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Motherwhelmed



ANNIKI SOMMERVILLE

Anniki Sommerville

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‘Hilarious. Makes me feel like I’m not the only one.’ Cherry Healey Funny and courageous fiction for fans of Dawn O’Porter and Gill Sims. ‘Had me rolling about laughing...I read this in one sitting it was that good’ Chellsandbooks Rebecca is 42, has a beautiful child and a wonderful husband. But she just hasn’t been feeling herself recently... Rebecca thinks a great night out should involve a packet of Marlboro’s, six double vodkas and snogging a colleague. Not gormlessly drinking a zero-alcohol No-hito while Instagramming a vegan chicken wing. Rebecca wants to ride on a Harley Davidson, to crowd surf till dawn, then collapse in a heap after swigging from a bottle of Jack Daniels... not sit in a soul-destroying meeting surrounded by 'blue sky thinking' and men half her age who interrupt all the time. She's had enough of commuting to an office that is so cold people have to wear blankets all day. And she can't help asking herself why her adorable daughter must spend all week in a containment zone for pre-schoolers. Rebecca wants to feel that there's MORE coming her way, rather than less... In short – Rebecca wants out. But where to?

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Rebecca is having a very bad
day / week / year*

*delete as appropriate

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MOTHERWHELMED
Anniki Sommerville



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Copyright

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Dedication

For Paul, Rae and Greta

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One

SOME SAY A SIGN that you're having a breakdown is when you stop sleeping properly. Or get heart palpitations for no reason. Or overreact to something quite minor. The problem is, all these things were quite commonplace in my life, and had been for some time.

From the outside things looked okay. I had a beautiful child and a great husband (okay, our relationship was hard work, but long-term relationships are no walk in the park). I had a job which paid well. I ate a nice lunch most days. I laughed once a week – sometimes these laughs were tinged with hysteria, but that was okay. I cried often but thought this was possibly related to tiredness or the perimenopause.

Besides, did anyone feel happy these days? If I thought of the people I worked with, I'd have described the majority as 'averagely content'. Others were clearly depressed. It was difficult to gauge. I sensed I wasn't the only one who woke up in the morning with a feeling of dread. It's horrible when you realise that the moment you clamber back into bed will be the best part of your day. It was work stress, yes ... but it was heavier. A sense of time running out, that I had fewer good years ahead than behind (this wasn't strictly true because I'd not really had many good years in the first place). Time was speeding past and I felt isolated. I'd fallen out of synch with the school friends that I'd seen every month during my twenties and thirties. They'd all had babies in their early thirties, and these kids were now entering secondary school. So when I had Bella they'd all moved beyond that small children stage. They were FREE and wanted to drink and re-invent themselves and PARTY! South London wasn't a million miles away from Acton but it felt like it. It was easier to keep a low-level buzz of connection via social media. I could 'like' the pictures but didn't have to listen to all the chat. They were embarking on new careers, getting divorced, or taking up marathon running. What was it with all the marathon running anyway?

And how exactly had I ended up moving from apathy and tiredness to a heart that thudded every morning when Bella screamed from her room because she needed a wee? Well work had been busy (it never wasn't busy). Work had become a *slog*, and all slog and no fun makes Rebecca a dull girl. And there was the rub. The moments of pleasure, the tiny positive increments that you needed to experience in life to keep going seemed to have disappeared without me even realizing it. The truth was those old friends had been important. There'd been a sense that we were steadily moving towards some common end point, some positive evolution was happening.

I had Kath. At least I had one true friend but it was weird how much my social circle had shrunk down to nearly nothing. She was my oldest friend and I'd known her since school days – one of the few I'd managed to keep in touch with.

It was weird because in reality, once Bella reached about three, I could feel life was getting easier. Nevertheless, it was as if the fug of the earlier, chaotic days was lifting to reveal a vast, empty terrain. With babies, it's easy to get lost in the sleeplessness, feeding, panic, angst and then discover that there isn't much else going on once the mess has cleared. If it wasn't the thudding in the morning, it was the booming noise in my ears in the middle of the night. The noise of my heart ready to explode. Then the thoughts would start up.

