

Fighting for a future

The girl sitting across from me waits for an answer, one I'm deliberately withholding. She says she wants to sue¹ her parents, like every teenager on the planet. But *she* wants to sue for the rights to her own body. It is exactly the kind of case I avoid like the Black Plague² – one which requires far too much effort and client baby-sitting. With a sigh³, I get up. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn't.” She sits a little straighter. “It's Anna Fitzgerald.”

I open the door and bellow for my secretary. “Kerri! Can you get the Planned Parenthood for Ms Fitzgerald?”

“*What?*” When I turn around, the kid is standing. “Planned Parenthood?”

“Look, Anna, here's a little advice. Instigating a lawsuit because your parents won't let you get birth control pills or go to an abortion clinic is like using a sledgehammer⁴ to kill a mosquito. You can save your allowance money⁵ and go to Planned Parenthood; they're far better equipped to deal with your problem.”

For the first time since I've entered my office, I really, truly look at her. Anger glows around this kid like electricity. “My sister is dying, and my mother wants me to donate one of my kidneys⁶ to her,” she says hotly. “Somehow I don't think a handful of free condoms⁷ is going to take care of that.”

You know how every now and then, you have a moment where your whole life

stretches out ahead of you like a forked road, and even as you choose one gritty path you've got your eyes on the other the whole time, certain that you're making a mistake? Kerri approaches, holding out a strip of paper with the number I've asked for, but I close the door without taking it and walk back to my desk. “No one can make you donate an organ if you don't want to.”

“Oh, really?” She leans forward, counting off on her fingers. “The first time I gave something to my sister, it was cord⁸ blood, and I was a newborn. She has leukemia – APL – and my cells put her into remission. The next time she relapsed⁹, I was five and I had lymphocytes drawn from me, three times over, because the doctors never seemed to get enough of them the first time around. When that stopped working, they took bone marrow¹⁰ for a transplant. When Kate got infections, I had to donate granulocytes. When she relapsed again, I had to donate peripheral blood stem cells.”

The girl's medical vocabulary would put some of my paid experts to shame. I pull a legal pad out of a drawer. “Obviously, you've agreed to be a donor for your sister before.”

She hesitates, then shakes her head. “Nobody ever asked.”

“Did you tell your parents you don't want to donate a kidney?”

“They don't listen to me.”

“They might if you mentioned this.”

She looks down, so that her hair covers her face. “They don't really pay attention to me, except when they need my blood or something. I wouldn't even be alive, if it wasn't for Kate being sick.”

An heir and a spare¹¹: this was a custom that went back to my ancestors in England. It sounded callous¹² – having a subsequent child just in case the first one happens to die – yet it had been eminently practical once. Being an afterthought might not sit well with this kid, but the truth is that children are conceived for less than admirable reasons every single day: to glue a bad marriage together; to keep the family name alive; to mold in¹³ a parent's own image. “They had me so that I could save Kate,” the girl explains. “They went to special doctors and everything, and picked the embryo that would be a perfect genetic match.” [...]

Anyone who tuned in periodically to CNN would know about the controversies of stem cell research. Spare-parts babies, designer infants, the science of tomorrow to save the children of today.

I tap my pen on the desk, and Judge – my dog – sidles closer. “What happens if you don't give your sister a kidney?”

“She'll die.”

“And you're okay with that?”

Anna's mouth sets a thin line. “I'm here, aren't I?”

“Yes you are. I'm just trying to figure out what made you want to put your foot down, after all this time.”

She looks over at the bookshelf. “Because,” she says simply, “it never stops.”

Jodi Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*, 2004