

Céline Robinet

## The sun in pieces

Ray loves to play. Sometimes he stays still for hours on end and plays possum, floating with his belly out of the water. The other two fish actually couldn't give a damn. They look at him for a moment, and then swim away none the wiser with a flick of their fins. With time, I've got used to it. The fish tank sits there in its grandeur, a gigantic 30 litres, on a table alongside the bathtub. When I take my time under the shower, the sides of the tank steam up. I wonder if it's good for the fish. Could they melt?

On the other side of the bathroom door, Saul knocks gently. He can wait a moment. I'm not ready yet. It's been five years but I can't come to terms with it. I open the cupboard over the washbasin and take out the bottle of 90 per cent alcohol B.P. I feel slightly unsure I want to go ahead as I uncork it. The first swig is hard. Tears come to my eyes. I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand. When he's just kissed me, that's what Saul does too - he does it discreetly, behind my back, as he hugs me. He needn't bother though, I don't mind a bit. It's normal, your lips are moist after a kiss. I knock back another swig. Wipe my mouth again. Does the bottle take offence? You see, Saul. I look at my watch. Almost 4 a.m. I put both hands on the side of the washbasin. It's too much for me. Saul is waiting for me to go and wake up Thomas. Tonight our son celebrates his fifth birthday. At 4.07 a.m. to be precise. For the last five years, we've had to celebrate his birthday all together, at the exact time he was born. It's a ritual. It's important for Saul. I knock back another swig. For my husband, politics comes before all else. For

him, feelings are all very well as long as they don't get in the way of the serious things in life. The child came as the crowning moment of years of struggle. That's how much it means. So when Thomas blows out the candles in a room plunged in semi-darkness with the two of us on either side, Daddy and Mummy, though there's no telling who's who, Saul explodes with joy. He's won. He's got his proof, right there, in the flesh, half asleep on the kitchen chair. But I don't hold it against him. His political involvement is what gives him the strength to carry on. When he's in the fray, he's a lion, proud and implacable. Most transgender people are like that. The thing is that it takes guts to break free from the arbitrary nature of real life.

I don't know if by the time of his transition he had already thought about having a child. If that's why he wanted to keep his womb. As for everything else, he changed it. Breasts removed, testosterone injections, voice, facial hair ... When I met him, he was already called Saul. Except on his identity card. Officially his first name is still Marthe. Alias Saul. "Alias", the state concedes that much. In the eyes of the law, you can't really be called Saul if you have a womb.

The day Saul and I decided to have a child, there was never a moment's doubt - it was him who was going to get pregnant. It was so obvious. Any human being with a female reproductive system can have a baby. "Coming, Johanna?"

Saul's getting impatient. He's in the kitchen. He must have stuck the five birthday candles in the cake and had a gutsful of just looking at it. He's right, the quicker we get it done, the earlier we can get back to bed. I've already knocked back half the bottle of alcohol. I need something to pick me up. Normally I don't drink. Or take anything psychotropic. But

every year it's the same, I put the birthday to the back of my mind and when the big day comes, it catches me unprepared. In their fishtank, the clownfish are sleeping the sleep of the blessed. Just because fish have no eyelids, that doesn't mean they don't snore. I envy them. The bathroom's far too big. The white tiling chills me. In the fishtank, it must be nice and warm. The fish snore out bubbles. A bubble, there's nothing better. No corners, no crest, no long side, it's round because the forces on its entire surface work just the same way, so a bubble is just perfect. Courageous too. It's not afraid of bursting when it comes to the surface - no way, it goes plop and bursts, but nicely, and it doesn't hold a grudge against anyone. It must be fascinating for a fish to blow out bubbles like that. I do think though that the whole thing bores the shit out of them. I see them going round in circles all day to try and catch their own tails like catfish. All the same, there are exciting moments in the life of a clownfish. When the female dies, the male gets bigger and puts on weight, and changes sex. They should have said so in "Finding Nemo". Were they afraid they'd shock the kids if they did? The kids would have been really impressed, though!

With the tip of my foot I push down the pedal to open the bin. The lid opens. I fish out some foil with the Bayer logo, the wrapping from a 50 mg dose of testosterone. Empty. Or almost. I squeeze it between my thumb and middle finger. The tiniest blob of gel oozes out and I scrape it up on my index finger so as to apply it behind my ear. A tiny drop of odourless perfume. There must surely still be more left. Using the nail scissors, I cut the foil lengthwise and hold the inside tight against my shoulder to let the sticky substance penetrate.

Of course it could have been me bearing the child. But that wouldn't

have made a stir. Even as it was, though, most people couldn't have imagined that, even if Saul was a man and I, of course, was a woman, we actually weren't a heterosexual couple. I'm a lesbian. A lipstick lezzo, a bit of a nancy-boy. As for Saul, until his transition he was a butch lesbian; then he became a faggot. Even if he doesn't like biological penises. It's often the case with transgender people. The fact is that homosexuality has its charm. But it's all very well managing to throw off the shackles of conformity, social pressures - the danger is that it'll all come back into your life just when you least expect it. With me - the woman - as the mother-to-be, arm in arm with Saul, what would we have looked like? A basic straight couple. Not a particularly attractive prospect.

