

TOO MANY MAGPIES

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Also by Elizabeth Baines

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**Too Many
Magpies**



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For Matthew and Ben

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FOR SORROW

ON THE BABY'S first birthday the Smarties on the cake went frilly round the edges. The first sign of odd things happening.

No one took it seriously.

He said it was magic. (*He*; he doesn't have a name, not here, not in my head.) 'I told you,' he said afterwards, 'things would start happening now you and I have met.'

'Magic,' said Danny too, four years old and excited, waiting in an agony of impatience for the start of the birthday tea in the garden, though never in any doubt that things would go as planned, or that birthday teas would go on happening, and Daddy always come to join them in time.

And, this time, he did. He came round the side of the house, Daddy, my husband, ducking under the honeysuckle and coming to kiss us all, smelling faintly of the lab, that sharp high chemical smell.

He was a scientist, my husband. He had a rational explanation. He looked at the Smarties and grinned. Lovely teeth, he had, not a single filling, and naturally curly hair. The kinks of it glistened in the sun. It came back to me then, all the reasons I loved my husband.

'See,' said Danny, pointing the funny way he did with his left middle finger, 'they're like little mince pies.'

And they were, each sweet surrounded by a perfect row of frills. My husband looked at them and laughed.

'Osmosis,' I think he said, I wasn't in a state to remember the actual word. Something about things running, their

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contents seeping through their skins, leaving themselves behind. At any rate, he said I must have put them on when the icing was too wet.

Of course. Because of what had happened, I hadn't been in a state to judge the drying time of icing.

But it was odd. Why, for instance, if things had melted, had the colours not run?

I cut the cake. I doled them out, the magic Smarties. A piece for my husband, and one for each child.

And the blackbird pipped confidently, as if that garden and those hedges would always be there for him to call across; and there we sat, husband and wife and two-point-four children, point-four being the child we might have had if certain chemical chances in our bodies had or hadn't occurred, and which we'd never have now, now things had started to happen.



It was the day before the baby's first birthday that I met him.

In the park there were magpies, too many to be counted. When I was a child there were never so many of them—one for sorrow, you said, two for joy—but now there were too many for such short rhymes or such simple messages, they'd multiplied and colonized the towns.

That afternoon we'd both been on a committee, educationists drafted in to advise on artists in schools, my first outside commitment since before I'd had the babies. My first time back in the world.

Though I wasn't really back there; I couldn't concentrate on the dry committee language, I'd got too used to simple sounds linked to the vivid senses, or to holding and

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rocking without the need for words at all.

It was hot in that committee room, early May and unseasonably hot although there'd been no sun all day. They had the window open and puffs of engine smell rose up through the still air. They were discussing the database of artists, and I was thinking idly of how in the centre of town there was never the sound of birds.

A train rolled over the viaduct, blue-and-grey toytown carriages sliding unbelievably along the top of a sky-high brick wall towards the suburbs where my husband would be putting the children to bed.

Tonight, for once, the baby would have to go to bed without his breastfeed.

On cue, as I thought of that, my breasts tingled, automatic, with primitive life, and on cue the familiar sleepiness overcame me. I'd lost the drift of the argument in the room now. I'd gone too far, metamorphosing down those baby years, and I was gaping now, hardly breathing in this flat dry committee-land. I yawned.

He'd hardly spoken till then.

He didn't speak when he didn't have to. Knowing too much about words to squander them.

I looked, I noticed him, for the first time really, just before he spoke. I saw a careful tension around his large mouth. Fastidiousness reining in something else.

And when he spoke he held his lips as though tasting something. Testing.

I knew then. He had the power.

As we crossed the park afterwards, suddenly there were birds again. Magpies, dropping out of the trees, like bunting, like Jacks-out-of-boxes. They cackled, they seemed hilarious.

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We tried counting.

'Seven,' he said. 'What does that signify?'

I said, too sternly, that I didn't believe in charms or spells.

He laughed. I saw that his teeth were bad, stained and very full of fillings. He said: 'There are charms and there are charms, and there are spells and there are spells,' and I had no idea what he meant.

The sun came out, dazzling and disorientating between the trees. The magpies glistened then, medallion green and alchemy blue. They were watching us sideways, they cocked their heads slyly over their bird-shoulders, waiting, or maybe taunting, it was hard to say.

We moved on, and they flapped away into the columns of sun between black tree trunks, still there but suffused and melted with the light.

He said, 'Seven for a secret never to be told.'

