

SOPHIE



I got a text message just before lunch. “There’s something wrong with the baby.” A ball of ice seized in my chest and I called Kat, my wife, who was pregnant with our first, a girl, Sophie, and had taken the day for the 20 week ultrasound.

She was frantic, in tears and pretty incoherent, but after some deep breaths, she was able to tell me that the sonographer had picked up something called a cleft palate, Sophie’s face hadn’t fused together properly for some reason and there were going to be implications for speech and dentistry and hearing and who knew what else.

That was just about the worst moment of my life, but I didn't understand. Dr Google was as helpful as it was horrifying, and we shed a lot of tears while we waited for our appointments and reappraised the trajectory of our whole lives. Would she need to go to special schools? How much time would she spend in hospital? Would she ever hear and speak properly? How well equipped were the hospitals to deal with this? The questions came in waves, and the fear, and even if we didn't realise it at the time, we grew closer than ever as we found new ways to affirm our commitment to our little family and all the unforeseen heartaches and triumphs to come. We told our families and friends, and we put a message up on Facebook to let people know what to expect when the photos came.



Sophie was born with an incomplete unilateral cleft lip and complete cleft of the palate, quite a bit bigger than we'd been

expecting, and was the the closest I've ever come to knowing perfection. All the hope in the world was in those tiny hands, too small even to reach around my thumb, and between the feeding and the family and the snatched moments of sleep, and the sheer wall of terror that we were suddenly parents, for real, the cleft lost much of its potency. Babies have a way of keeping you occupied. Every single person we've dealt with about the cleft has been great, from the admin to the surgical staff to the amazingly committed volunteers at CleftPALS. The hospitals have been as efficient as they have compassionate, and while there are gruelling days of waiting at clinic, and the grief of seeing her come out of surgery, drugged and bloodied and full of tubes, and the occasional open stare or insensitive question from strangers who are only as clueless as I was twelve months ago, it doesn't escape us that we are lucky, lucky, lucky to have the care available to us that we do. Talk about being born in the right place at the right time.



About the time you're reading this, she'll be going in for her second surgery, to close up the remaining holes in her palate and have her first grommets put in, and even though it will be difficult for all concerned, we also know that she's in great hands and after a year together, we're more optimistic about the future with every big smile we see from her. Our little miracle is not so little anymore, but who's going to complain about a growing miracle? Not us.