I step on the bin pedal again and pop it open. I toss in the dose of Testogel. Change my mind. Pick it up again, wrap it in toilet paper and stuff it in my pocket. With his vision of militantism, I'll never be able to tell Saul that I had this child out of love. I know how he sees things, feelings are all very well but you mustn't let them get in the way. He'd be disappointed. If I whispered the usual things we've heard so often. Words that sometimes, when you say them, send the blood coursing from the right ventricle into the pulmonary artery - "I love you", as a massive surge of serotonin is released into the pineal gland, "I love you", as the neurotransmitters go crazy, "I love you", it stings your eyes just like when you crouch over a camp fire and the smoke hits you right in the kisser, "I love you", with an Adam's apple growing in my throat, I love you bloody hell I love you! OK, I know, fine, OK, love - no way, it doesn't exist. It's a cultural construct, a superstition, a psychological weakness, a myth, it's old hat, politically speaking totally devoid of interest, a

Judaeo-Christian mechanism of oppression that capitalism provides with pathetic substitutes like inflatable dolls, porno films, psychotherapy, sluts, drugs. No, you mustn't try to form a couple, you have to refuse dependence, alienation, interiorised social schemas, marriage, a house, children, a dog - the dog's optional, to make up for not being a vegetarian.

Whereas I'd like to melt

melt

into his neck my breasts into his into the small of his back and sink my teeth into it

even if loving helps you put up with other things, things it'd be

impossible to face up to without love

loving I mean

what a waste.

But look, a little clownfish has woken up. I toss him a few flakelets of plankton. Clownfish are really rather harmless. Every year more people are wounded by dogs and pigs and stags than by clownfish and sharks put together.

I wince. The alcohol burns my throat. Becoming the first pregnant man.

That's something that was a cert to tear familiar categories right apart.

A brilliant media coup. In terms of strategy and militant marketing,

unsurpassable. After nine doctors had refused to have anything to do

with us - because the Medical Council had told them not to - and an

endless battery of psychological tests, we were allowed to have access

to the sperm bank. From the time "The Scientist" published the first

photo of Saul pregnant, the media never gave him a break.

"The couple always felt normal in the eyes of others, until they wanted

to have children". The papers talked a lot of crap. They didn't know what to make of it. They'd go and interview our neighbours, showing them the famous photo, and ask them what they thought of it. The neighbour on the fourth floor answered: "Couldn't swear if he's pregnant or it's just beer in her belly - should see mine after a few pints!" From the specialist press to the tabloids, they'd all show us, the two of us, us in bed, us in our living room, us in the bathroom brushing our teeth, us during the scan in front of the ultrasound screen, us looking tenderly at the future baby's cradle ... the photographers knew exactly what they wanted, and it was always Saul, with his belly in the air. We were even invited to appear on American TV programmes like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It was incredible. She's the wealthiest black woman in the United States thanks to her TV shows, and there we were as her guests in the studio. Afterwards, Oprah lost thousands of viewers. Throughout the broadcast, though, she was poring over Saul's belly with a look of disbelief. Insulting letters came flooding in. Saul was treated like a monstrous excrescence of gender studies - not a man, but a mutilated woman - unfortunately not mutilated enough to put a stop to childbearing. "You don't choose to become a man and then promptly get up the stick!" "How is this child going to develop psychologically?" "Who's the mother in this story?" And weren't the hormones SHE (they meant "Saul") was taking going to harm the baby? They said he was selfish, deliberately provocative, proselytising. I was afraid something might happen to him. You're never safely out of reach of some nutter.

Saul was jubilant. The transgender cause had never been so high profile. And we had our supporters too. For the general public, it was an opportunity to learn for the first time that transsexualism wasn't just

about MtF - Male-to-Females - but also involved Female-to-Males. The problem was that, even within the queer community, there wasn't a unanimous response to Saul's pregnancy. He took stick about the media cover. Wouldn't the government now move to make a hysterectomy mandatory before authorising hormone treatment? Saul repeated in interviews that childbearing didn't make him feel more feminine. There was no way any doubt could be cast on his masculinity - for a transition to be validated and considered a success, transsexuals have to convince people that they fulfil the usual gender criteria. This means that FtM transgenders have to be men, real men, virile and heterosexual. In the fourth month of pregnancy, Saul took part in an anti-VTOP demonstration. He wanted to know if militants preferred a pregnant poofa trans, or if they were suddenly going to come out in favour of abortion. That evening, he called me from Casualty. "Johanna" he said, "don't worry about the stitches. They're no big deal, but our situation does show there's a blatant lack of legal, political and social awareness. We're backing the right horse."

