

Can Any Mother Help Me?

Jenna Bailey



In 1935, a young woman wrote a letter to the women's magazine *Nursery World*, expressing her feelings of isolation and loneliness.

'Can any mother help me? I live a very lonely life as I have no near neighbours. I cannot afford to buy a wireless. I adore reading, but with no library am very limited with books . . . Can any reader suggest an occupation that will intrigue me and exclude "thinking" and cost nothing!'

Women from all over the country wrote back expressing similar frustrations. They were full of ideas and opinions but had nowhere to express them. So they decided to start a private magazine.

In *Can Any Mother Help Me?* Jenna Bailey presents the extraordinary group of wives and mothers whose lives connected through a magazine. Her book is an intimate and moving collection of personal stories and, above all, a portrait of inseparable friendships.

I think the time has come when I can tell you the whole story of what was happening here from 1946 (April) when Matthew was started – to 1949 (Sept.) when I entered the Catholic Church. It's all one story, really: story of a crisis. I only hope it won't be terribly boring. You may remember that, in 1945, when we all returned here and started our family life again, I wanted a fourth baby. But after we had discussed it very fully, Alistair told me to put the idea right out of my head, as it would upset all the educational plans he had for the other boys, and also cause overcrowding in this house, which he already considered much too small. I succeeded in persuading myself that he was probably right and that it would be better to concentrate on our three, and enjoy them, and not hanker after another baby. So I set about it very thoroughly, even to the extent of getting rid of practically all my baby clothes and equipment, at a time when these things were difficult to replace. By the spring of 1946 I had renounced all thoughts of ever having another child, and was quite content with

life as it was. One night at the end of March 1946, A suddenly took me unawares and unwilling (not feeling in the mood), disregarding all protests – when I asked, 'What about precautions?' he answered, 'Oh, to hell with precautions. They spoil everything. Besides, it's quite unnecessary at our age. We aren't as fertile as we were.' I said, 'Are you quite sure you want a baby exactly at Christmas time, because you'll certainly have one.' 'Rubbish,' said Alistair; and I resigned myself. Next morning I worked out exactly when the baby would arrive, December 24th. The worst possible time. Poor Granny would be called upon to have the boys for Christmas or else to come up here to look after them (which Alistair would most likely not agree to). In any case we should all be separated. I could have wept. And yet I was thrilled! We were at the seaside in the Easter holidays when I missed my first period. 'Nonsense. Rubbish,' said Alistair. 'It will come. You'll see. You've miscalculated it.' But when the fact was established he was furious. How dared I do such a thing? How could he have known that one risk ►►

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would be one too many? I was equally furious with him. 'I warned you, didn't I?' And so we reproached each other. I tried to resign myself to the more trying aspects of the situation, but felt profound resentment about it all – yet mixed with joy and excitement. All most irrational.

Another thing which contributed a great deal to the bad state of things between us was that, following a sort of nervous breakdown while on an instructing job at Wimbledon, A was having psycho-analytical treatment, almost every day, up in London. He used to go up after school each afternoon, and return home about 7. The effect of this treatment was to make him completely and absolutely wrapped up in himself and totally indifferent to everything and everybody else. It also made him morose, and exceedingly irritable. Moreover, he was absolutely terrified of anybody knowing that he was being analysed, and I was ordered to keep the secret, no matter what lies had to be told, to everybody who might enquire where he was. In fact I was constantly telling his friends and relations that he had gone to the London Library, or to the dentist, or just shopping; until I was sick of it. He seemed to regard it as the most dreadful kind of disgrace, and said that of course if it were known he would lose his job. This wretched business was going on throughout 1945, 1946, and the greater part of 1947. It made him well enough to do his work, and it released a great deal of the extreme resentment he felt against his mother. He became able to laugh at her instead of helplessly raging. But as for improving his relations with me, it certainly did not help and on the whole the total result was negative. They broke him down, but did nothing to build him up. This being the old old story of the eternal triangle, I'd better come now to the third party; but first I must make it clear that this business did not begin until Matthew was 6 months old. It sort of stole upon me unawares, so that although the 'third party' was quite a lot in the picture from June 1946 onwards, it wasn't until June 1947 that I was in love with him. And I don't think it would have happened but for Alistair's preoccupation with himself and his analysis, and the general estrangement and lack of sympathy between us all this time . . .

