

## A Bit of a Muddle

The Mayor's wife was distressed and angry. "Where's my other baby? What have you done with her?"

The Mayor was upset because his wife was upset. "Your baby is here, my love. Our beautiful baby girl."

"The other one! Where is the other one? I want to see her now! NOW!"

"There is no other baby, my dear. Why would there be?"

"I was having twins! Two babies! I gave birth to two lovely little girls."

"N-n-no, my dear. You had one lovely little girl. You've always been going to have one baby. The doctors will tell you."

The Mayor's wife became hysterical, and tried to get out of the bed to find the missing baby. The doctor came rushing in and injected a sedative and the Mayor's wife eventually subsided into the bed.

The Mayor looked at the doctor. "What now," he said.

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Meanwhile, at same time, in the same place, the Mayor's wife was distressed and angry. "What baby? Why are you trying to give me a baby? You know I can't have children. Why are you being so cruel?"

The Mayor hated to see his wife distressed. "What are you talking about, my dear? Yes, I know that we had difficulty conceiving, but we were so pleased when you did conceive at last. Don't you remember?"

"No, no, no! I just woke up here, in the hospital and you're trying to give me a baby. Is this a trick? It's so cruel of you!"

She tried to get up and attack her husband, but the doctor who was standing by stepped in and injected a sedative. She subsided onto the bed with a sigh.

"What now?" said the Mayor.

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The Mage came into the Boffin's laboratory. "Dear, something's gone wrong. I don't think that it is too serious, but we should have a look."

"Yes, I know," she said, gesturing at a board bright with red and yellow lights. "Any ideas?"

The Mage drew a square in the air and it lit up with a series of pictures which kept repeating. A woman with two babies. A woman with one baby. A woman with no babies. A woman with one baby.

"Hmm." he said. "It should only show one picture. That's odd."

He waved that away, and a spinning orb appeared, with bulges that expanded and contracted rhythmically. “Well, in your terms, a probabilistic crossover.”

“And in your terms?”

“A slight tear in the fabric of the cosmos.”

“Sounds serious?”

“No, not really. The cosmos is self healing. You know that. The question is, do we try to help?”

She reminisced. “Yes, that is always the question. Remember how, when we were new to the job, we tried to fix everything?”

“Yes, there was no job description was there? Yes, I’m afraid that until we realised, we did more harm than good. The wars! The destruction. The poor people. Remember, we felt so guilty.”

“We were young. We didn’t know. A good helmsman never fights the waves. He uses them instead. And humanity does love its wars, doesn’t it? Stop one here and another one pops up over there.”

“So, this case? I think that we have a minor collision between two spaces. Two worlds, according to your young scientists. My charms say that the collision happened about twenty-five years ago, when the woman was born and the spaces have only just separated. Who is she anyway?”

The Boffin turned away and typed some queries into one of her computers. “Mmm. The wife of a Mayor in a town to the west of the Capital. Morgantown. Her name is Helen, and her husband is called Tom. She’s just given birth to twins. Or has she? It’s unclear, which is odd.”

She looked closely at her computer. She tapped a few more keys. “Same in the other space. That’s good, I think. Not too much divergence. That Helen didn’t have any babies. Or did she? Again, it’s unclear. I think I know what has happened, and how we can help. How do we insert ourselves? I can be a doctor, and you?”

“A doctor too. A psychologist.”

She nodded. “OK. That will do fine. So in one space, or alternate world as the youngsters annoyingly refer to it these days, a woman gives birth to twins. In another space, the woman doesn’t give birth. I think she might be infertile, but I’ll check when we go in there. There’s a crossover, and both women end up with one baby, and realise that something has gone wrong, but don’t know what. Because of the crossover, no one else realises what has happened.”

“Yeah, I agree with your analysis, my dear. It agrees with my feelings.”

She put her arms around him. “I agree with your feelings. I trust them.”

He kissed her. “As I trust your analyses, my dear Boffin.”

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So the Boffin and the Mage visited one of the spaces, which were so close to one another that the Mage felt itchy thinking about it. The Boffin posed to the hospital doctors as an expert in multiple births, so they deferred to her. She, of course, brought along her colleague, the Mage, who was an expert in the psychology of mothers who had given birth to more than one baby.

