

When I went into hospital to have my baby, I took two detective novels to read. Well, I was having a caesarean, I'd be in bed for a week, what else was I going to do? I think it's fair to say that I'd buried my head in the sand about this birth. I'd refused to read the final sections in the pregnancy books. My mother came to stay to be my birthing partner, and she read the books. It was very different from her day. She found out that modern women have tennis balls rubbed on their backs during labour. Did I have any tennis balls? Did I think it was a good idea? I didn't care.

My husband had died in an accident four months before. He was 42. People were shocked and saddened, but they all said how lucky I was because I would have the baby. I didn't get it. How would a baby help? It couldn't talk. It couldn't hug me. It had never met my husband. What was the point? And anyway, most people I knew had both a husband and baby – why couldn't I?

The antenatal classes were difficult. The women were so excited. They were fussing about birthing pools and TENS machines and yoga. They were making plans to meet up as couples when the babies were born. I stopped going.

First babies are always late, they say. Mine was. The consultant had convinced me a natural birth would be best, for me and for the baby. A week after the due date I stopped being able to cope. When I went to see him he sent me home to get my bag and said he'd operate first thing the next day. In the safety of the hospital, without any tennis balls, I went into labour. Ten hours later the baby's heart rate dropped, so I had a caesarean anyway.

They put my baby on my chest. She was alive, and she was a little girl, ten fingers, ten toes, all responses and reflexes normal. She was hideous: like a skinned Spielberg alien, but she was staring at me and she was mine. The surge of adoration that flooded my body took me by surprise.

I'm sure that it wasn't only the morphine that made me grin like a maniac. I couldn't stop gazing at her, stroking her, touching her, holding her. All I wanted to do was lie in bed with her cradled in my arms next to my heart. I thought she was beautiful. I thought she smelt of strawberry jam. All those people were right. I didn't miss my husband any less, but her birth made it a little bit better.

I took her home ten days later. I put the two detective novels in the bottom of my bag, unopened. I've never read them to this day.