I said quickly that I didn't believe in secrets. And I told him all about my husband, and about the kids, to indicate at once that there was no chance whatever, should he be thinking along those lines, of any kind of intrigue, any kind of setup where I'd need to make divisions, protect him from knowledge or guard my family's privacy from him. And, to nip in the bud any growing attraction, I babbled on about the children in the bourgeois way I'd guessed by now he wouldn't approve of. But those shapes in the sun, I could sense them shifting. I lost courage in what I was saying, and he was laughing at it anyway, showing those big handsome teeth with all those awful brown fillings. I guessed suddenly what he'd meant: that the best charm, the real secret, is in losing your fear.

I'd stopped walking, I discovered. The bark of a tree was behind me, ridged and warm. Under my feet something

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crumbled, sugary, the dead catkins off the tree.

I said stupidly, no not stupidly, I thought it might protect me, it was one the things which Richard and I held most important in our life together: 'We only give the children sugar at special times like birthdays.'

After all, it was my baby's first birthday next day.

It didn't work, that spell. And I knew, after all, that it wouldn't. I sensed, didn't see him come closer. He took hold of my hand. He knew that vivid power of touching, he knew without being told that once he'd made contact I wouldn't be able to take it away.

The magpies flew off again.

The first time I'd seen so many was the day I discovered I was pregnant with Danny, my first child. Three for a girl, you once said, four for a boy, god knows what seeing so many could mean.

He had hold of my hand.

He said, 'What are their names?'



'What shall we call it?' I said, the first time.

I have to face it, I meant *him*, I had this image of walking through the park hand-in-hand with a boy in shorts with a cap of shiny hair.

I tried to keep the options open: I said, What shall we call it, and later carefully replaced the fantasy with another of a tousle-headed girl in jeans.

I was kidding myself, of course. All around the park there were magpies tumbling, too many to count; I laughed to myself, saying, No knowing what the child will be, but the truth was I didn't need magpies, or the scan they did

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later, I knew already. One thing I'm sure of now is that you can know things before they happen; I'd known all along it was going to be a boy.

I have this memory of a black towel. Black with red and yellow dots, like one my husband's mother once lent me.

But you don't wrap a baby in a black towel, especially in hospital. I've made inquiries, asked friends and professionals about hospital procedures around the country, and no one has thought it likely that a maternity unit would use a black towel.

But there he was, as I remember it, as that night later I remembered it, wrapped in black, eyes popped with the shock of foetal stress or whatever they call it, I wasn't in a state to take the term in. Head straining backwards as they swung him away.

'He's very tiny,' I heard them say.

'Is he all right?'

They say the mother always asks it; no doubt they hear it so often it makes them blasé. 'Yes, yes,' they said quickly, and I whispered, 'Let me see.'

'Come on, mother,' (don't be silly) 'see, everything's present, ten little fingers and ten pretty rosy toes.'

And they dangled him before me.

And then I saw: hair growing down his cheeks and over his shoulders.

An elfin child, a child not of this world.

'You're very lucky,' they said. 'Mother,' they added firmly, in case I dared not claim him.

'He's very little, but see how pretty, and perfectly healthy, and what wide-awake eyes, and all that glistening golden hair on his head.'

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Lanugo hair, my husband said it was, the hair on his body. He'd looked it up in a book: a normal sign of slight prematurity.

But everyone saw. Other fathers, come to see their own, would stop by his cot and stare and say, 'That's a funny cute thing!'

And all the bustling, and all the plot of four-hourly feeds, and the disinfectant smells, and the bleep of hi-tech machines within the walls all around us, none of these could hide the truth from me.

Well, I knew it, but then I forgot it. Or rather, I found it wasn't the whole truth, other truths came in and changed it, like the sea across the sand.

For a start, we quickly named him. Danny.

No, that's wrong: it was I not we, who chose it. I'd had a fright, I chose it as a name to make him brave in this lion's den of a world.

And so Danny he became. And yes, he was brave, and pretty strong, too. Mobile early, at four months, and at six months crawling properly when others his age were still static in their baby bouncers and cradle seats.

And how he grew. And how he ate. A really healthy appetite.

One day a friend of mine took him to see a children's film. They stood in the cinema queue, Danny holding onto her coat. He looked up at the hoarding and read out the title of the film. 'How old is that child?' asked the woman next to them. 'Three,' answered my friend.

'Good lord,' said the woman and others in the queue murmured amazement.

A success story, that's how my friend told it, and I was proud.

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Only later did I think of it this way: him standing there being stared at, odd for this world.

This man I can't name:

He said he hated committees, he said he didn't know what he was doing on that one.

Luck, or magic, he said. Or maybe destiny.

I said sharply that I didn't believe in destiny, I believed there were always choices to make.

I made the choice not to go straight home.

We drove to a pub. It was my car we went in. He'd once written a book, he said as I drove. For kids, he said, which was why he'd been co-opted today, though in fact it was full of rude cartoons.