In 1946, X was about 50, and everybody liked him and called him 'a nice little chap'. Actually he isn't all that small – about 5 ft 7, tho' he is certainly no Adonis, he is quite pleasant to look at. Rather like a smaller and more refined edition of Ernest Bevin. He has a well-shaped head, high wide brow, greyish brown hair brushed back and not very thick; horn glasses, blue eyes, nice features, expressing great firmness of character beneath a very agreeable and friendly manner. He obviously has a first-rate brain. Not only is he an extremely good doctor (you hear tributes on all sides to all sorts of aspects of this) but he is also a

classical scholar, and reads Thucydides in his spare time and is well read in general. He was always interesting to talk to, when he had time. And he has a remarkable gift of sympathetic understanding and a nice sense of humour. He was almost always cheerful, with a sort of boyish gaiety in the way he would tear up and down steps like a ten-year-old, and turn round to wave before leaping into his little grey car. We had always liked him. At the time of Tom's birth, when he and the Sister were with me for the whole of the last hour and a half, I remember being rather exasperated by their heartless jesting and badinage across my writhing form. Still, it was more reassuring than too much solemn bedside manner, and I joined in during my lucid intervals, and quite enjoyed it. But never never had it occurred to me, before May 1947, to regard Dr X as a potentially romantic figure. I went to him for all the routine pre-natal visits, and he saw Matthew into the world most efficiently as I have before related. While I was in the nursing home we had two rather serious conversations in private, first about M's chances of survival, and secondly when he broke the news to me about Matthew's cataract. On these occasions there was no joking in his manner, but just the quiet and serious sympathy you would expect. Of course he knew then about Matthew's abnormal condition, though apparently he couldn't be absolutely certain until the end of M's first year. It was just a very strong suspicion. At least, that's what I gather from combining what he said about it with what the nurse and matron at the maternity home told me later.

In the Christmas holidays immediately after M's birth, the boys all had chicken-pox, and the doctor came then, as well as routine visits to Matthew and me. Then he caught flu and was pretty bad and we had visits from two new young partners. Before the January term began, it was necessary to get a certificate to say that they were all clear of ch. pox – and I wrote a note about it to one of the partners, very apologetically asking if one of them would look in when passing by one day. Much to my surprise, latish one Saturday evening, a foully cold day – Dr X himself turned up. The family was gathered round the fire, and he came in and inspected the boys' torsos and wrote the certificate, and talked and joked with them. Alistair went on reading the paper, more or less, and took very little notice. Then Dr X turned to me and asked abruptly, 'How are you?' I said, 'Oh, all right thanks' (actually feeling fairly foul), and he then said, 'I want to see the baby, and can we talk upstairs?' M was already in his cot. I took the Dr up and at the top of the stairs he asked, 'How is your period?' so I said I'd been going on merrily ever since M was born. He started talking about fibroids then, and seemed in quite a flap. We sat on my bed, with Matthew on my knee, and he looked him well over, especially his navel and tummy, and ▶▶

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the circumcision scar. Then he went on and on about fibroids, and said I must come and see him in about a month's time if the flow had stopped. Then he asked when the oculist was going to see M – which was fixed for March, and asked me to remind him to arrange the consultation. We went downstairs chatting, about his influenza and how he was still feeling pretty awful but there was so much work to do that he had to keep on etc. He reminded me again to come see him, and went off. Alistair asked, 'Whatever did he want to talk about?' and 'Fibroids? Rubbish. You haven't got any,' and went on reading his book. True to the principles of all his family, A does not believe in anything you can't see. He considered all this a great fuss about nothing. Please believe that I am writing all this without rancour. A is entitled to his own opinions even if they irritate me! Besides it's all past and done with.

