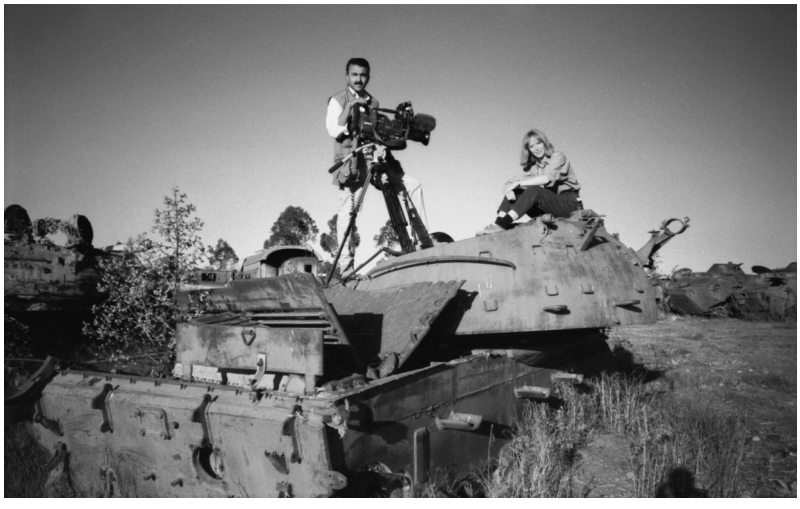
- Chapter One -

A Tunnel at the End of the Light

'Hey Em, can you go to Sri Lanka today?' The BBC's foreign news editor, Vin Ray, strode towards me across the newsroom carpet, stained brown from dozens of spilled cups of tea and coffee. I sipped at my portion of tepid dark liquid in its polystyrene container, trying to keep my nerves steady as the adrenaline kicked in. He stuck the piece of news-wire copy in front of me. 'There's been a bomb attack in Colombo, the business district, dozens killed. See what else you can find out. We'll organise a crew. You fly tonight.' A suicide bomber had wrecked the Central Bank in Sri Lanka's capital. It was going to be carnage and I grimaced at the thought. Normally foreign correspondents have a kind of perverse excitement at the chance to get on air with a big news story. I covered the developing world, specialising in the conflicts and social issues afflicting many often-ignored nations. I loved my job, but that day was different. The ceaseless and often unpredictable travelling was playing havoc with my personal life. The needs of the newsroom were paramount; relationships had to sink or swim in the



My job was covering the aftermath of wars – tank graveyard, Eritrea, with cameraman Bhasker Solanki ...

... And efforts for reconstruction. Restoring the old railway, Eritrea.

wake of urgent deadlines and long-haul flights from Heathrow Airport.

I slumped in the cramped aircraft seat next to Tony, one of our ebullient cameramen, crestfallen as he chatted merrily about the trip ahead, a glass of wine in hand. All I could think of was how the beginnings of a fairy-tale romance were now being shredded by the urgency of another country's civil war.

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The invitation had arrived like a ray of sunshine into my light-starved West Kensington flat. The paper had slid out of my fax machine to reveal the tantalising words: 'St Petersburg Ball at the Café Royal'. My seen-it-all, cynical heart registered a flutter of excitement. 'A Bal Masqué on the theme of the Ballets Russes of Diaghilev ...' Nijinsky leapt before my eyes, and then images from *War and Peace*: that breathtaking moment when Natasha enters the ballroom, bursting with youth and beauty, and almost swooning with excitement. She meets Prince Andrei, one of the best dancers of his day, her charm mounts to his head like wine ... I stopped my reverie: 'Don't be ridiculous.' This was London 1996, not St Petersburg 1809.

I was more than twice the age of Tolstoy's heroine, on the wrong side of thirtysomething, and had been exploring the seedy underside of the planet for five years. At any other time I might have binned such a frivolous invitation, but having just turned my attention to the seedy underside of my psyche with five days of intense group therapy, I was in the mood for a fresh start. This had been no wishy-washy chit-chat, but an excavation of my encrusted mental landscape. I was an expert at staying with unsuitable boyfriends out of a mixture of excessive loyalty and deep insecurity and I'd unloaded a cargo

of emotional baggage, weeping more than I thought possible. To my surprise, I found that by the end I felt not miserable but elated, brimming with a desire to shake off old habits and find new friends.

A Charity Ball in aid of the Burns Unit of Children's Hospital No. 9 in Moscow seemed like a good place to begin. I felt a little uncomfortable at the contrast between the glamour of the invitation and the grizzly reality of children's suffering but a friend assured me that as a fund-raising event it had, over the past decade, raised tens of thousands of pounds for a worthwhile cause.

I'd never been to a ball. My fiercely anti-glamour, 1970s youth was spent at Sussex University learning about intellectual history, vegetarianism, feminism and gay rights and if anyone there ever went to such an un-PC event as a ball, they would never have dared admit it. I now realised there was a world of these smart charity events run by powerful, ageless women adept at persuading rich people to dress up in period costumes, turn up to church halls to practise dances like the polka, the schottische and the polonaise, eat a large dinner and then write even fatter cheques. My invitation said the dance practice for the ball was on the Tuesday, three days before the evening itself.

Rush-hour traffic thundered down the Cromwell Road while I ran past the domed grandeur of the Catholic Brompton Oratory down an alleyway to find the austere brickwork of its Anglican neighbour, Holy Trinity Brompton. I hugged my coat as the wind whistled past its shadowy archways, and eventually I found the hall: a modern, rectangular construction. I pushed open its squeaky wooden door. Inside, dozens of guests were already gathered, talking eagerly, many of them in Russian;

some had an exotic, Slav look about them, with bleached blonde hair and aquiline noses. I hesitated, wondering whether I should really give this a miss, when I was approached by a very tall handsome man with tousled dark hair and grey-green eyes. He emanated geniality and a slight air of melancholy as he offered me a drink. 'Something soft,' I said, nervous about my ability to follow dance steps at the best of times, let alone under the influence of alcohol.

