

Anchor Hours

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1. What Kinwell is and what it is used for. Kinwell is used to support the forming of a parental bond in adults who have been assessed as having difficulty bonding with one particular child (the anchor child). For a limited period it makes your brain more receptive to the sight, sound, smell and touch of that child. The bond that forms is your own.

Jodie Walsh peeled the backing off her first patch at my kitchen table at ten past four on a Tuesday, and her hands were shaking so badly she stuck it to her own thumb. Cian was under the table with the cat's dish, eating the cat's biscuits one at a time and watching her ankles the way you'd watch a dog you didn't know.

"Upper arm," said Orla Twomey from the Agency, reading off her tablet. "Clean, dry skin. Then the hour starts."

Jodie got the patch off her thumb and onto her arm, under the sleeve of a grey hoodie that was too big for her, and pressed it down with two fingers for the full thirty seconds, counting under her breath. She was twenty three. She had been clean for nineteen months. She had done the parenting course and the other course and the course after that, and she had passed every test they could think of to give her, and then, at the

last hearing, the judge had asked her a question nobody had thought to put on a test, and she had answered it.

“When you hold him, Ms Walsh, what do you feel?”

I was there. I was in the second row in my good coat, because a foster carer is allowed to attend and I have attended every one of them in twenty years. Jodie looked at the judge for a long time and then she said, “Nothing. I’m sorry. I’m telling the truth. I feel nothing.”

Her solicitor shut his eyes. I remember thinking that I had never heard anybody say anything braver in that building, and that it would cost her her son.

It didn’t, quite. It cost her six weeks of patches and an hour a day in my kitchen in Blackpool, because the familiar setting is better for the child, and I am the familiar setting.

“Close physical contact,” Orla said, and looked under the table. “When he’s ready.”

He wasn’t ready. He was four and three months, and he had been with me since he was fifteen months old, and the first thing he had ever done in my house was bite me. Jodie got down on the lino on her knees in her too big hoodie and said, “Hiya, Cian,” in a voice like she was asking a shop assistant where the toilets were. He put a cat biscuit in his mouth and moved to the other side of the table leg.

“He likes it if you don’t look at him,” I said. “Look at something else. Look at the cat.”

She looked at the cat. Mrs Doyle, who is fourteen and fears nobody, looked back. After eleven minutes, Cian put his hand on Jodie’s shoe.

2. What you need to know before you use Kinwell. Do not use Kinwell if a separation from the anchor child is planned or foreseeable. Kinwell is not licensed for use by foster carers, residential care

workers or any person whose care of the anchor child is expected to end.

I have fostered twenty three children. There is a nail in my hall for each one that left, with a photograph on it, and Cian's favourite game when he was three was to stand on the bottom stair and point at them and ask me their names. Shauna. Dylan. The twins. Precious. Kacper. Little Amy, Big Amy. I tell him the names and nothing else, because the rest is theirs.

In the training they teach you a sentence: *I will care for this child as if he were my own, knowing that he is not.* They teach it to you the way you'd teach someone to carry a full pan of water across a room. Don't run. Don't look at the water. Look where you're going.

When Kinwell came in, the year I got Precious, the Agency sent a letter to every carer on its books. It said that under no circumstances could a foster carer be prescribed the patch, and that any carer found to have obtained it would be removed from the panel. The letter explained why. I read it at this same table and thought: well, they've met us, then. They've seen us in the car park after a handover, with the empty car seat.

I didn't love Cian when he came. I want that written down too, because people assume. He came in a babygro two sizes too small with a smell on him I won't describe, and he didn't cry. That was the worst of it. Fifteen months old and he had learned already that crying brought nobody, so he had stopped. He bit, and he ate until he was sick, and he hid food in the radiator, and he looked at me like a man in a bank looks at the clock. For a long time I fed him and washed him and sang to him and felt nothing at all, the same nothing Jodie said out loud in court, and I never told a soul.

It came the slow way. I couldn't tell you the day. It came out of nights and toast and the smell of the top of his head, out of the first time he cried properly, at nineteen months, over a dropped spoon, and I nearly cried myself from the relief of it. It came out of doing it. Two years, near

enough, before I would have said the word, and then I said it to him every night, at the door, the way you'd lock up.