Does Bella's nursery teacher hate me?

Have I filed the right version of the loo roll presentation for Friday morning?

Why hasn't the client replied to my last email?

Where have all my tights disappeared to?

Why do I shout at Bella so much?

What is that lump on the back of the cat's head?

Why have I eaten so many potatoes these past few days?

How does everyone else get through each day without giving up?

The only thing I could do to quiet my brain was watch a couple of episodes of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. These beautiful, yet strangely cold, women lived in a universe where life looked busy yet relatively easy (and seemed devoid of emotion, each face rendered immobile by Botox). I am sure someone at Mango-Lab, the market research company I worked for, would offer up a cultural context as to why this reality TV soothed me but I'll just say that after watching an hour, I could usually go back to bed again.



'I don't want to go to nursery!' my daughter howled up the hallway from her bedroom. It was a Monday. 5 a.m. Up and down the country, children were shrieking at their parents, and telling them they didn't want to go to whatever childcare was lined up for that particular day. It always made me sad to see the drop offs, the weary stooped shoulders of the parents. The red rimmed eyes of the kids. In reality, nobody wanted to be thrust out of bed at some ungodly hour and sent somewhere they didn't want to be – whether it was a jaunty room full of toys and tissue paper collages or a grey tomb, populated with young people hunched over laptops, the room pumped with freezing cold air.

I reached for my phone and saw there were already fourteen emails in my inbox. The temptation to read them was too much. I tried to ignore Bella's cries for a few seconds longer.

MASSIVE PROPOSAL NEEDS TEAM – said the first. URGENT CLIENT QUOTE! IMMEDIATE ATTENTION REQUIRED – the second. CRAFT BEER CLIENT WANTS GROUPS TOMORROW EVENING IN SCUNTHORPE – the third.

The whole thing made me want to curl up into a ball. It would be a day of trying to bat these unpleasant demands away. It was like a depressing round of ping pong. The problem was there were only so many balls you could avoid. At least one would hit you between the eyes.

Also, since when had EVERYTHING been written in CAPITALS?

It no longer gave a sense of URGENCY to anything because it was used in all company communications these days.

The thing was it was hard to get everything done – having a successful career, a strong relationship, owning a home (well that was pretty much impossible), and having a family. And then on top of that, for me anyway, work had proven so stressful that it had kicked my reproductive prowess to the kerb for a good while.

The morning was a blur of soggy, uneaten cereal, then an alternative breakfast of boiled egg, which went uneaten. Leggings were put on and taken off.

'I don't want to wear tights,' Bella said as I hunched over her tiny frame trying to wiggle her legs in. It was a bit like trying to get an octopus to stay still.

'It's cold outside darling. You need to stay warm.'

'I want bare legs.'

'You can't have bare legs. It's cold.'

She grabbed a fistful of my hair and I felt a sudden rush of anger. Should I let her go to nursery with bare legs? Was this a battle worth having when there were CRAFT BEER GROUPS THAT NEEDED TO HAPPEN IN SCUNTHORPE ASAP? I took a deep breath. It was all about *breathing* this parenting thing. And not smacking (though I had actually smacked Bella once and beaten myself up for weeks afterwards). And trying to be much kinder than you felt in that moment. I breathed in and out whilst she looked up into my face, puzzled as to why my lips were pursed together.

'How about leggings instead?' I said.

Bella smiled and wrapped her arms around my head, squeezing so tight that I felt my teeth would come out. This was a moment of happiness. Right there. I was trying to get better at spotting

them but the moment you did, they flew off again. How could I bottle this emotion so it lasted the rest of the day?

Then a battle with a toothbrush and the blue toothpaste versus the orange one (one washed off and then the other put on the brush instead.) Then off to nursery and a kiss for Pete (we'd exchanged ten words that morning – chiefly about what we'd take out of the freezer for dinner that night). Then Bella was off on her scooter flying towards imminent death, and I was sprinting with my laptop in a rucksack on my back doing the tell-tale run of a parent, stooped stop-start run, walk, run, walk, shrieking – '*STOP BEFORE YOU GET TO THE ROAD!*' Then alternating this with checking my phone to see if there were any new emails I needed to ping a response to, and – '*STOP BEFORE YOU GET TO THE ROAD!*' And then more emails. Then some crying (Bella and I both).