'You'd better have a vodka then!' His smile was bewitching. I couldn't argue. This was clearly a ridiculous thing to be doing, so I might as well not worry about making a complete fool of myself.

The compère clapped his hands and called for quiet. Some jaunty Strauss music rang out of his tape machine while he demonstrated the steps of the polka. Soon we all followed, bumping into each other like dodgems. The mazurka involved some strange leg waving with a little hop, and then there was a leisurely waltz, a Chopin polonaise, and the chaotic helter-skelter of the gallop. I tried not to look at the dark-haired stranger, but caught the odd glimpse as he whisked a partner round the room. I couldn't even remember his name and knew nothing about him. He was going to remain a mystery, because I had to leave the dance practice early to go out to dinner.

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That had been the night before and now I was heading for Sri Lanka. By the next evening, Thursday, we had to have a piece ready for the '*Six O'Clock News*' in London. The ball was on the Friday, so I was certainly going to miss it. I berated myself for dwelling on the sorry state of my social life when there was

an important story to report on. The *London Evening Standard* made grim reading:

> A suicide bomber drove a truck full of explosives into Sri Lanka's Central Bank ... High rise buildings burst into flames and the business district was thrown into chaos as raging fires prevented rescuers from reaching the heart of the carnage ... Dozens of people were trapped on top of burning buildings, waving for help ... Thick black smoke rose over the city ...

The attack was in revenge for the Sri Lankan military capturing the Tamil stronghold in the north, Jaffna. The Tamil Tiger rebels wanted an independent state and they were ready to die for their cause, perfecting the art of suicide bombing.

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We arrived into the steamy heat of Colombo, and instantly it felt familiar; I was used to landing in a hot, chaotic place after a night flight and starting to work immediately. We rushed to the scene of the bombing. The police had cordoned off the devastation; the once-gleaming façade of the Central Bank tower block had collapsed. Its concrete floors were bent and broken, jutting out into the street above a sea of shattered glass. The whole street was covered with layers of debris, while smoke was still emerging from the blackened buildings. The skeleton of a car was lifted onto a pick-up truck as the painful clear up began. We spoke to one desperate woman who still couldn't find her sister-in-law but was barred by the police from entering the area. Another man bemoaned the loss of life and the impact on Sri Lanka's shaky economy. Then we

headed for the nearest hospital to find it overflowing with the injured who were waiting on trolleys in the corridors. There was a noticeboard with lists of names of those who worked in the Central Bank; friends and relatives crowded around it waiting for news. We had a five-hour head-start on London, which gave us time to finish filming, editing and arguing with the surly guards at the government-run TV station and still make our deadline.

By now it was past midnight and, too exhausted to eat, I picked at the remaining curries in the hotel buffet, thinking about the wrecked lives in this futile civil war and wondering whether telling the world about such atrocities would ever make them any less likely to occur. My job depended on war and poverty, killing and misery, and I saw no end to the suffering. I was beginning to feel a pull back to another world, the world of marriage, families, children, domestic routine; a world that up until now had always appeared unbearably conventional and dull as I walked this high wire of global drama and tragedy. I felt a passing regret that I would now miss the Russian Ball that was going to take place in just a few hours time, over 5,000 miles from where I was sitting.

'Why not see if you can get released from the story and fly back? It's probably only going to run for one day anyway.' Tony was still incredibly perky after our gruelling day, and full of bright ideas. He was right. This kind of event, although huge here, would get little follow-up on our national bulletins, and other correspondents were now flying in anyway. 'Or you could spend the weekend watching developments from a nice sandy beach!' Now, that was tempting, and I could research stories for my brief: the sex trade, the current refugee crisis

triggered by the war – there were any number of topics that needed investigating here.

I walked back to my room, to the debris of a frantic day: notebooks scattered on the table, sweaty cotton trousers and shirt in a tired heap on the floor with the remaining contents of my suitcase spilling out after my frantic search for contact lenses. I sat on the quilted bedcover and picked up the phone. 'Hello, I'm sorry – would it be all right if I come back to London?' I winced with embarrassment as this was definitely not the way to impress one's boss nor get on in journalism. It's a profession where enthusiasm and dedication are taken for granted.

'Well, if you really want to,' Vin said, obviously puzzled by my eagerness to return; most correspondents were hungry for the next story.

I dialled our travel agent. 'What time is the next flight to Heathrow?'

'At 6 a.m., Kuwait Air,' he said.

It was now 2.30 a.m.; I quickly packed and headed for the door, glancing back at the inviting bed I hadn't had time to use. The taxi took me straight to Bandaranaike airport, where I joined the long lines of Sri Lankan domestic servants checking into the London flight, going via Kuwait City. A second night in succession on a plane; this was clearly a kind of madness.

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From the warmth and bright colours of Colombo I arrived into overcast winter skies over Heathrow – but the blanket of grey couldn't dampen my spirits. I raced home, threw on a 1930s black lacy dress – a relic of the Chelsea antique market – flung around it my grandmother's black silk shawl, and

headed for the Café Royal in Regent Street looking like a babushka from the Russian backwoods. This was hardly the outfit to endear me to a new social circle, but at least, I thought, 'I am here'.