The meeting had broken in disarray. He had opened his mouth, fastidiously—he'd been quiet till then—and had asked them nicely, politely, what they thought they were up to institutionalizing anarchy. Some of them started laughing, others didn't know whether to, the agenda fell to pieces, he cast a spell.

The pub was high in the hills. Up here the sun was out, tipped across the hillsides. There were white-painted tables on a stone veranda. We'd had a run of hot summers and even up here you sat outside in the evening in the sun.

I sat down. I fingered my keys. I should have been at home. You don't not go home the first time your baby doesn't have his evening feed.

He was waiting. Behind him, down below, deep valleys led off everywhere, anywhere.

He said, 'What will you have?'

He stood out in relief, tall and thin against the hills, his

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skin glowing brown in the sun.

I said, 'A beer.'

I didn't do that normally, drink and drive.



My husband has a name, I can use it, it is safe. Richard Smith. There, see how he sinks into the safe sane particular, the ordinary, the quotidian. We could take him home to tea.

Which I did. We sat on my parents' sofa, the two of us, eating cake with a line of cold jam through the middle.

Though my mother was uneasy. 'So what is it you are studying, Richard?' she asked him, as if she didn't know already. She jumped up and offered him another slice, and he had to shake his head and gulp, the dry mouthful sticking, before answering, 'Biochemistry.'

'How interesting,' said my mother distantly and indulgently, but also strained. She'd never known a scientist before, my mother, only mechanics and engineers, not the academic kind, the kind they call Pure.

I swallowed my cake and thought contemptuously that people always tried to patronize things they were afraid of.

My mother was limited, I decided, unenlightened and frightened and challenging: she asked questions to which even the most subtle must give an obvious answer, she made cakes on which even the most competent must choke.

Richard's competence was this: he could boil two liquids together and turn them into third. Without any bother, all in the course of normal day. 'Just like cooking,' he said it was.

The excitement for me was in the way he made it all so safe and sane, so everyday.

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This was Richard's view: that there was nothing in the world which could not be explained in natural terms, as long as you had the appropriate knowledge.

And knowledge of how things work is what helps to make things safe.

Richard's job was finding the knowledge.

His field was Nutrition, and his special interest was Cholesterol. This sometimes led to Hormones, and what they called Inter-Disciplinary Cross-Fertilization, which in recent years had manifested itself for me in the form of bridge evenings with a university medic and his GP wife.

I couldn't play bridge very well. My thoughts would wander, and I'd speculate on the medic's project which he called 'Hairy Women', pondering the vision it conjured, of women walking around cloaking seal-like furry bodies. I'd get drunk, or pretend to, to relieve the boredom of counting clubs and spades. I couldn't hold them in my head like they could, Richard and the medic and the woman GP, I didn't have their mental clarity and skills of clear-cut organization, it seemed to be something magical, though I knew that, as they said, it was just an aptitude explainable by genetics, or maybe even just the way they'd been trained.

Richard gave me his knowledge.

And proving that in the things that really mattered I could after all be trained, I took the knowledge and used it to make things safe.

Sugar and saturated fats make cholesterol in the blood.

Roughage prevents cholesterol forming, and helps to take it away.

I husbanded this knowledge.

It was hard in our suburb to get bread made with properly stoneground flour. I pushed Danny's pram for miles,

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coming back with a supply tucked in under the apron, where Danny would find it and start eating it, picking great holes in the loaves.

‘What an appetite,’ said passers-by.

Later in our suburb a health shop opened, where you could buy the flour. We bought a big plastic bowl, Danny and I, with little feet like opaque bubbles, and filled it up with the silky, slippery grey-brown mountain of flour. In the cupboard under the stairs, where the central-heating boiler constantly purred and now and then gave a cough like an extra-strong heartbeat, we set the creamy-beige yeast to turn into a quietly hissing balloon. Just like magic; though of course it was metabolism that was all that was going on.

Danny always got to knead a roll of his own. His hair bobbed as he kneaded, a pageboy silver as the flour, his arms plunging, yeast-brown. When the flour fluttered off the worktop to the floor he laughed, quite content and absolutely balanced and perfectly healthy, pointing out the mess he’d made, and the only thing odd was the way he pointed, with that bendy middle finger.

We had a garden.

We grew all our own vegetables, since trials had indicated that pesticides and nitrates in farming and market gardening could cause allergies and cancers. Nothing proved conclusively, but useful indications.

Richard wasn’t one of those scientists who thought something was only true if you could prove it; he kept in mind the unproved possibility which one day further knowledge might confirm.

The summer Danny was two, we had Richard’s brother and his wife and their child up for the weekend.

We’d give them home-grown vegetables. I went out to

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pick the beans.

It was especially hot that year. The ground cracked open. We left every window wide, but the air in the house remained still.