Our next meeting was in the hospital, unexpectedly, 2 months later. Alistair and I had taken Matthew in before his first eye operation for the pathologist's examination. We waited about for ages in the little private patients' waiting-room. I was filled with the most irrational panic and depression, feeling quite certain that M would never survive an operation on his eyes. (Too idiotic – a little thing that doesn't take 10 minutes.) Matthew was by now a really lovely babe – 4½ months, normal weight, pink and blooming, very contented, and really (I truly think) very pretty. He slept in my arms and my tears rolled down upon him. Alistair stood by the window looking as miserable as I felt. Suddenly, in walked the Sister and our doctor. The Sister went to speak with Alistair; the doc. bent over Matthew and me. He exclaimed loudly: 'But is this the same baby? Why he's beautiful! What have you done to him? Did you feed him yourself?' I smiled at him, feeling a glow of gratitude. 'Sister,' he called out, 'Mrs R has 4 sons. Isn't she lucky?' (I remember seeing a notice in the *Daily Telegraph* about 4 years before. 'To Dr and Mrs X – etc. A son, who only survived a few hours.' I had forgotten it until that moment. They have two girls.) I looked at Matthew, and felt ashamed of my moping fear, and suddenly much comforted.

After M had the operation, I forgot that he'd be visited on his return from hospital, so it was a surprise when, on a brilliant April evening, I was carrying hot water up to the bathroom for the boys to wash at bedtime, and through the hall window I saw the familiar little grey car outside, and the door bell rang. The doc. had a look at Matthew in his cot and then was able to clear up some confusion in my mind about the various eye drops and lotions which I had been given at the hospital. . . . That was about the 22nd of April. Some three weeks later, when I had forgotten all about eye-drop difficulties and doctors, but was in a far from good nervy condition myself, with fibroids getting worse and worse each time, there was a really

comic surprise visit at a most unwelcome time. I had no domestic help then, and David was still at home – the school couldn't take him until September. Alistair was coming home for midday dinner. Matthew needed quite a lot of attention. And this particular Monday morning, I was cooking corned beef hash, and vacuum-cleaning all downstairs, and in a far from sweet temper. So when Dr X appeared, all tanned and merry from his holiday, he got a very sour welcome. I glared at him. 'I just wanted to see how Matthew was,' he said cheerfully. 'And you remember you had difficulty about the eye drops. Was it all right?' He nearly tripped over the vacuum cleaner. I led him through the sitting-room to the pram in the garden, cursing inwardly. David was playing outside. The doc. had a look at Matthew, chatted a bit, about the eye operation and so on. We didn't yet know whether it had been a success. M was to see the oculist in another 10 days. Then we went indoors, and the doc. said, 'And how are you?' I said, very sourly, 'Oh, I'm going crackers I think.' 'How are the periods?' 'Bloody,' I said. 'Well, I must look at the fibroids,' he said, very firmly. 'Not now, you can't,' I protested. 'Not inside, I only meant to feel your tummy.' 'Oh bother,' I said. 'I'm busy.' 'So am I.' So I began to lie down on the sofa, very reluctantly. 'No, that's no good,' said the doc., 'because you can't lie flat. You'll have to go upstairs, I'm afraid. It won't take long. Call me when you've got your belt off.' I mumbled something about being sure that the fibroids had gone, and went upstairs, wondering how soon the corned-beef hash would burn. David meanwhile came in to see what all the argument was about, and wanted to come up with me, but Dr X propelled him out through the window, and shut it firmly! When I got upstairs I found that only one bed was made, as I'd been interrupted, so I pulled my bed clothes up just to look respectable, and lay down on Alistair's bed when ready. The doctor came in and pummelled my tummy and pressed and massaged it very nicely, all the time chatting briskly and cheerfully, to put me in a good humour. When he had finished, he pulled my dress down and gave me a final fatherly or brotherly pat on the tum. Said, 'It's all right. Those fibroids aren't giving much trouble. They may die down, or they may become tiresome later on, in which case we'll have to do something about them. I'll send you some tablets for the bad periods. Try to rest the first day, and don't worry.' I had sprung up from the bed and was going to see him to the door, but of course my stocking began to descend, and I felt a fool and annoyed with him. He grinned sweetly at me and said he'd show himself out. He departed leaving me still muttering curses and wondering how to get the carpets done before dinner. When Alistair came in I told him the doctor had been to see Matthew. I didn't mention the rest, because he'd only think (as I did) what a fuss. But when he went upstairs for ▶▶



something, he noticed my bed, which I'd still forgotten to make properly and asked me about it. I then told him the rest, partly because David had made some remark too and he looked so scandalised and suspicious that I burst out laughing. 'Darling,' I said, 'it was all most professional. Dash it all – you can't really entertain dark suspicions of dear old X can you?' and Alistair laughed too. But said he thought it was rather a nerve to flow in like that and conduct an uncalled-for examination. However, I certainly attached no importance to it at all, any more than X did.