I was out of breath as I walked into the opulent ballroom, dripping with chandeliers and gilt carvings. I was greeted with a deep bow by one of Leo Tolstoy's descendants, Count Tolstoy, along with an array of other members of the Russian nobility, and had to pinch myself. I felt a complete stranger in this world and searched the sea of crinoline and cleavages to find my host. I squeezed past women in empire-line frocks with tiaras nestling into their perms; some fluttered their fans as they chatted to groups of men in Napoleonic uniform. Others held exotic, colourful masks over their faces, a token gesture towards the Diaghilev theme.

Luckily I was soon accosted by a wide, beaming woman whose long curls were tucked neatly behind her head in a bun sown up with pearls: 'I've just been to Russia to research a film about tattoos – absolutely fascinating – did you know it's a whole art form over there?' Before I could reply she waved her fan in the air as she spotted someone on the other side of the room. Taking my elbow firmly in her hand she hissed in my ear, 'Come and meet the most eligible bachelor here!'

I instantly recognised my dark-haired stranger – now in a bright red Cossack outfit with gold buttons. 'Shall we dance?' he said. I was struck again by his irresistible warm smile and twinkling eyes. I'd been catapulted straight from civil war in Sri Lanka to this other universe in a few hours, and now I was truly in culture shock. I tried to get a grip on the situation, to muse on the role of free will and fate, feeling intoxicated by a mixture of elation and jet lag, but any deep thoughts evaporated

as Gerald hurled me round the room so fast that all I could focus on was trying not to twist my ankle.

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I survived the polka, and subsequent encounters with Gerald. In fact our romance bounded on with more reckless dancing and numerous trips up and down Portobello Market. He knew virtually every stallholder in the area and took great pains to show me where I could buy second-hand clothes, books and tapes. He would rally a motley collection of opera singers, pianists, jazz musicians and Celtic banjo players, as well as rowdy rugby supporters revelling at the end of a good match, for his evenings of improvised music-making. Gerald was truly at the centre of a 'world wide web' and, after he showed me round the Travel Bookshop, we soon began our own *Notting Hill* romance long before Hugh Grant splashed orange juice over Julia Roberts.

We even survived our first rainy bank-holiday weekend away together in Cornwall. As we sat consoling ourselves about the weather with yet another portion of fish and chips, he said, 'I've won a free holiday. Would you like to come?' I had an image of a free weekend in a country hotel, or perhaps even Paris. 'It's to the country that had the best performing stock-market of 1994,' he continued.

I searched through my hazy knowledge of financial markets, and couldn't think ... 'Germany?'

'No.'

'Er, the US?'

'No.'

'OK, South Korea?'

'No, Brazil! All flights paid for. I won it in an *Observer* newspaper competition about a year ago, and haven't had anyone to take, so I just hung onto it until now.'

August came and we flew to Rio. We travelled up to Salvador, and the heartland of Brazilian salsa, before retreating south again to the tropical marshland of the Pantanal where we watched the loping gait of the capybara, a kind of giant cuddly water rat. We arranged for our canoe to be towed upriver; as we glided silently back down with the current, sleepy alligators caught unawares exploded out of the reeds and dived under our boat. Flocks of startled white egrets swirled like clouds round their nests and when we fished, our bait was gobbled by voracious piranha. Our adventures culminated beside the spectacular Iguaçu waterfalls, the widest in the world, where the Iguaçu River drops into a deep canyon. As we stood on a platform overlooking the plunging, churning falls, the air heavy with the sweet smell of jasmine, Gerald said, 'Will you carry me?'

It seemed a reasonable enough request after our large dinner washed down with plenty of cheap Chilean wine. Then it dawned on me that against the loud rumble of the falls and with his heavy cold he might have said, 'will you marry me?' I didn't bother to ask for clarification, telling myself that either way, the answer had to be, 'Yes!'

The next day we fished on the great Parana River, drifting near the concrete suspension bridge that links Brazil to Paraguay. I looked up from our little rowing boat to the place where, a year earlier, I had made a documentary about the trafficking of Brazilian babies to Paraguay, many of whom were adopted by unsuspecting couples from abroad. I could see the spot where we had struggled to film in the strong winds. I never thought then that I would be back in such different circumstances, nor

that the currents of fate that were now sweeping me along would make that experience so important, influencing me eastwards, towards another continent many years later.

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The land was in mourning. Skeletons of trees scratched the sky; burnt logs covered the blackened earth. I could see forest fires like blazing dots on the horizon. There was a constant smell of burning. At four in the afternoon the hazy red sun disappeared behind clouds of smoke. This was the heart of the Amazon basin and nowhere could have felt further from the intoxicating romance of our holiday. Gerald had gone home and I had stayed on to make a documentary about the landless peasants who were squatting on the corners of vast cattle-farming estates. Brazil has the most unequal distribution of land in the world, with 1 per cent of the population owning half of the country's productive land.

Tree-burning was the fallout from this fierce class 'war'. Both peasants and ranchers were setting light to the forest to clear the land for grazing or growing crops, encouraged by a bizarre government ruling which awarded land to those using it most productively. Dozens of peasants had been killed in clashes with police, while ranchers on their fine chestnut horses, herding their creamy-coated, long-horned cattle, lived in fear of a popular revolution.

We would prise ourselves out of bed at five every morning and drive over dusty, red-earth roads to the malaria-ridden camps, packed with ex-goldmine workers and others desperate for a living. Some were inspired by high ideals, others by the simple lure of a piece of land. A young woman we met had fled her life as a maid to a rich family to join this 'revolution'.

'The land should be divided as Christ did with the bread,' she argued, sitting on a log beside her simple wooden hut. Her leader was a man who flitted from hideout to hideout in the forest, carrying with him a bright red typewriter and pictures of his heroes Chairman Mao and Che Guevara. Giving the voiceless, like this young woman, a chance to speak to millions round the world was hugely satisfying. The discomfort and the sweat had to be worth it, even though it was hard to create a sense of real drama when the squatters took long siestas in their hammocks and displayed a very Brazilian-style good humour at their plight.