So when Orla rang to say the court wanted Jodie on Kinwell and wanted the anchor hours supervised at mine, I said, "Of course," in my professional voice. And then I sat on the bottom stair in front of the nails for a good while.

3. How to use Kinwell. Apply one patch each morning to clean, dry skin on the upper arm, for 42 days. Each day, spend at least one hour in close physical contact with the anchor child (the anchor hour). It may take several weeks before you notice any effect.

For the first week nothing happened, except that Jodie learned where I keep the biscuits.

She came every day on the bus from Knocknaheeny, one change at the North Main Street, always early, always standing at the gate until the clock on her phone said four exactly. She brought him things she had obviously been told to bring: a book about a bear, a jigsaw with too many pieces. He ignored them. On day six he let her hold him on her lap for the whole hour while he watched a cartoon about diggers, and she sat as stiff as a lollipop lady, with her arms around him like they were somebody else's arms she had borrowed.

"Talk to him," Orla said, from the doorway.

"About what?"

"Anything."

Jodie looked at me. I was doing the washing up, which is where you put yourself in a supervised contact so that you can see without being seen to see.

“He likes his toast in squares,” I said. “Not triangles. Triangles are an insult. And he hums when he’s frightened, very low, so you’d think he was happy. He’s not. If he hums, put your hand flat on his back.”

She wrote it in her phone. *Squares. Humming = scared.* I watched her do it and something in me said: I needed two years to learn that, and you’ve just been given it in a sentence. And then I was ashamed, because what was I meant to do, keep it from her?

In the second week he started bringing her the bear book, and she read it to him in a flat careful voice, the way a person reads out a form.

In the third week it took.

You could see it. I had read every word of the leaflet by then, the way I read the leaflet of anything that comes into my house, and it says “several weeks”, and it doesn’t say what it looks like when it happens. What it looks like is this. On day nineteen, Cian fell asleep on her during the diggers, and Jodie put her nose into the top of his head, into his hair, and breathed in, and stayed there. She stayed there so long Orla looked up. When Jodie lifted her face it had gone a different shape, like somebody had let the air out of a tyre. Her eyes were wet and she looked furious about it.

“What’s that smell,” she said. “On him. What is that?”

“That’s just him,” I said.

“It’s not shampoo?”

“It’s just him.”

She put her nose back. Orla wrote something down. I dried the same plate for about five minutes.

That night, at a quarter to twelve, my phone went.

sorry its jodie. is he asleep

I went up and looked. He was asleep crossways in the bed with his feet on the wall, the way he sleeps, the bear book under his cheek.

Yes, I wrote. *Out for the count.*

ok. sorry. thanks. night

She texted every night after that. A quarter to twelve, twelve, ten past. *is he asleep. is he warm enough. did he eat the dinner.* I always answered. You'd want to know, I suppose, if you couldn't sleep until you knew.

I'll tell you what I felt, the first week of those texts, because I've promised myself I'll put it all down. I felt robbed. I had done it the long way, like a fool, with the biting and the radiator and the spoon, and here was a girl who had told a judge she felt nothing, and three weeks and a few patches later she was smelling his head in my kitchen like a mother in a painting. It wasn't her fault. It isn't anybody's fault what a medicine does. But I stood at the sink with my back to the two of them and I thought: so it's only chemistry, then. All of it. Mine too. I just made my own, slowly, at home, like soup.

4. Possible side effects. Like all medicines, Kinwell can cause side effects, although not everybody gets them. Very common (may affect more than 1 in 10 people): preoccupation with the anchor child's safety; difficulty sleeping when apart from the anchor child; increased awareness of hazards in the anchor child's surroundings. Kinwell may influence decisions concerning the anchor child. Discuss any major decision with your doctor.

By the fourth week Jodie was not sleeping. She came in with the skin under her eyes gone the colour of a bruised pear. She sat on my floor with Cian building a garage out of the jigsaw box, and she watched the plug sockets.

"Have you got covers on those?"

"He's four," I said. "He knows."

“Does he, though.”

