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Born Sleeping by H C Gildfind

gr rating ★★★★★

Stillbirth. Writing about it can be like pregnancy itself: fraught with danger. Gildfind emerges unscathed, the result a triumph on many levels.

Our narrator and her long-term partner, Ivan, sit with his brother, Stefan, and very expectant wife, Mel. The narrator is passed Mel's phone to see the selfie she took - *à la* the pregnant celebrity - naked, cradling her breasts and belly. She's both jealous and dismissive of the need to post this on social media. The next day, Ivan informs her that Mel lost the baby.

The death of a child is heart-wrenching. Writing about it runs the risk of becoming mawkishly sentimental. Gildfind's obvious talent deftly avoids this trap. The novella form itself helps: short reading time; long after-effects. Also, her choice to write in the second person is profound. This perspective offers mirror-like introspection.

Most importantly, it is the set-up which pays the greatest dividends at the denouement. The pregnant Mel is painted as vain and superior, with the type of hubris the gods love to punish. The narrator's reaction to the news of the stillbirth is clumsily flippant. Both of these characters have much to learn. The narrator realises, 'How little [she knows] about anything - about everything'.

Knowing and not knowing is indicative of the many binaries at play here, apart from the overt life vs death. There is so much left unsaid about stillbirth. Grief silences the family and others don't know what to say. Life goes on? This is the most unfair. The shock and despair are handled by Gildfind with sensitivity and poise, while still leaving room for liberating, relieving humour. This is exceptional writing.

Reviewed by Bob Moore