The hot days passed at a tortoise's pace. There were no phones, and I had no way of speaking to Gerald. As I lay sleepless in my simple bedroom, with its one fluorescent light in the ceiling, I began to wonder if our time together was just a dream. My confidence was withering like the plant life around me. Gerald had no doubt arrived home and by now had changed his mind. Who would want to marry someone who spent so much of her life on the road? But to understand a story from the inside needed weeks like this, observing day after day the squalor that so many people endured: it couldn't be done with a fleeting visit. Men could often get away with this lifestyle, but it seemed that most female television foreign correspondents were single; hardly any had children. I had spent years building experience and knowledge of issues that I thought really mattered, yet now I could feel my inner magnet switching poles. It had been wavering already: the commitment required for intense, sometimes harrowing, stories was taking its toll, but now homesickness was seriously beginning to outweigh the burning desire for adventure. Here, amongst the dregs of Brazil's gold rush, I was discovering that

The burning forests of the Amazon.

... where ranchers were rallying against the landless.

for me in-depth journalism and lasting romance, like oil and vinegar, just didn't mix.

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By the following summer Gerald and I were married. The hawthorn hedges were in full bloom, the pheasants and rabbits cavorted in the grass verges as my uncle accompanied me to St Catharine's Church in Chipping Campden. The golden Cotswold stone glowed in the afternoon sun, while the priest inside asked God to bless us with children. I couldn't imagine otherwise; surely this was a match that fate decreed. Certainly, if goodwill alone could create offspring we would have a tribe of them. Our friends and family were effusive, perhaps displaying that extra joy and relief when people, who are not in their first flush of youth, finally marry. I still had to pinch myself that this happiness was really mine as we drank our toasts, ate and danced into the night in the cavernous fourteenth-century tithe barn at Stanway House.

Nature smiled on us the next day as guests teamed up to play cricket in brilliant sunshine. I glanced at the thatched pavilion designed by the author of *Peter Pan*, J. M. Barrie. He'd written about a boy who didn't want to grow up, and I too would have been happy that day for time to have stood still. Life was perfect. This was how fairy tales should end: and they lived happily ever after.

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Not for us. There was to be a long and rather tortuous epilogue.

Four months after the wedding, I discovered I was pregnant. 'That was easy,' I thought, as the joy of it sunk in, and I felt

inner bubbles of satisfaction. I pored over 'Mother and Baby' books, charting the size of the foetus, making guesses as to how many centimetres long this little person inside me would be. I continued to work, haloed in the warm glow of expectant motherhood, and hoping I wouldn't have to travel anywhere soon. I enjoyed being pregnant; it had such a sense of purpose and inevitability about it. Also gestation was so easy and so much the opposite of my working life; I didn't have to make phone calls, organise anything nor fly thousands of miles to achieve it. Fertilisation, hormones, cell division, chromosomes, they were brilliantly programmed to know what to do. I could become just like any other mammal and let the miracle of life take over.

Then, one Friday, I was cycling home and felt suddenly exhausted and depressed. I couldn't explain it. That evening was the annual dinner for ex-pupils of Stonyhurst College, Gerald's old boarding school in Lancashire. I dressed up to go, feeling strangely numb. I couldn't concentrate on the conversation or the canapés, and as I was being introduced to yet another long lost pal whose name I was struggling to retain, I suddenly felt a twinge of pain; I was starting to bleed. I excused myself and headed for the toilet. There was a spot of blood which I stared at in disbelief. After the drinks, the speeches and the dinner all ended, we went home and I checked again. There was no more. As we chatted about the evening, I told Gerald I was a little worried about the pregnancy, but we agreed that some rest would set things right.

At three in the morning I was woken by severe cramps in my abdomen, like period pains, but exacerbated by a rush of anxiety and fear. I ran to the bathroom to find the bleeding had increased, and there were even tiny clots. I started to panic

and woke Gerald. He tried to calm me and encouraged me to lie down and keep still, as we hoped that with every second that passed the blood would stop flowing, that my body would go back to how it had been before. This brilliantly engineered biological process had suddenly stalled and I had no idea how to restart it. I lay under the blankets, closed my eyes and prayed that the next day this would all seem like a bad dream. Eventually I managed to sleep, fitfully, and in the morning I found the bleeding had stopped.

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Daylight, and the familiar plain grey façade of Queen Charlotte's Hospital in Chiswick was reassuring. I had driven past it countless times, thinking of the thousands of babies who had been born here; I myself had been one of them. My mother's blood group was rhesus negative and to prevent risk to my life, I had to have all my blood changed at birth. As I walked the pale yellow corridors past the maternity wards I was sure that today, nearly forty years later, their expert teams of gynaecologists would be able to explain what had happened to my baby and be able to help a threatened life.

The doctor went over and over my abdomen with the scanner, saying he could detect a tiny foetus but couldn't see any activity, and no heartbeat. Then, in that gentle voice which medics seem to reserve for bad news, he said, 'I'm sorry to tell you that you aren't pregnant any more.'

I lay on the treatment couch staring at the screen. The black hole where a baby should have been mocked me. Something had stopped gestation in its tracks; it was as if God had slammed on the brakes, calling a halt to this tiny life. I thought of all my excitement over his or her future, my optimism at the

idea of having a baby. How absurd it seemed now. I was back to square one.

I was admitted for a d. and c., a routine operation to clean out the womb. The anaesthetic felt like a welcome drug. Thankfully they kept the miscarriage patients on a different floor from the maternity ward: two worlds, the miserable and the deliriously happy just a short lift ride from each other. The nurse explained, 'It's often the body's way of getting rid of a child who isn't quite right, it's very common, one in four pregnancies end in miscarriage. You've just been unlucky.'