They kicked out all the other doctors and the Mayor himself and interviewed the Mayor's wife alone.

"What's your name, dear, for the record?" said the Boffin.

"Helen," said the Mayor's wife.

"So, please describe what happened, starting from when you found that you were pregnant."

"Oh, we were so pleased, Tom and I. Then we found out that we were having twins. It was a shock and a joy. I had terrible morning sickness, but we were so happy."

The Boffin made a note.

"And then?"

"You've seen the medical notes?"

The Boffin nodded. The notes had no mention of twins. They were pretty normal for a single first pregnancy.

"So, when you had the babies? What happened then?"

"Well, I had the babies. Twin girls. And then I passed out or went to sleep. When I woke up people said that there was only one baby! But I know that I had two. Who wouldn't know? I had two!"

She was getting wound up.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," said the Mage, "but tell me something. This is a hard question, and just to gauge your state of mind. I won't blame you if you get angry with me. All things being equal, would you have preferred one baby or twins? I know that you will love them both, but deep down, what are your feelings?"

"I don't know," wailed Helen. The Boffin held her hand which seemed to calm her down.

"I guess," sniffed Helen, "that I sort of feel guilty about having two. After all, so many women can't even have one. And it is going to be hard."

She paused. "Am I delusional? Everyone acts as if I am! They all say that I only had one baby, and I can't think why they would do that. Am I going mad?"

"No dear, you aren't going mad. We'll sort this out. In the meantime, look after your baby, the one that you have with you. We'll look into the other one. We know where she is, and we'll explain everything to you a bit later. This is a very rare happening."

The Mage gestured and installed a temporary memory. It would eventually fade away but for the moment Helen would remember only one birth. It would calm her for the moment.

The Mage and the Boffin left her room. The Mage looked at the Boffin.

"A sad case," he said.

"Yes, but we can resolve it. The other one?"

"Yes, the other one."

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The Mage and the Boffin stepped. It was the same hospital, although the colour scheme was slightly different. In this space the Mage took the lead as the psychologist. Once again, they interviewed the Mayor's wife alone.

"What's your name, dear?" asked the Boffin.

"Helen," answered the Mayor's wife.

"Can you tell me what happened?" asked the Mage. "Start from when you woke up."

"Well, I was in this hospital, and they told me that I had just had a baby! But I couldn't have!"

"Why not?"

"Well, I was told when I was quite young that I couldn't have any babies! I had had some problems, and they had done tests, and they told me. No babies."

She started to cry, and the Boffin held her hand.

The Mage looked at the Boffin, and she shook her head. She had scanned Helen and found that she was unable to have babies.

"You'd like to have babies, though?" asked the Mage.

"Oh, yes," said Helen. She sighed.

"Why did you reject the baby, then?"

"She wasn't mine! She couldn't have been. But she was so sweet."

"OK, but she needed a mother, didn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose. I could look after her. Until her mother is found, I suppose. Her poor mother! She must be desperate."

The Mage looked at the Boffin again. She nodded.

"Look, we'll sort this out. But the baby needs looking after. Will you do that for now?"

"Oh yes, of course."

The Boffin held her hand and gestured. Then they left.

"Another false memory," said the Mage. "We need to sort this out before they fade."

"We can do it, my love. By the way, I also fixed it so that she could feed the baby."

"We can definitely do it. I just hope that there are no side effects."

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The Mage and the Boffin set up a space. It was only a temporary space, and looked much like a boardroom, with a long table and chairs. There was a small side room with a small table and four chairs.

They called up the Mayor and his wife, the one who had given birth to twins, into the boardroom. The couple looked around in surprise.

“Where are we?” said Tom. “What happened?”

“Welcome, my dears,” said the Boffin. “Please remain calm. You are going to have a few shocks in the next hour or so. The first is that you are going to meet two people who are identical to you. They look the same as you, they have the same names, are the same age as you. I will explain later.”

Tom was a Mayor, and used to getting answers. “What’s going on? Who are you, and where are we? How did we get here?”

“Please don’t be angry. We will get you back as soon as possible. We are trying to help you and we need to sort something out.”

