

Holding the baby

Nobody is watching me and I am alone in the house with the little girl, so I get down on the floor for a bit and try making daft cooing noises at her over the edge of the sofa. Trying to eke out the interval before she starts crying again. I pop my cheek in my special way and a steady look of interest appears under the eyelashes. I pop the other one. I reach for the feeder cup my daughter left but the head goes solemnly from side to side. Not even the raisins? Come on love, I'm sure that's ketones I can smell.

This is yesterday afternoon as I write, and the thing still hasn't resolved, we don't know where it's going, although I don't think I'd be writing this if we didn't seem to be coming out of the woods.

But for more than a week, except for a 2-day window, she's been fine in the mornings (which is when she sees the doctor) and then miserable, feverish and inconsolable in the afternoon and through the night. My daughter is getting desperately tired and worried, part of it being the pressure of un-done work, especially yesterday when she had a crucial 1-hour meeting in the afternoon. Her partner had done at least his share of the caring earlier in the week but was now even more urgently committed than she was. This is a parable of modern life.

Grandma was having her first day as senior adviser for a CAB session — and that is as unmissable as unmissable gets — so it had to be Fairy God-Grandpa to the rescue, shooting 50 miles up-country in his eco-friendly diesel Jag, drowning his aching anxiety with his new CD of Haydn's *Nelson Mass*. Trying to change the way the possibilities always sorted in his mind so that the worst were at the top. Pulling in to pause the CD and listen to the voicemail from his microbiologist other-daughter: 'Talking about it in the lab we think it could be a UTI'. Doctor Grandpa must be slipping, of course, it might be no more than that!

In the event my daughter almost hasn't left us, but I realise the crying is upsetting her more than it is me and I

tell her to go. I text-message a few minutes later to say we are OK. And we are, sort of.

She has a third bout of crying — arching back, fingers in mouth, again inconsolable — but it subsides more quickly. And yes, she might now be interested in a book. She points weakly at a cow and her mouth shapes the ghost of a moo. No, she doesn't want to rub noses with a finger-puppet lamb. So I slip it from my little finger onto the mouthpiece of her feeder cup. Her face crumples slowly into a glorious giggle. I start feeding her the raisins and she scoffs the lot. She takes thirsty swigs from whatever it is in the feeder cup.

When my daughter gets back she is standing bouncing on the back of the sofa and they wave delightedly at each other through the window. I stay long enough to go round with them to pick up her twin brother from the nursery. He rushes to me with open arms and won't be put down, or carried by anyone else, until I go. His sister lets me kiss her goodbye and I notice the ketones have gone.

On the way home the *Nelson Mass* is louder and better. With a gap for the news to hear that Tony Blair has lost that crucial vote it exactly fills the time. I get home feeling on top of the world.

It's all so simple and so clear once it's over, but however hard you try, you can never really imagine what it's like to be in the middle of it.

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