I kept asking myself why it happened. I was just 39: old, yes, but not too old for children. I'd never smoked, nor drunk myself into oblivion. Yet as much as I tried to rationalise that this was just a biological event out of my control, I still felt totally responsible. I had lost a baby, and somehow it must be my fault. I had let Gerald down, so I was not only leading a bizarre life of overseas travel, but I wasn't really a real woman after all. If I had been just tired from housework and looking after children, that might have felt more acceptable, but the fact that my job was demanding, and that I had chosen it, made me feel even more guilty.

The trouble with miscarriages is that without a medical explanation, any number of theories abound. Perhaps I hadn't followed the perfect pre-conception diet closely enough, had not taken the right vitamins or meditated to calm my spirits. I arrived home and tossed aside those half-read books with their pictures of serene smiling pregnant mothers enjoying their latest yoga pose. One was called *Taking Charge of your Fertility*, as if I could take charge of anything. I felt powerless and utterly out of control. Perhaps if I had avoided every risk factor, things would have been different, but my whole life was, according to

these books, a risk factor: looking at VDUs, stress, pollution, in fact every aspect of urban living. It was a wonder that any babies were born in London at all.

I inwardly rebelled against the supposition that I could make myself perfect in order to be a mother. It was surely absurd to think that the small amount of stress I experienced in my affluent, secure, peaceful nation with its ample supplies of food could be such a killer. There were millions of women around the world living on the very edge of survival. I thought back to those who, even under extreme duress in refugee camps, seemed to be able to have children. In Goma, Zaire, I had spoken to mothers who'd been driven out of Rwanda after the genocide there, and were now living on

The Goma refugee camp.

aid-agency rations, enduring intimidation and rape by the murderous militias crowded in with them. They were getting pregnant in large numbers, and some were even rejecting their babies. An Italian sanitation company had discovered unwanted newborns thrown down the mobile latrines. It was one of the most depressing and stressful places I'd ever seen, and yet human biology seemed remarkably unaffected.

In my search for an explanation, I wondered if my baby had died because it had been conceived shortly after returning from a couple of weeks examining rampant tuberculosis in Siberian prisons. The remote gulag near a town called Minsk held 2,000 prisoners suffering from TB and the sporadic use of antibiotics meant that some men there had the drug-resistant strain of the disease. Petty thieves found their brief punishment turned into a life sentence; their drawn, blank faces had the look of the doomed as they lay coughing in their dilapidated, overcrowded dormitories.

It had been disturbing, but I had also felt very inspired by the local army doctor who dedicated her life to treating them, putting herself at risk every day from the disease. Having lost my suitcase somewhere between London and Novosibirsk, this lieutenant colonel and one-time enemy of the West had not only put us up in her small flat, but lent me her spare clothes, even her underwear. I asked her why she didn't just get a more comfortable job in Moscow. 'I can't, I must stay here, I love my patients, and they need me,' she had said. With women like that in the world, I couldn't believe I was so weak that I had to put my feet up, do yoga and take buckets of vitamins the moment I got pregnant.

I found myself weeping sporadically. Everywhere I looked calm, pregnant women smiled contentedly. They seemed to

ridicule me with their swollen bellies: 'Look what I can do, and you can't.' I tried to avoid them, as they unwittingly turned the knife in my grief.

Even so, a few days after the operation Gerald and I visited Xiaodi, a Chinese friend. She had just had a baby and was still in hospital. I made myself go, even though I privately dreaded it. We walked into the ward, and I sat down on the bed, looking down at the baby's pink, squashed-up face. 'How lovely she is,' I said. 'I'm so happy for you.' Her tiny hand curled round my finger, and she moved her head a little from side to side. She was gorgeous, but then I couldn't see her anymore. I blinked and my tears fell on her soft blanket. Her mother glowed with happiness. I ran out, gasping for breath.

A few days later an old friend wrote me a card: 'I am pleased to announce the birth of my honeymoon baby.' By then, I wasn't even able to write back. My grief was turning into a meanness of spirit, I was angry and insanely jealous.

'Give up your job,' became a refrain from many well-meaning friends. The trouble was that my job now felt like a refuge. It was a relief to be able to throw myself back into the big issues that belittled my own problems.

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So I went back to work and buried myself in the widespread and largely invisible crisis of malnourishment in children across the world. UNICEF was highlighting how half the 12 million child deaths a year in the world were just due to a lack of food. Some former Soviet republics were discovering severe shortages for the first time in decades. Moscow used to ensure everyone had enough to eat but now outlying republics, like Kyrgyzstan, were left to fend for themselves. Once it had

Scandinavian standards of social care, but without the umbilical cord to Moscow it was struggling to feed its population.

The dawn sun gave a pink and mauve glow to the Tien Shan peaks; just looking at their staggering beauty felt cleansing. We drove away from the capital, Bishkek, passing an Arctic fox, a solitary buzzard, and a herd of long-haired chestnut horses pawing the snow for food. A farmer with a ruddy Oriental face, woollen coat and fur hat trotted by on his shaggy pony, his boots brushing the snowdrifts. We saw a hillside on which a vast swastika design stood out entirely made of fir trees; it had been planted as a practical joke by a German prisoner of war in the 1940s. He'd been sent out to plant the trees as a punishment, but no one at the time had noticed the shape he had made until long after the war when the trees had grown

Horseman in the Tien Shan Mountains.