She asked me what he was allergic to. Nothing. What he did if he got lost. He knows my number, he sings it. She made him sing it to her. He sang it to her, all ten digits, to the tune of the thing from the ad, and she wrote it in her phone under *Squares* and *Humming = scared*, and then she asked him to sing it again, and then she went into my downstairs toilet and stayed there for a while with the tap running.

The plan, the one the court had signed, was that after the forty two days Cian would start overnights at hers. Then weekends. Then home for good, by Christmas.

Her home was a flat on the fourth floor of a block in Knocknaheeny with a balcony and a lift that worked when it felt like it. I had never been inside, but I had been outside, on handover days, in the car. Shane lived there, her boyfriend, who was not a bad lad, everyone agreed, and who was not on anything, everyone agreed, and who had a friend with a dog.

I want to be careful how I put the next part.

I had read the leaflet. *Increased awareness of hazards*. And in the fourth week and the fifth, while she sat on my floor with her nose in his hair, I talked. I’m a talker anyway, everyone will tell you. I talked while I did the washing up, the way you do.

I told her about a boy I’d heard of, years back, who climbed a balcony rail on a fourth floor because he’d seen a cartoon man fly. I told her that Cian, at three, had stacked the kitchen chairs to get at the biscuits and I’d found him standing on the top one, humming. I told her that dogs that are fine with adults are not always fine with children who hide food in their pockets, and that Cian still hides food in his pockets, he’ll probably always hide food in his pockets, because of where he started. I told her about the lift in Precious’s mother’s block, which had stopped between floors for four hours once with Precious in it. I told her that the hardest thing for a kid like Cian is not the big thing, it’s when the

grown up in the house is sometimes there and sometimes not, because the not is where he learned to stop crying.

Every word of it was true. I'd like that written down somewhere, because I'm not sure it counts for anything.

I watched her take each thing and put it in her phone, under the toast and the humming. I watched her face go that shape again, the let-down tyre. I knew what the patch did with things like that. It said so on the paper in my drawer. I knew, and I kept talking, and I told myself I was only doing my job, which is to tell a parent what their child needs.

That was true too. That's the trouble with it.

On day forty one, the second last hour, she came in without the bear book and without a jigsaw. Orla was late, stuck on the Commons Road behind a lorry, so for twenty minutes it was only the three of us and the cat. Cian was at the table doing what he called writing, which was pages of tight small circles, very serious, with his tongue out.

Jodie sat across from him and watched him do it. Then she said to me, without turning, "Is this what it's like? All the time?"

I knew what she meant. I could have said, *What's what like?* I've said that to social workers for twenty years.

"Yes," I said.

"Even when they're asleep. Even when they're fine."

"Yes."

"Then how do you hand them back?" she said. "Twenty three of them. How do you do it?"

"Badly," I said. "In the car. You sit in the car."

She nodded, as if that was a fair answer. Cian finished a page of circles and gave it to her, and she said thank you and folded it twice and put

it in the pocket of the hoodie. Then she looked at me properly, for the first time in six weeks, I think.

“I’m going to tell Orla I want him to stay with you,” she said.

The kitchen was very quiet. I could hear the clock and the fridge and Mrs Doyle eating.

The first thing I felt, God forgive me, was joy. It came up through me like heat off a road. And right behind it, so close I couldn’t get between them, was the leaflet. *Kinwell may influence decisions concerning the anchor child.*

“Jodie, that’s the patch,” I said. “That’s not you. You’re not sleeping, you’re seeing danger in every socket. That’s in the paper, it’s a side effect. You can’t decide something like that on a side effect. Wait till you’re off it. Wait a month.”

I said all of that, and I meant it, and I said it a little too well, the way you say a thing you’ve rehearsed so you can say later that you said it.

“Off it,” said Jodie. “It doesn’t go off. Did you not read that bit? It doesn’t wear off. Eleven years they tested it, it never wore off.” She laughed, a small terrible laugh. “I’m stuck now. I’ll be like this when he’s thirty.”

“Then wait for the court. Talk to your solicitor. Talk to a doctor.”

“For the first time in my life I can see him,” she said. “Properly. Like you can. You can’t tell me not to look at what I’m seeing.”

