

The Cost of Love

by Marit Meredith

I was, so I was told, the product of much hard work and a lot of invasive procedures. Initially, I'm sure my parents were making love, but then came the slog, the repeated failed attempts at getting one of mother's millions of eggs fertilized. Those tadpoles just couldn't make it past some blockage or other. That's where the invasive procedures came in — and plastic pots (oh, and a top shelf magazine or two to make father produce the desired tadpoles) and Petri dishes — syringes and strangers in white coats.

The result was me. I was on my way.

If they had succeeded the first time, it wouldn't have been me. It would have been someone else — and not even a brother or sister — because I wouldn't have existed, so wouldn't have been a sibling. Sometimes I think that perhaps that would have been better, but deep inside I don't mean it. I've got a sizeable ego, despite everything. It's my defence against the world.

The labour was hard, my mother exhausted and I unexpectedly small. Still, I was the first-born - a son — and perfect. So I have been told, ad nauseam.

I was showered with love and whatever they could afford to give me. I played to the audience and wallowed in the attention, secure in the knowledge that it was all about me.

Then my world collapsed.

Maddy was born. I didn't want a sister. Everyone had eyes for her only, and I had to be quiet. 'Shh!' I think mother knew how I felt, but she always had one eye on the baby, even when it was my cuddle time.

Dad was away a lot, working, earning the money to pay for the privilege of having had me. Maddy cost nothing. Mother said she was a miracle.

For two years I plotted and schemed to make mischief, but it wasn't much fun by myself. If my sister was naughty it was just cute, but she was turning into a goody-two-shoes anyway.

Once, on a train journey to our grandparents, the train entered a long tunnel and everything went black. I loved it. My sister screamed. Mother didn't see me giving her a sharp kick under the fold-down table, but father said 'Oliver!' in a stern voice. Maddy, of course, got all mother's attention and kisses and cuddles. Perhaps if I had been a girl...

It got a bit better when Sammy moved in next door. 'Oh, good,' mother said. 'Ollie needs a friend.' My name is O-l-i-v-e-r. Anyway, Sammy wanted a sister, so I dressed up and pretended, too. I didn't want Maddy to play with us.

I should have been an only child, but when Henrietta came along, we were three. Maddy couldn't pronounce Henrietta, so she called her 'Etta'. She's Etta to this day, like Madeleine is Maddy. I'm neither Oliver or Ollie. It took a long time, but I suppose I was always a bit different.

These days I prefer to be called Olivia.