Meagre supplies in the market, Kyrgyzstan.

up. At the end of a deep gorge we were greeted by a giant wrought-iron silhouette of Lenin's head perched on top of a rock. The faster Kyrgyzstan moved to a market economy, the less likely it seemed that anyone wanted to take it down. People talked longingly about the past, showing no desire to obliterate an era when at least they had had enough to eat.

Naryn Town – and its standardised, Soviet-style blocks of flats – was crammed into the flat ground between the mountains. Doctors from the local hospital, who routinely saw babies born underweight, welcomed us. In spite of the local shortages, they entertained us with a huge meal of roast yak, ham, potatoes and Russian salad, washed down with copious amounts of vodka. Then, with both the light and our energies fading, we visited the chief physician of the region. He recited

a litany of depressing figures – 60 per cent unemployment, 60 per cent of women with anaemia, less than half the funds needed coming from the government, 5 hours a day with no electricity ... and as his voice carried on the room grew steadily darker. Soon he was almost invisible behind his large desk. There was no power that day; the temperature outside was plummeting and an icy wind whistled under his door.

It was −20 °C as we climbed the next morning towards the worst-hit villages at 4,000 metres, just a few miles from the Chinese border. Eki-Naryn was perched on steep, snow-covered slopes. At first there were no obvious signs of hunger: horses were pulling carts heavily laden with straw, children were tobogganing before they ran into school. Two rosy-cheeked boys took us to their simple wooden house, strewn inside with brightly woven carpets. They and their five brothers and sisters lived on bread, noodles, potatoes and buckets of tea. Fruit and vegetables were too expensive to buy, especially during the seven months of winter. Their father, wearing his traditional black fur hat even indoors, complained that they were killing their cattle one by one just to survive.

Down the mountain, back in Naryn Town, hospital health workers showed us the results of this diet every day: people lacked energy and were unmotivated, babies were born premature, underweight and anaemic, and children became stunted mentally and physically. In the maternity ward there was no joy. Mothers and their babies looked listless, their skin a sickly yellow from anaemia. One of the doctors swaddled a scraggy newborn girl until she was wrapped up tight like a parcel. My eyes filled with tears of regret and longing. Then I thought of the plump, well-fed babies in the West and our obsession with healthy diets for pregnant mothers. These listless women were powerless

to take 'ten steps to the perfect pregnancy', too poor for 'the optimum pre-conception diet'. They were lucky if they had the strength to walk outside for the vital firewood needed for heating and cooking. What's more, no one told them to give up their job, when their job was survival.

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In the end I did give up my job; at least, I gave up the Developing World brief to cover Religious Affairs instead. The issues could be addressed closer to home and I could see that interviewing vicars in the Home Counties would be a more sensible and safer option than hurling myself to the four corners of the globe.

It seemed that God and my body agreed. After a few weeks of immersing myself in a colourful array of beliefs, I found I was pregnant again. It was Easter; the sense of new life was everywhere, there was even the signing of the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland. Perhaps this time I was allowed to be a little optimistic.

On my way to work, the rays of morning sun lit up the blue ceanothus buds and the daffodils, making the normally drab Shepherd's Bush Green look beautiful. Once a place where farmers used to bring their sheep to graze on the way to Smithfield Market from the West Country, now it was blighted by a constant stream of heavy traffic churning and jostling for position before heading off across West London. As I walked into the circular sixties structure of Television Centre, I felt unusually light-hearted and happy. I had a job more suited to a settled life, and was feeling well.

I greeted Ian O'Reilly, my friend and producer, and we sat down to finalise plans for a feature for the '*Nine O'Clock*

News' about the future of the Catholic Church in Ireland. As we flipped through our itinerary, I felt something, a small discharge. My stomach tightened like a vice, I felt sick, and this was no morning sickness – I actually enjoyed morning sickness, seeing in the discomfort a sign that I was healthily pregnant. No, this was pure nerves. I stared at the computer screen, attempting by sheer willpower to stop the bleeding. It worked, there was no more.

The next day we were on a plane to Knock, the shrine in the west of Ireland that was attracting 1.5 million pilgrims a year – and where I hoped that a few well-placed prayers might also keep my baby alive. Knock was the only parish in the country where attendance at weekly mass was rising. It was buoyed up by the legend that a 120 years ago on a wet Thursday evening, the Virgin Mary, kneeling in prayer and clothed in white robes with a brilliant crown on her head, had appeared to a small group of worshippers. They had watched the apparition for two hours, reciting the Rosary. I looked at the vast glass windows of the impersonal modern basilica and whispered, 'If there really was a vision of the Virgin and if she has any power, let her help me keep my child. Fruit of thy womb, Jesus ...' The words of the Creed kept going over and over in my mind. What of the fruit of my womb? Catholicism was so steeped in imagery of procreation. The big questions always seemed to be about contraception and abortion. Did it have anything to say about lives that wondered whether to exist or not, babies that toyed with life, who teased their mothers, 'Here I am ... for a little bit – but I won't be staying long?' I tried to stay calm, worrying that worrying could harm the baby.

This was a part of Ireland soaked in religious belief. Just a few years before a couple of girls had sworn they'd seen the

Virgin Mary on top of a hedge as they walked home from school. A small shrine had sprung up, and now there was a steady stream of visitors. Surely if anywhere was going to have a healing effect this would be it.

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Back in London, I was relieved to find there were no more adverse symptoms and I cultivated my comforting sensation of morning sickness. I kept looking at my tummy hoping that it was actually growing, that the bulge was due to the presence of a child, not to too much Irish black pudding. Of course the foetus would only have been a few centimetres long and hardly likely to influence the swelling of my abdomen. I even started eating more desserts just to make sure that whatever happened my stomach would appear more rounded.