Cian started another page. He was humming. Very low, so you’d think he was happy. Jodie heard it before I did. She reached across the table and put her hand flat on his back, and he leaned into it without looking up, and the humming stopped.

5. How to store Kinwell. Keep this medicine out of the sight and reach of children. Do not store above 25 °C. Do not use after the expiry date stated on the pack.

The hearing was in January, at the courthouse on Anglesea Street, in a room with a radiator that clanked like somebody tapping on a pipe to be let out.

The Agency's barrister did his job, which was to say that a decision taken under the influence of a prescribed neuroactive medicine could not be regarded as fully free, and that the court's own order had placed the mother in a state the manufacturer itself warned could affect her judgement. He was right. I sat in the second row in my good coat and agreed with every word.

Then the judge, the same judge, Judge Ní Bhriain, a small woman with reading glasses on a chain, took the glasses off and asked Jodie directly.

"Ms Walsh. The last time you were in front of me, I asked you what you felt when you held your son. Do you remember what you said?"

"I said nothing."

"And now?"

Jodie stood up. Nobody had told her to. She had the folded page of circles in her hand; I don't think she knew she had brought it.

"Now it's all I feel," she said. "That's why. You gave me the medicine so I'd love him. So I love him. I'm only doing what it's for."

"And if the medicine is choosing for you?"

"Then it's the first thing in me," Jodie said, "that ever put him before itself."

The judge put her glasses back on. She looked at the papers for a long time. She looked at me, once, over the top of them, and I have thought about that look since. Then she made the order: long term care with me, with a view to adoption, and contact for the mother every Saturday, and at any other time agreed between the parties, "which I expect," she said, "will be often."

In the car park Jodie was sick behind a wall. I held her hair. Orla stood a little way off and smoked, which she doesn't, and didn't look at us.

When Jodie straightened up, she wiped her mouth and said, "You'll do his toast in squares."

"I will."

"And the humming."

"I know about the humming, Jodie."

"I know you know," she said. "I'm saying it so I said it."

6. Contents of the pack and other information. Each pack contains 42 patches. In clinical studies, bonds formed during treatment showed no measurable decline over the follow-up period (up to eleven years). If you have any further questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

He is six now. The adoption went through in the spring of last year. He has my surname and his own first name and a middle name, Walsh, that he chose himself when the social worker explained he was allowed, because, he said, it's Jodie's and she'd like it.

Jodie comes on Saturdays and at other times agreed between the parties, which is often. She has a job in the bakery on Shandon Street, the early one, so she comes in the afternoons smelling of bread, and he climbs her like a tree. She has a different boyfriend, a quiet one, and a ground floor flat with a garden the size of a tablecloth. Some weekends Cian stays over. She sends me a photo every hour he is there without my asking, and I've never once told her she needn't.

She is still not sleeping well. She told me the doctor said it might be lifelong, and she laughed when she said it, the same small laugh. She is twenty six. She will love him, that one way, with that one smell in her head, when she's eighty, and he'll be living in another country, probably,

the way they do, and she'll still be awake at night wondering whether he's warm enough. That's what the court did to her, and the Agency, and the leaflet, and me. Mostly me, I think. I've stopped being sure which.

I have stopped thinking her love is the patch and mine is the real thing. I watched both come in. Hers came in six weeks through her arm and mine came in two years through the spoon and the radiator, and when he hums now we both put our hands out at the same time, and he doesn't care whose gets there first.

I never told her about the balcony. About why I told her about the balcony. I think about it on the bottom stair, under the nails, where there is no nail for him and never will be. I think she might know. I think she might have known that day in my kitchen with her hand on his back, and decided it didn't matter, because it was all true. She's cleverer than the courses gave her credit for.

Every night, at a quarter to twelve, give or take, my phone goes.

is he asleep

Some nights he is. Some nights he is under the duvet with a torch she gave him, reading the bear book he is far too old for, and I can see the light through the crack in the door.

I write *Yes* anyway. *Out for the count*. She's owed her sleep, the little she gets of it. It's the one side effect the leaflet doesn't list, and the only one I can do anything about, so I do it, every night, the slow way, like soup.

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