“I’m not staying here!” said Tom and headed for the door. “Come on dear, we are going!”

He threw open the door, and instead of a hospital corridor, he saw fields of orange grass blowing in the wind, a blue sky, and beasts like a cross between a horse and a pig, snorting and snuffling through the grass.

He stumbled back to a seat. “Who ARE you people?” he asked.

“We will explain everything shortly. In the meantime....” The Boffin gestured and two cots appeared with two babies.

“Now, Tom, what do you remember about these babies?”

“Well, Helen gave birth to them and... That’s funny. I remember that she had them both, and I also remember that she only had the one.”

“That’s what we are trying to sort out,” said the Mage. “Please look after them. There are baby things in the cupboard, and also coffee, tea, and other refreshments. We will be back in a minute.”

He opened the door, and instead of the fields of grass, there was a small side room with a table and chairs. He and the Boffin went into the room and shut the door behind them.

“What do we do?” asked Tom.

“What do we do? Why we look after the babies, of course,” replied Helen.

The Mage and the Boffin called up the other Helen and the other Tom. They went through much the same with them as with the first Helen and Tom. This Tom remembered that his Helen could not conceive, and also that she had given birth to a baby. They were as confused and as worried as the first couple.

The Boffin ushered the second couple into the larger room. In spite of the warnings, both couples were shocked to meet their counterparts.

“Please help yourselves to any drinks and food that you might want, in the cupboards at the end,” said the Boffin to the second couple. “There’s also nappies and other baby stuff in there. Just make yourselves at home, while we make some arrangements.”

She and the Mage went through the door into the side room.

“...while we make some arrangements’? Is that the best you could do?” asked the Mage.

The Boffin pretended to be annoyed. “Huh! Could you do any better? Anyway get your spy glass out. Let’s see if they are getting along.”

The Mage took a small pearl and passed his hand over it, and suddenly he was holding a glass globe. In the globe the two mayors could be seen sitting in two of the seats, chatting. Their wives were up by the cots, each holding a baby, and also chatting.

“My, that was quick. Still, one either likes oneself or one hates oneself, and they aren’t haters. Shall we go back?” said the Boffin.

They returned to the conference room and both couples turned to look at them.

“Please sit down, everyone and I’ll explain everything,” said the Mage.

“OK, we have here two Helens and two Toms and two little girls. How can this be? Well I could get all technical with you, but basically you belong to two different places. We call them spaces, but today’s young scientists call them alternate worlds. In one space Helen gave birth to twins, and in the other, well, Helen was unable to have babies. I’m going to refer to Helen who had twins as Helen-two and Helen who had none as Helen-none.”

“These two spaces are so similar that each has a Helen and each has a Tom. Many, many other things are the same too. This is because the two spaces were once one space, and they split round about the moment that you were born, Helen.”

Both Helens nodded. Helen-none said “I think I understand. I sort of understand. We were once the same person, but we split?”

The Mage nodded.

“Technically, there was a probabilistic crossover when you had the babies, Helen-two, or in other words there was a small tear in the fabric of the cosmos. One of the babies crossed over from Helen-two’s space to Helen-none’s space. The fabric of the cosmos is self repairing, and little tears happen now and then, as a matter of course. As the tear started to repair itself everything changed so that it appeared that both Helens had given birth to a single baby.”

Tom-two said “Are you saying that my wife did give birth to twins? I remember it now! But why did I think that she had only given birth to one baby?”

“Because you are in a special space, a place we made, and not your usual spaces,” said the Mage.

“In your usual spaces the only people who remembered what actually happened were the two Helens. A woman knows if she has given birth to twins or not.”

“Who are you? Are you aliens? Time travellers? What are you?” asked one of the Toms.

The Boffin laughed. “No, we’re human. As human as you are. We’ve got some powers that you don’t have, which we never asked for, and which we try not to use if we can help it. But we decided to help you guys out, or at least support you in your decision.”

“So, what are the options, ma’am?” said one of the Toms.

“Just call me ‘Boffin’. He’s ‘Mage’. Well, there are two options. One is that both babies go back with Helen-two. As things stand, she gave birth to them, and so they both belong to her.”