Then it was time for my first check-up. The gynaecologist peered at the ultrasound screen. There was a long silence and eventually he said, 'We just can't tell, we'll have to give you a blood test to see which way your hormones are going. In ten days you can come back and then we'll know for sure.'

Ten days of not knowing. This was ridiculous. Ten days of wondering whether there was life or not inside, of not saying anything to people I worked with, pretending I felt fine.

After ten days they took more blood, and when I returned to get the results, the answer was stark. The tests showed my hormone levels were dropping: that was the death knell for my child. It was final, there was no pregnancy, and another d. and c. had to be booked in the next day. I was stunned. How often was I going to fail? Why couldn't I do the simplest thing? I could feel myself going into a downward, self-destructive spiral.

Ian called. He was in a car on his way home from the airport after filming in Kazakhstan. 'Hello, how are things? We've just had a really interesting trip ...'

I could hardly speak. 'I've just had a miscarriage, I'm devastated.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry ...' We talked for a while, and then he began to tell me what he'd just been filming. 'A few days ago we were in a hospital in Aralsk, it's right beside the Aral Sea, at least what was the Aral Sea, because now the water is sixty miles from where it once was. The Soviets diverted the water to grow cotton, they drenched the earth with chemicals and fertilisers and now the whole area's an environmental disaster. Toxic dust clouds swirl around infecting the local people. We've just been talking to women waiting to give birth. One in four babies who are actually born die, and the rate of miscarriages is astronomical. One woman we interviewed said ''this is my ninth pregnancy, and I have yet to give birth''.' Ian went on to say how the community's body and soul were being slowly destroyed.

I thought of how I was feeling after just two miscarriages, living my comfortable life in London. I felt embarrassed at my level of despair when there were women whose bodies were being eaten away by poison. There's nothing like a dose of global perspective at the right moment.

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That weekend Gerald and I drove through the winding, leafy roads of south London to a dinner party with friends whom we'd last seen when we were both newly engaged. They were now married, had a lovely little girl and boy, and they naturally glowed with happiness and contentment: 'Come and look at

our new garden design, the boards will make it safe for the children, and we've built in a sandpit as well!' There was the pretty playroom stacked with toys, the games that littered the living room floor.

'How wonderful it looks,' I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. I put on a fixed smile as I was shown round the house.

The doorbell rang and other guests arrived. A round husband and his wafer-thin wife appeared, also burning bright with parental pride. 'It's so lovely how children bring such an extra dimension to one's life, don't you agree?' said round husband.

I kept my smile firmly on. 'Yes, I suppose they do.' We sat down and I was grateful to be sipping the pumpkin soup, its warmth was delicious.

The conversation carried on. 'I never thought I'd want to rush home from work and see my children. I used to be such a workaholic, it's just amazing. And there's nothing like a walk in the park on a Sunday with them. It's just such fun!' our host said, grinning broadly, and looking misty-eyed into the distance.

I found myself lapsing into silence. I was being eclipsed by all this joy, and I felt small, ragged, sour and inadequate. How could I pierce this bubble of happiness with my sad little tale?

The thin mother waxed on about how easy her pregnancy had been. 'Why do women make such a fuss about being pregnant? Nothing could be easier. All that sighing and panting that they do, honestly it's just for effect!'

'Really, is that right?' I nodded in acquiescence, crushed by the easy confidence of a successfully completed conception. I felt my soul shrinking inside, reflecting my limp, empty

womb. It didn't seem to matter that I had made a dozen documentaries and learnt so much; ultimately I was a non-woman, reproductively inert, and without any apparent value in this strange parallel economy. Here I felt the currency was children, and the more you had the wealthier you were perceived to be. Those without children were poorer and had to be gently pitied.

I excused myself to go to the toilet, and stared with horror into the mirror as my eyes overflowed. My upper lip was going pink, and I wondered how I was going to organise a dignified re-entry into the dinner party. Holding in the grief was making me feel faint, but I couldn't bring myself to raise the subject at table because I knew the floodgates would open. I pushed the emotion down with the brute force of a jackboot and returned to the party. I sniffed, complaining of a bit of hay fever, and finished my soup. The roast pork was a comfort, as were the several helpings of mashed potatoes. Maybe I should have been an actress; I don't think anyone suspected a thing.

'Now, my little Arabella has just auditioned for a part in *Harry Potter*, I wonder if she'll get it.'

'I wonder. It must be very competitive.'

'She's so natural, you see, that's what they like, so we're pretty confident. The school has been marvellous about it, and says she can have the time off if she needs to.'

'That's great ...'

'Of course she's ahead with her schoolwork too, so they aren't worried. As long as she does enough work before her entrance exam for St Paul's, that's all I'm worried about.' St Paul's is a top London school that has become a byword for achievement, as much for the parents as for its pupils.

'I'm sure she'll do very well.' I heaped another spoonful of lemon cheesecake onto my plate, feeling better at each mouthful. My emotional tide was slowly subsiding, and I even managed a genuine smile at the enchanting exploits of little Arabella. I hoped I wasn't going to become bitter and twisted and unable to enjoy parents' conversation. Yet I saw dinner parties stretching out into the future like minefields where I was going to need body armour. It had been hard enough returning from some war-torn place and reinserting myself into London middle-class preoccupations, but now even my attempts at a 'normal' life were making me feel as distant from these people as if they came from a far-off country.

By the end of the evening we were emotionally drained. Even the ever-stoic Gerald said it was tough, and we were relieved to be out of that hothouse of family bliss. No one there knew about the miscarriages, so I couldn't blame them, but even so I felt nauseated by their air of smugness. Giving birth to children was a gift from God and biology, so why was it seen as such a personal achievement?

