

The Very Strange Afternoon

There's a story I've heard many times about how my brother Jason got the scar that runs above his left eye, almost parallel with his eyebrow. He was four years old when I was born, and he'd wanted a brother, a sister or a dog for as long as he could remember, but Mum and Dad had always said no.

'Nobody needs more than one child,' insisted Dad. 'The planet's overpopulated as it is. Do you know, there's a family in the street next to ours with seven children under the age of six?'

'How is that even possible?' asked my brother Jason, who might have only been a child at the time but knew a little about how the world worked.

'Two sets of twins,' replied Dad with a smile.

‘And dogs need constant walking,’ added Mum. ‘And before you say you’d walk him, we all know that you say that now but, in the end, it’ll be your dad or me who ends up doing most of the hard work.’

‘But –’

‘They create an awful mess too,’ said Dad.

‘Which?’ asked my brother Jason. ‘Dogs or siblings?’

‘Both.’

Mum and Dad were so insistent that there would be no further additions to our family that it must have come as something of a shock when they sat him down one day to tell him that he was going to get his wish after all and that, in six months’ time, there would be a new baby in the house. Apparently, he was so excited he ran out into the back garden and charged around in circles for twenty minutes, screaming at the top of his voice, until he got so dizzy that he fell over and hit his head on a garden gnome.

Although that’s not how he got the scar.

When I was born, however, there was a problem. I had a hole in my heart and the doctors didn’t think that I was going to survive for very long. The hole was only the size of a pinhead but, when you’re a baby and your heart is only the size of a peanut, that can be pretty dangerous. I was kept in an incubator for a few days

before being brought to an operating theatre, where a team of surgeons tried to repair what was wrong with me. My brother Jason was at home with the au pair at the time, and cried so hard with worry that he fell off the chair and hit his head on a coffee table.

Although that's not how he got the scar either.

The doctors told my parents that the next week would be critical, but as they've both always had very important jobs – Mum's a Cabinet minister now, although she was just a normal Member of Parliament at the time, and Dad has always been her private secretary – they couldn't be with me constantly and so took it in turns to come to the hospital. Mum came in during the mornings when the House wasn't in session, but she was always being called away for meetings, while Dad arrived during the afternoons but didn't like to stay too long in case there were what he called 'developments' that meant he had to get back to Westminster as quickly as he could. But my brother Jason was brought in to meet me for the first time the night following my operation and, even though he was only four at the time, he refused to go home afterwards, and caused so much trouble that eventually the nurses put a cot in the room next to my incubator and let him stay.

'Baby might sense there's someone here looking out for him,' said the nurse. 'It can't hurt.'

‘And at least we know he’s safe here,’ said Mum.

‘Plus, we won’t have to pay the au pair double time,’ added Dad.

But then, a few nights later, a noise sounded from one of the machines that were keeping me alive and it gave him such a shock that he stumbled out of his cot in search of a doctor, but, as the room was dark, he tripped over the wire of something called an intravenous infusion pole, and when the nurse came in a few moments later she found me sleeping soundly but my brother Jason lying on the floor in a daze, blood pouring from above his eye where he’d injured himself.

‘Don’t let my brother die!’ he cried out as the nurse examined his wound.

‘Sam’s not going to die,’ said the nurse. ‘Look at him, he’s fine. He’s fast asleep. You, on the other hand, are going to need stitches. Here, hold this towel to your head and let’s go down to my office.’

But my brother Jason was convinced that there was something terribly wrong with me and that, if he left me alone, then something awful would happen. And so he insisted on staying exactly where he was, and eventually the nurse had to sew up his wound right there, and she must have been quite new because she didn’t do a very good job.

And *that's* how he got the scar.

I've always loved his injury, because whenever I look at it I think of that story and how he insisted on staying by my side when I was sick. It shows me how much my brother Jason has always loved me. Even when he started growing his hair longer, and I didn't see the scar as often as I used to because he liked to pull his fringe down over his forehead, I knew it was there. And I knew what it meant.

For as long as I can remember, my brother Jason has taken care of me. There were au pairs, of course – *lots* of au pairs – because Mum said if she didn't put her constituents first they'd vote for the other side at the next election and then the country would go to rack and ruin. And Dad said it was important that Mum always won by a substantial margin if she was to continue her climb up the greasy pole.

'It looks good to the party,' he said, 'if she doesn't just win, but wins *big*.'

Most of the au pairs didn't stay very long because they said they were professionals with qualifications, they'd been to university, knew their rights and refused to be treated like slave labour. And Mum always pointed out that, if they were so highly educated, then they'd

know that slaves didn't get paid whereas they did, and then she'd turn to Dad and say something like, 'These are the types that go on marches, protesting against everything, but never actually raise a finger to help,' and an argument would break out that took in everything from the failings of the health service to nuclear disarmament, by way of the rising price of Tube tickets and the Middle East peace process.

