't possibly breathe in there!' A primal snarl hurtles out of my mouth: 'Don't touch my baby!' We both take a step back, equally frightened of me.

Bleary eyed, I watch a nature documentary on Borneo during her midnight feed. An orangutan wraps her long, orange arms tenderly around her baby and gazes back at me with kind eyes. I am drawn to this hairy version of myself. It looks a tender yet fierce love and I smile imagining her giant hands flattening inappropriately curious strangers. She looks proud and exhausted. We stare at each other, two mammal mothers learning the dance of survival with our young.

The next morning, new sunlight streams in across Jessica's bassinet and her little eyes flicker with recognition when I enter.

A moment, then her mouth opens downwards and outwards, the most perfect strawberry pink crescent moon. A bolt of white electricity zigzags through my spine and into my heart where it stays, pulsing. I can almost hear the whooosh of my parachute opening.

I'm no longer falling, but floating, silently and gently. I'm in love; my baby girl smiled at me. ●  
*Kate Rotherham's story should have been published in our summer 2009/2010 issue as the final runner-up for the 2009 My Life competition. We mistakenly published another story and apologise for this.*