Danny bobbed in his sun-hat before me. He turned and waved to Richard who was coming out of the outside door of the cellar with the wine, and then disappeared behind the sky-high wall of runner beans.

‘Danny, where are you?’

A tiny scuffle.

The ground crumbled between my sandalled toes. In the spring Richard had dug it, and Danny had sunk in his wellies in dark upturned cakes that smelt of long-compressed pre-industrial summers and the ancient pure rottenness of centuries of trees, and was quick with the glistening entrails of worms. Now the vegetables had grown, and the earth was like brown sugar, and every evening we had to come out with the hose.

‘Danny?’

A flash of pink sun-hat between the heart-shaped leaves.

As I plucked, elsewhere on the branches bright-red flowers fell, not straightaway but loosening and then stumbling, finally dropping to reveal the bean-pod sickles.

A slithering giggle.

‘Danny, are you there?’

It was deep inside the bean row. Coils of shadow spiralling upwards; it was easy to believe they led to giants in the sky. Danny was crouched right at the centre.

‘Boo.’

‘I don’t know how you do it,’ Richard’s brother’s wife said. She meant the garden, everything so lush and green.

We had a table outside where we’d eaten our evening

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meal. The kids were naked apart from wellies, and ran through the hose spray as it rattled the scarlet flower heads. Silver drops rolled off the cabbages; a rainbow kept glancing over the spray.

Later we put the kids to bed and sat inside. But the feel of the garden still reached us; through the window clematis stars glowed in the dusk, and the air in the kitchen was scented with broom. We stretched, drinking elderberry wine, made ourselves, ripened only out of the earth's essential oils.

I smiled. No, I didn't know how I did it. Oh yes, I did: we read the books, we applied the gathered knowledge.

But it's true also that I thought: Funny how easy it is to grow things when you're happy.

I was happy, I thought. I was. The other thing had gone away.

'What will you do,' asked Richard's brother, 'when they ban garden hoses?'

I smiled, I put my hands on my belly, full of homegrown food. I didn't know how I'd do it, but I would.

No one spoke then. And in the darkness outside someone, as usual, plucked the lavender.

We had herbs as well as vegetables. Trials had proved that some traditional herbs did have therapeutic qualities, scientific knowledge confirming old wives' tales. Science making sense of magic. Synthesis, it seemed: full circle.

Every night, in the dark, a stroller came. The clock of easy, lazy footsteps, and then they stopped, and after a pause you'd hear a stem breaking.

Like a blessing, it seemed.

That night, as usual, we left the windows wide open for the air. My limbs felt powerful and large, drenched with the

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sweet-smelling darkness, capable of absorbing it and making it mine.

In the morning I knew I'd conceived. Conceived out of confidence, he was, my second, solid baby, out of scented earthly goodness.



Funny how something good and easy can make you know about the bad.

It wasn't that the birth was easy, the second time; they tell me that in an earlier age he'd have died. I believe it. I knew it then, and so did he. They held him up, amongst all that blood and metal, and I saw the instinct-knowledge cross his face: so that was it, that's the line you have to teeter on, that was death, and this is life. So. And satisfied, he closed his eyes.

And set to work seizing life in as calm and efficient a way as possible, drinking deep and quickly from my breasts and falling straight back into unburdened sleep for hours.

No, it wasn't that there was no danger. But there was this certainty: that however things turned out, they were proceeding according to natural laws.

Richard visited with Danny.

'Where are you Danny?'

He'd disappeared. Richard turned in the doorway, looking back down the corridor.

He wouldn't come in.

The typical nervousness of a child in stark and strange-smelling surroundings, that's what people, anyone, might say.

Me and the baby tucked up, all solid in our place,

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Richard caught in the doorway. Danny nowhere.

But then at last he came. Round black eyes and silver hair—I'd cut it myself, why did it look so straight and artificial?

'Come and see your Mummy, Danny, come and see your baby brother.'

He walked straight past us.

He went and fiddled with the radio on the wall. Understandable reaction of denial—as anyone might deduce—in a usurped elder child.

'What have you been up to, Danny? Had a good time at Grandma's?'

But he'd put on the headphones. Tuning out.

My mother said, 'You shouldn't have done it.' Shouldn't have let him come so soon, seen me strapped up like that, all those drips and things and catheters, long plastic worms sprouting.

But I don't think he looked.

'Danny?'

He was fiddling with the knobs still.

I'd been remembering. Sitting up in bed with that warm satisfied baby, I'd been remembering Danny newborn: never satisfied, catnapping only, and waking fretful and anxious, as if afraid the source of sustenance would disappear forever while his eyes were closed; and then, even while feeding, restless, pulling off and seeming to listen to something, distracted by a sound no one else could hear.

'Danny?'

He found the frequency he wanted.

Tuning in.