In the middle of May 1947, Alistair and I had to take Matthew to see Mr Adams, who had done the needling operation, to know whether it had been successful. We learned that it had not, but that it could be repeated, and often had to be done half a dozen times before it succeeded. . . . But at this consultation we met Mr A's partner whom we both instantly disliked. He was a very peculiar young man, apparently suffering from enormous vanity and conceit. He interviewed us before Mr A saw Matthew. He suddenly fired at us the question: 'Do you consider that your baby is mentally deficient?' This idea had never even occurred to either of us. We most emphatically assured this doctor that M did not seem in the least m.d., only rather backward in his development which we thought his bad sight accounted for entirely.

When we got home, Alistair expressed his opinion of Dr P in no uncertain terms, although we did talk over the possibility of his being correct. However, our own quite honest and definite opinion was that Matthew's backwardness was purely temporary. One thing which weighed with me was that he had learnt to feed from the breast so successfully, after a very difficult start. And he always seemed so responsive to us. However, I went on brooding over this horrible possibility, and felt that I would like a reliable opinion on it as soon as possible. So I found myself writing to X telling him that we were perturbed at the mention of definite mental backwardness, and asking if he could possibly give me an opinion about it. Alistair meanwhile began a prolonged period of leaving me severely alone. For the next 2 or 3 months he scarcely spoke to me, never talked, and never touched me, except for about 2 very miserable mockeries of intercourse, neither of which could be described as better than nothing. (Actually this was the state of affairs almost all of the 8 months after M's birth.) No conversation. No love making.

On one of the last afternoons in May, having done my housework, and had lunch with David, and fed Matthew, I had a bath and changed into a summer dress, and was just sitting down to write something for CCC when Dr X appeared – in answer to my note mentioned above. He was wearing a natty summer suit, and appeared to be in no hurry at all. When I asked, 'Shall I fetch Matthew in?' he said, 'Not yet. Come

and talk to me first.' We sat down – I on the sofa and he in a chair close by, and I told him all about the interview with Mr A and the partner – at the mention of whom Dr X grinned inscrutably to himself. He then told me that at this stage it was really not possible to say definitely whether there was anything seriously wrong with M. He said that the two conditions, congenital cataract and mental abnormality, were frequently found together; but that Matthew did have, from the first, a tendency to a lolling head, which was possibly a bad sign. On the other hand, he was emphatic that the infant might not be irremediably backward – might possibly develop slowly and in a normal manner; he agreed with me that M did not, in general, look like a really m.d. baby, if you made allowance for his almost complete lack of sight. He bid another look over M – especially his head, neck, back and tummy, and gave me bits of advice. I put M back in his pram and sat down again, thinking that the doc. would now be pushing off. But I had said in my note that there were some other things I would like to ask him about. I had thought that it would be very disastrous to have another pregnancy, and that I had better get sound advice upon the best methods of birth control, in case our usual ones were not adequate. Dr X said, 'I think there was something else you wanted to ask me about' – and came and sat beside me on the sofa, very much to my surprise. Still more to my astonishment I found myself overcome with sudden embarrassment, as if the subject of b.c. was not one which I could possibly discuss with him. It really was a bit difficult, with him sitting so very close beside me – much more like an old friend than a professional adviser. However, I took the plunge, and asked him about the relative safety of sheaths, caps and pessaries. What was still more surprising was that he also suddenly appeared to be embarrassed – about half way through his discourse, after firmly telling me that only sheaths were 95% safe. And believe it or not this business-like discourse tailed off into silence, which prolonged itself for several minutes! It is all as clear to me now as though it were yesterday and not just over 3 years ago. (The details of this whole affair are still clear to me, dates and all, partly from having cryptically recorded them as they happened, and from much reflection upon them; and from having written them up in story form later on, only a year or so ago. After I have finished this account of them, I don't propose to think about them any more; but in any case, they have now lost any emotional power, although the emotional flavour of them remains very clear, in memory.) So long did X remain sitting there, looking half embarrassed and half rapt in thought, that I began to wonder whether no sick people were awaiting his attentions anywhere, but no doubt it was not a very busy time, in such beautiful summer weather. ■

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