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I began to tell myself that *not* having children was just fine. Perhaps I should join the ranks of the 'child free' and just enjoy it. But the losses were gnawing into me, eating away any sense I had of my own value. Even though childlessness had been built into humanity, and must therefore have had a useful function since the dawn of time, I still felt worthless. I had tried and failed, which was worse than deciding not to have children. I looked enviously at friends who had made the decision to remain without offspring, feeling almost as jealous of them as I did of the pregnant ones.

I subscribed to the Miscarriage Association, and when their journal fell through the letterbox, I found grains of comfort in dwelling on the misery of other mothers. I began to realise I'd been lucky; I could have lost the baby so much later and then the pain would have been multiplied. There were stories of babies born only a few weeks too early, whose mothers had put the foetus in a tiny grave, and still visited it year after year. My little babies were barely more than a speck inside a blood clot, so they had just gone out with the medical waste. I recalled eyeing the hospital bins at Queen Charlotte's with a combination of suspicion and horror.

Gerald remained firmly optimistic that we would eventually have a family. And I lost count of the times we were told 'it's all very natural'. I read the book by the country's leading expert on miscarriages, Professor Lesley Regan from St Mary's Hospital in London, and she was also full of reassuring statistics. She wrote that only 2 per cent of women have a couple of miscarriages in a row. And the chance of then having a third is minute. Most women who have recurrent miscarriages go on to have a healthy child, and until I had a third miscarriage, the doctors could offer no solutions.

By the end of the year, I found out I was pregnant again. This time I looked on the blue line of the pregnancy test with deep suspicion. I tried to ignore it, and as the weeks went by, kept my hopes firmly in check. 'I'm not interested until you stick around for at least three months,' I snapped at my only-too-flat stomach, terrified of the emotional let-down if I lost another child.

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I was planning a story in Thailand about how cooperation between Catholics and Buddhists was helping to fight HIV

infection, and this time Gerald was free to come too. Thailand was then a model for how to fight AIDS, and the Catholic aid agency, CAFOD, had researched the way new cooperation between priests and Buddhist monks was transforming results.

In the lush hill country of Phayao province in northern Thailand, the ravages of HIV were at their peak. Villages were being torn apart as parents died leaving grandparents and children to fend for themselves; there was a funeral every day in some communities. Sister Mercedes Placino, a dynamic nun from the Daughters of Charity, took us to one small village where AIDS stalked like the Plague. She opened up a hand-drawn plan of the village, showing each household that was affected marked with a red dot; the map was littered with them. We went to one small wooden house where a skeletally thin woman lay on a mattress. Her husband was already dead, victim of the prevailing habit of visiting prostitutes. Her gaunt face was covered in tears while her twelve-year-old son tried in vain to interest her in a bowl of watery rice. He was about to join the ranks of Thailand's 80,000 AIDS orphans. I looked at him staring at his dying mother; it's a sight that will haunt me forever. The only sound was the woman's weak cough and a fly buzzing by the small window. The room was so quiet, yet screaming with tragedy. Sister Mercedes told us that the village elders were in despair: 'There is too much loss and no one knows how to solve it.'

We drove to the nearby Buddhist temple to see the front line of the fightback. In its spacious grounds a little hut now housed a medical centre, where a nurse was handing out condoms to anyone who turned up, even if they were just complaining of a headache. The monks outside continued their meditative walk, while the smiling golden Buddhas seemed

to see the irony of their hallowed ground being used to provide sex education. This initiative was knocking down the local infection rates dramatically. It was all being cleverly organised at arm's length by an independent-minded Catholic priest, though he was forbidden by the Church's policy from advocating the use of condoms. I loved ingenuity like this, everyone working around the dogma for the good of the local population. In fact I was becoming increasingly attracted to stories in the developing world which showed ingenious solutions to intractable problems.

I too began to think outside the tramlines of my own biological pregnancy. I was pregnant, but this next one could fail too. Perhaps we should reach out to a child abroad, even from a place like this.

Sister Mercedes took us to see some of the orphaned children in her care; they ran up to us, showering us with their enchanting smiles while we were told of their tragic stories. Their parents had died from AIDS and many were passing time until they were old enough to earn their own living. One ten-year-old girl took my hand and told me that her mother was in prison for possession of heroin, and as she had also been infected with HIV she might never come out. I wanted to take that girl home there and then.

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We travelled on to Sydney where I was to get my first check-up of the pregnancy. New Year's Eve was a blaze of fireworks over the harbour; Gerald and I hugged each other and fizzed with high expectations for 1999. The next day I edited the piece about Thailand's AIDS crisis and fed it to London where it ran that night on the 'Nine O'Clock News'. I was happy that editors still liked my obscure stories, and the following morning

I had a spring in my step as I entered the courtyard of the King George V Hospital for Women.

The ultrasound soon put an end to my elation.

'There's no foetus there,' the young Californian woman doctor explained. 'Just a ''yolk'' and empty space around it. We can offer you a d. and c. tomorrow if you like.' Just like that. My carefully restrained but secretly nurtured hopes fell clattering to the floor. Perhaps I was only ever to have phantom pregnancies.

Gerald picked me up after the operation and we went for a short walk along the harbour; the same place where just days earlier we had watched the fireworks with such an imminent sense of new beginnings. The sky was bright blue, the sea perfect, but I felt inwardly wounded and exhausted. The whole business of having our own biological child was becoming an emotional roller coaster and I wanted to get off now. No more of these false hopes, these hints of life that shone briefly and then were snuffed out at the first whiff of an ultrasound machine.

'Shall we adopt?' I said. 'What do you think? Or at least let's start to look into it.'

'Of course,' replied Gerald, the emotional rock as ever, offering a rescuing hand as my soul was being dragged under by my plummeting hormones.