



# Smile and the world smiles with you



**He was born into darkness, but Claire's son knew the secret of how to light up everyone's lives...**

**S**troking my baby bump, my husband James smiled and murmured: 'I can't wait to meet you, little one.'

With every day that passed we grew more excited about the arrival of our first child. At 20 weeks, we went to hospital for a scan. As I lay back on the bed, the sonographer smeared cold gel over my belly and tried to locate the heartbeat. She stared intently at the screen. 'I'm a little concerned about your baby,' she said eventually. 'I'm going to send you to a specialist.'

I gripped James's hand anxiously. I already loved this child with every fibre of my body. After another scan and more tests, the consultant called us in. 'Your baby has a heart problem, which causes a shortage of oxygen in the blood,' he explained. My stomach flipped. 'Will our baby be OK?' I asked. 'Yes,' he smiled. 'We'll need to perform open-heart surgery but after that, hopefully your child will lead a normal life.'

It sounded terrifying but I

trusted that the doctors knew what they were doing. The rest of the pregnancy passed smoothly and in time I went into labour. Several hours in, I felt exhausted. I'd had contraction after contraction yet so far there was no sign of our baby. Suddenly I noticed the doctors huddled together, talking in hushed voices. I began to panic

— was something wrong? 'We're going to have to speed up delivery using forceps,' a doctor explained. 'The baby's heart rate is slowing.' I nodded, worried. After that, everything passed in a blur. I felt a tug and moments later I heard a shrill cry. It was the best sound in the world — and such a relief. 'It's a boy!' someone shouted. 'Is he OK?' I asked.

The midwife showed me our tiny son. He had a thick mop of brown hair and chubby cheeks. I gazed in awe at this tiny being that James and I had created. 'Hello, George,' I whispered, stroking his clenched fist. The name suited him perfectly. 'Are his eyes all right?' James asked suddenly. I peered more closely at our son. Now that he mentioned it, his eyes did look a bit unusual. They were sunken and his eyelids were tightly closed.

'Don't worry,' the midwife said. 'Newborn babies often wait a while before opening their eyes. It's his heart we need to focus on right now.' They took George away

My boy loves anything that makes a noise

for a check-up and I lay back in the bed, exhausted. Hours later a doctor came to see us — and his expression looked serious. 'The good news is George's heart appears to be working reasonably well for now, though he'll still need an operation in a few months,' he said. 'But I'm afraid there's some bad news too...'

**'I'm afraid there's some bad news'**

'What do you mean?' I stammered. 'Your son can't open his eyelids,' he said. 'It may be he has no eyes at all...' He carried on talking but his words were just swimming round my brain. I couldn't take in what he was saying. *No eyes? How could our baby have no eyes?* I started sobbing. James took my hand, his own eyes brimming with tears. I didn't understand. I'd never even heard of a baby being born



he said. There was nothing the doctors could do to repair his sight. He'd be blind for life. James and I were shell-shocked. We didn't know what the future held. Would people treat our son like some kind of freak? A week later, we were finally allowed to take George home.

At first it was exhausting. He wouldn't feed and I'd often spend whole days curled up on the sofa, coaxing him to take some milk. When he was just five weeks old, doctors fitted plastic expanders in his eye sockets to prevent the bones in his face from collapsing in on themselves.

He was so tiny and I hated him being operated on — but I knew it was for the best.

Three months later George went in for his heart surgery. It was terrifying, but yet again our brave boy pulled through. And afterwards he was like a different baby. His appetite improved and suddenly he was alert and responsive.

Then one day I was feeding him when his lips twitched — and he broke into a big grin. From then on, he couldn't stop smiling — at the sound of a familiar voice, when he was splashing in the bath, whenever he was tickled...

His happiness was infectious. You couldn't help but smile too. He also loved music. When he was tired he liked classical music and when he was feeling lively he loved cheesy pop tunes.

We'd put on his favourite song — *Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go* by Wham! And he'd bounce about, merrily shaking his head to the beat. We'd dance round the room with him in our arms while he

grinned with delight. He only had to smile and I'd find myself beaming along with him.

Unable to see toys, George liked anything that made a noise. He'd bang spoons and saucepans together and make his own music.

Before we knew it, our little boy was a year old and we were singing *Happy Birthday* to him. Even though his physical development was a little slower than other children's, he was very bright. At 18 months, assessments showed his verbal understanding was six months ahead of the average child.

Eventually he turned two. He was such an affectionate, happy little soul — so cheerful and friendly. And he loved showing off his repertoire of party tricks — making animal noises and tinkling on his toy piano. Eventually James and I were told George could have custom-made prosthetic eyes fitted. So although he'd never see, one day he might be able to open his eyelids.

Sometimes, when I took George to the park, I'd hear other mums say things such as: 'Look at that little boy with his eyes closed. He's asleep on the swing!' 'Actually,' I'd explain, 'he's wide awake but he's blind.'

When they looked at him with pity, I'd tell them he was the happiest person I knew.

Now James and I are still coming to terms with the fact that our son doesn't have eyes — but it's not the catastrophe we first thought it was.

We're just thankful to have a beautiful little boy with a fantastic personality that shines through every time he gives us one of his brilliant sunshine smiles.

**CLAIRE CROFT, 36, SIDCUP, KENT**

● Claire is donating her fee for this story to MACS — The Micro And Anophthalmic Children's Society. For more information visit: [macs.org.uk](http://macs.org.uk).

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