One of the Helens put her hand to her mouth. The other leaned across and put her hand on the other’s shoulder.

“The second option is that one baby goes back with each Helen. Of course, because of the tear, the Helens will remember what actually happened, but we can fix that. We can give you temporary memories, and as the tear mends, these memories will become real. Oh, and whatever you decide, you will forget what happened here. You might dream about it, though.”

“We’ll leave you now and let you discuss the options. Just press the big red button when you are ready.”

The Boffin gestured and a big red button appeared in the middle of the table. They withdrew into the side room.

“A big red button? You’re enjoying yourself, aren’t you?” said the Mage.

“Is there anything that says I can’t enjoy it?” said the Boffin. “I think that we’ll have a good outcome. The Helens are your people, feeling and empathetic. Like you. The Toms are logical and sensible. Like me.”

She tapped on one of her devices. “The probability is very close to one hundred per cent that we will get a good result.”

The Mage made a rude noise. “‘Sensible’ she says. Yes, my dear, my feeling is that they will choose the best option. Helen-two is going to find it a little tough at first though.”

It didn’t take long before the button was pressed and the Mage and the Boffin returned to the room.

“We’ve decided,” said one of the Helens. “I’m going to give up one baby to my other self.”

So she was Helen-two. She looked a little pale, while Helen-none who held one of the babies looked radiant and thankful. Tears made both Helens’ cheeks wet.

The Boffin nodded. “That’s what we hoped that you would decide. Here’s how we can help. We already gave you temporary false memories to reduce your distress. We can install semi-permanent false memories so that you both remember giving birth to one baby each. That will align with the situation in your local spaces, but you won’t forget what actually happened completely for a long time. It will sometimes reappear in dreams and reveries. In time the real memory will fade as the tear mends and the false memory will become the real memory.”

Helen-two said “I’d rather not forget completely. Is there a way that I can follow the progress of my second baby and my other self? And what happens if I become pregnant again. Will it be twins again?”

The Mage looked at the Boffin. “The memories will fade,” he said to the Helens and the Toms, “but we may visit from time to time and that will temporarily bring back the memories. We can also bring you all to a special place so that you can meet again, if you wish. In a better place than this one, though! Probably with sand and a beach. But eventually you will forget completely. I’m sorry.”

The Boffin said “I calculate that if you get pregnant again, there will be only one baby. Though a consequence of the tear and its mending this way is that you can both get pregnant again.”

Helen-none gasped. “Really!” she said delightedly. “Oh, how wonderful! Thank you, Helen. Thank you so much.”

Helen-two hugged her. “You are welcome. This is by far the best solution.”

“So, if you are all agreed, let’s form a circle around the babies. Right, three, two, one, go!”

The Helens and the Toms and the babies disappeared.

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“You do like your theatrics, don’t you dear?” said the Mage.

“Well, yes, but they liked it too, didn’t they?”

“You realise that we didn’t actually need to do anything? That the tear would have fixed itself in no time if we had just left it?”

She turned to him and hugged him. “With a very high probability, that’s true. An astronomically high probability, actually. Do you mind? It was worth it just to see the look on Helen-none’s face when she realised that she could have another baby. Though ‘another’ is the wrong word in some ways. Both Helens would have had a rough time for a while too.”

She waved one of her instruments, and she and the Mage were standing on a seashore. A small cabin at the top of the beach was shaded by coconut palms and draped in vines. Small dragons hopped about and scavenged in the seaweed, and dug into the wet sand for shellfish as the waves broke and retreated. They behaved just like shore birds do in human space.

The Mage looked at the Boffin. He knew this place, and there was something in her voice. “You’re thinking of having another baby yourself, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

The Mage took it as confirmation and groaned.

“Side effects,” he said resignedly.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like children. He did, and he loved all their previous children to bits. They just disturbed his routines. He hoped it would be a girl. He knew his wife well, and if it was a girl, she’d stop at one, most likely, but she liked to have sons in sets of three for some reason.

“Anyway, I’m going for a swim. Are you coming?” she said, and ran up to the cabin to get changed. So he put aside his reservations and followed her and soon they were splashing happily about in the lagoon.

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