Sometimes my parents and the au pair would reach some sort of agreement, but it only took a few weeks for things to flare up again, and then the original advertisement would be brought out and the girl (and once a boy) would point out that it said nothing about ironing the parents' clothes, weeding the front garden, or folding thousands of constituency leaflets into envelopes while they were watching television in their own room in their private time. But then Mum would show them the line about 'other general household duties' and everyone would start shouting at each other. The phrase *If you don't like it, you can always leave* came out, and then Mum and Dad would argue, because he'd say it would take an eternity to find another au pair and he'd be stuck at home with 'those bloody children' in the meantime, and Mum would say, *Oh, you just don't want her to go because you like staring at her bum* – this is what Mum

would say, I'm only *telling* you – and eventually the au pair would announce that she was going on strike for better conditions, and Mum would say, if that was the case, then she could pack her bags and be gone by the following afternoon and good riddance to bad rubbish.

So they came and went like the seasons and I knew not to waste my time growing too close to any of them. And by the time I was ten my brother Jason was already fourteen, and Mum said we didn't need an au pair any more – he could bring me home from school every day unless he had football practice, in which case I was to sit in the stands and do my homework until he was finished. And he said fine, but could he get the same money the au pairs had earned, and Dad said, you live in our house rent-free, you eat our food and make a mess with your football boots and your dirty kit, so how about we call it even?

You might think you know some good footballers but, believe me, you don't know anyone as good as my brother Jason. He started playing football when he was only a toddler, and by the time he was nine years old he'd already had a trial with Arsenal Academy, but they said he wasn't ready yet and wanted to see him again in a year's time. Twelve months later he returned for a

follow-up, and the coach said that he'd come on in leaps and bounds in the meantime and there was a place for him there if he wanted it, but to everyone's surprise my brother Jason turned it down. He said that, even though he liked to play at school, he didn't want it to take over his life, and he definitely didn't want to become a professional footballer when he grew up.

'Well, that's just ridiculous,' said Mum, who'd had a huge argument with the head of the Academy the year before when they'd rejected him, and made some vague threats regarding sports funding. 'You've obviously got talent. I've seen you play and you're better than everyone else in your class. You always, you know . . . kick the ball and get it into the net . . . Or sometimes you do anyway.'

'Why not just agree to go for the next seven or eight years?' suggested Dad. 'That's not so long, is it? Just until you finish school, and then you can make a proper decision about your future. It would look very good for Mum if you were signed to a professional football club. The voters would love it.'

'Because I don't want to,' he insisted. 'I just like playing for fun.'

'Fun?' asked Dad, looking at him as if he'd just started speaking a foreign language. 'You're ten years

old, Jason! Do you really think your life is supposed to be about fun?’

‘I do, actually,’ he said.

‘Do you know what your problem is, Jason?’ asked Mum, who was filing her nails while scanning the newspapers, and he shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘What?’

‘You’re selfish. You only ever think about yourself.’

And, although I was only six years old at the time and sitting quietly in the corner of the room, I also knew that this was completely untrue, because my brother Jason was the least selfish person I knew.

‘Why don’t you want to be a famous footballer?’ I asked him once when I was lying on his bed and he was playing CDs for me and telling me why each song he played was the greatest song ever written and how I needed to broaden my musical knowledge and stop listening to rubbish. As I looked around the room, I saw pictures of footballers on the walls, but then again there was also a poster of Australia and another of Shrek, and I didn’t think he wanted to be a continent or a cartoon ogre either.

‘I just don’t,’ he said with a shrug. ‘Just because I’m good at something, Sam, doesn’t mean I want to spend the rest of my life doing it. There are lots of other things I might want to do instead.’

And, to be honest, that sounded pretty reasonable to me.

Last year, when I was thirteen, my English teacher gave our class an essay to write over the weekend called ‘The Person I Most Admire’. Seven girls wrote about Kate Middleton, five boys wrote about David Beckham and there were three more on Iron Man. After that it was a mixture of people like the Queen, Jacqueline Wilson and Barack Obama. My nemesis, David Fugue, who has bullied me relentlessly since the day I tried to welcome him to our street, wrote about Kim Jong-un, the Supreme Leader of North Korea, and, when our teacher, Mr Lowry, gave him eighty-seven different reasons why Kim Jong-un was not a positive role model, David Fugue waited until he’d finished before saying that he needed to be very careful what he said or he might find himself in serious trouble. He claimed that he played online every night with Kim Jong-un and that they’d become great friends. Just a word from him, he said, and Mr Lowry might find himself on the wrong side of an unpleasant accident when he was walking home one evening. That didn’t go down very well, and David got a letter home to his parents and had to stand up in front of the entire class the next day and