

SHORT STORIES BY JUDITH HOOPER

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DON'T WORRY, JUDITH, SHE'S FINE

'You really should stop worrying, Judith. She's fine.'

Someone passes me the plate of chocolate biscuits, and I shake my head. My fingers play up and down my baby's back, snug in her white towelling babygro. Five minutes before, I was holding a robust, bouncy boy on my knee. As he wriggled, bursting with energy and vitality, I felt his muscles under my hands: alert, taut, raring to go. A thought forced itself to the front of my mind: 'This is what babies should feel like'. Now, touching my baby girl's sagging muscles, her curved spine, the words of reassurance ring hollow.

We sit together drinking coffee: five women, sharing only the closeness of our babies' birth dates, and the memory of having been thrown together over a couple of weekends, learning birthing positions and how to change nappies on the marmite-smeared bottom of a plastic doll. A mist forms round me, separating me from the other mothers and their preoccupations – sleep, routines, feeding, the best buggies, maternity leave, the cost of childcare. Their babies' futures are mapped out – sitting by six months, walking sometime around their first birthday, talking, running. The worry grips me and I hardly notice the plate of biscuits doing its rounds again.



We are sitting on the floor at home, our baby girl lying between us on her Noah's ark mat. My husband Nick picks up her toy mouse, and she giggles as he pulls the stretchy cord and Mousey dances in front of her. She is four months old.

Still dangling Mousey for Rose's delight, Nick says 'You know, my boys never used to look banana-shaped when they lay on the floor'. I think of Nick's sons from his previous marriage - tall and muscular and energetic, entirely at ease in their bodies. Rose laughs as she grasps her father's hand and reaches for her toy.

'I'd been wondering about that', I reply, looking down at Rose's c-shaped posture. 'It isn't normal, is it?'

'I don't think so. They didn't do it, anyway. Can you mention it to the health visitor?'

There. We've voiced it. The moment when it all started. The journey. Slowly, slowly. Conversations with health visitors, who take our concerns seriously. A visit to the GP: no, she's fine. Long gaps, with nothing happening but fear, worry, feeling alone. And noticing, all the time, that other babies are doing different things from our baby - sitting, and moving around, and experimenting, whilst she still struggles to sit at 12 months and prefers to observe the world gently, peacefully, from a supine position on the floor.

Then the momentum shifts and faster, faster, the wheels start to turn. After months of waiting and not knowing, through the door we slip at last, like Alice down the rabbit hole, into a world of appointments, professionals, questions. Paediatrician. Neurologist. Orthopaedic paediatrician. Eye specialist. Physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy. Testing. Decisions.

And one day we wake up to the realisation that we are not just parents any more, but carers, and for a while at least, it feels as if there is a world of difference between the two.