The day the child was born Saul was front page news all over the world. "The French transsexual has given birth to a little boy in a Paris hospital. The baby is doing well." Yes, his baby was doing well. No, he wasn't malformed. Yes, he was viable. That partly gave the lie to the objectors. What I had done was take a course of prolactin to stimulate milk production. I was breastfeeding Thomas. I was given a bed in Saul's room, and for a week all three of us stayed in the warmth of the maternity ward, rocked to sleep by the visits of family, friends, colleagues and those bloody whores of journalists and photographers who wouldn't give us a moment's peace.

“Aren’t you coming, Johanna?”

I’m coming. One last swig. Thomas is still asleep and showing no harmful intent. Let him make the most of it. I can’t bring myself to go and wake him. I love the child. You don’t wake up a kid you love. Radio alarm clocks are toys that shouldn’t be allowed for the under-twelves. It’s incredible. It practically takes a doctorate in marine aquatic chemistry just to get three little fish moving around in a fishtank, with anemones, living stones, the aerator, the water mixing plant, the substrate, the climatisation, the external filter, the monitoring equipment, the earthing for the mains supply, the decanting basin ... And nothing for children. Ray is watching me in his sleep. It’s because they have no eyelids. You can never help watching when you’re a fish. I don’t know how he does it. You can’t see anything here. In the dead of night you shouldn’t be in a fishtank - let alone in a bathroom. In the dead of night you should look for your lenses. Where are my lenses? I open the cupboard above the washbasin and the mirror shakes. I retch. On the middle shelf are Saul’s doses of testosterone. Alongside them is the stuff he uses to stop hair loss. He doesn’t realise that I let his intimacy act within me. For seven years, around his mouth, there’s been facial hair. His lips look on in silence. He doesn’t want to come close to words. He’s stronger than me. I like it when he holds my arm tight behind my back. The second too. I can’t defend myself. I. can’t. breathe. any. more. He rubs his stubble against my cheek. Brings me back to life. His hirsuteness. A miracle. He never ceases to amaze me. Like his voice. Done on testo. You turn me on, babe. The slightest hair, every muscle, his skin, raspy and slightly flattened by the hormones. Nature is thrown out of kilter. It gets to know the new inventor: injections. Gel. Extreme sensuality. Inscrutable.

Impossibility in the hardness of these bones. What counts - he's there.  
Here and there. He holds me tight in his inexplicable arms. Squeezes  
me again. Tighter. Breathes slowly so that my breathing can follow his.  
Sshh, confidences whispered in the night. Ah, my lens holder. I unscrew  
the blue cap and draw the left lens under the tip of my index finger.  
Would it be possible to get it to spin around my finger like a pizza base  
then throw it in the air and try to catch it in my eye?

Don't speak. Don't speak. Cut out my tongue. I put the 90 per cent  
alcohol back in the cupboard. It's all very well emptying a bottle,  
that doesn't mean it takes up less room. My head is fuddled. In the  
condensation inside my skull I trace our two names. Saul and Johanna.  
Love is like magic. Just the conjuring is magnificent. That a magician  
should go to such lengths to create the illusion, just for us, so that we  
can marvel, it's worth all the truth in the world.

Johanna!

No. Yes.

I swapped the baby. That's why. Now I have to proffer endless silences.  
I can't impose my views. I see all this darkness, and what can I do  
about it? I'd like a fish to tell the truth. To invent true things always.  
Tonight I awoke with a start. It was my ambition to go and lock my throat  
up, otherwise I never seal it tight, I'm haunted by the fear of raising  
barricades, violence stutters as soon as you spread out beyond your  
own place, panic is here, within, inside as well as in all the symptoms,  
so I don't turn the key any further on anything else, I refuse to be put  
aside within my own place. Ours was dead. Without doing anything  
deliberately. Three days behind his birth. I surprised him like that, during  
the night, motionless and no longer alive at all. Cot death can happen

to any newborn. But in our scenario, the people and the papers and all the others would have said it was because of Saul. It's obvious, they would have misinterpreted things. It couldn't have been otherwise. Not one person must get to know about it. So you see that you can be happy when you're a trans. The rest takes just once a year. Remembering on birthdays. Surely not. Our baby was doing well. Yes. He wasn't misshapen. Impossible. I swapped him for a live baby. In the nursery at the clinic, they were too much. Then I crept to the real Thomas' burial. I saw the parents crying. They were sobbing, while my eyes were dirty. I was a bus shelter window. One side shattered, kept in place by the layer of hard glass behind. Crushed, but still upright. A mosaic of vertical cracks. A hanging jigsaw puzzle. An illusion held together by glue. A pane of glass which would crack if even a ray of sunlight passed through. I held it together out of love. I don't feel sorry about one single thing. Politics is all very well, but you mustn't let it get in the way of the more serious things in life. I'd always known. Simply from touching him - Saul. I knew that, come what may, it would be a blessing to live unhappily at his side.

"Johanna! It's 4.06!!"

Coming.