On the train, I took out a small mirror and noticed with horror that another white hair had popped out on the bottom of my chin. These were becoming more common and soon I would resemble Rip Van Winkle. I licked my finger and tried to encourage the hair to lie flat but it wouldn't play ball. Aside from the beard, I was okay looking. The thing is strong features do you a service as you age as it gives structure to all that sagging skin. It's like a good scaffold. I also dyed my hair blonde every six weeks because whilst I knew grey was fashionable, I wasn't sure if it really was or whether people were just being PC and were too scared to say it looked terrible.

I checked my inbox and it seemed that many of the emergencies had been resolved aside from the craft beer one, and I had a sinking sense that this would be the ball that would hit me and stick. I arrived at the office, which was eight floors up in a lifeless glass building in Vauxhall, and sat down at the nearest free desk. There was a lot of bustle, and it was obvious that many people had been in for some time. Mango-Lab, had changed a lot since I'd started back in 2003. It had originally been a company of ten, and now employed over four hundred (we had global offices too). I had no clear idea who most of the people were. On bad days, it felt like a factory; people came in, got their laptops out, plugged their headphones in, and you didn't speak to them until they got up to leave (and then it was some trite comment about train delays or TV shows or dinner plans). During the day, you wanted to avoid making tea for everyone as you'd be stuck in the kitchen for thirty minutes sorting out the Lady Grey from the Jasmine Green and the builders with just a dash of milk etc.

I had the sense that people used to talk much more but this was now changing. When someone came up to your desk, the ideal outcome was to get them to shut up and go away. We emailed and texted one another as if none of us were in the same building.

Since returning from maternity leave, I worked three and a half days a week and whilst I'd like to tell you this arrangement worked just fine for me, it didn't. I constantly felt like I hadn't got a clue what was going on. There were new initiatives launched every two weeks. There was Monday Power Lunch (where an older person such as myself had to sit with a younger person and be told what was what). Wednesday Round-The-World Breakfast (self-explanatory – again the onus being on talking to one another and sharing our mutual passions for travel and eating diverse food types). Friday Fun Sessions – possibly the worst of all the initiatives as we were made to stay an hour longer and drink beer, when we (I) really wanted to get home after a long day spent collaborating, team-building and being generally enthusiastic. It takes more than a trolley laden with beer to shake off a week's resentments and bitter rivalries. These initiatives combined with the heavy workload made life exhausting. You were either answering emails or being forced to bond with colleagues, which afforded very little time to sit in the toilet crying (though I managed this at least once a week anyway).

Still, the company was doing well. Or it was difficult to tell as one week we were told it was good and then two weeks later that it was dicey. They were hiring more people which felt positive. All of them unfeasibly young and fresh. These new hires contributed to the feeling that I was no longer at the 'cut and thrust' of the market research world. There were only a few of us oldies left now, and the three or four favoured ones had their own offices with proper heating, so you only spotted their grey hair flouncing past atop their haggard faces when they walked to the shared toilets. The

thing is marketing is all about youth. Our job was to help clients sell stuff. People aren't convinced if you have a face like Bagpuss and are wearing unfashionable clothes. We sold stuff chiefly through talking to people in group situations and showing them bad ideas. Not all these ideas were bad but the majority were. In my youth, I'd thought I was helping bring good things to the wider population but when I reflected more deeply, it wasn't, of course, true.



Back when I'd started there had been more enthusiasm amongst the respondents who came to the focus groups – there was wine provided, the venues were nice and adverts were still seen as relatively entertaining. Now, all that had changed and people were savvy and resented just about everything about modern life.

Once you got people in a room, it became difficult to manage the conversation without it turning into a giant bun fight. Adverts were boring and manipulative. Products were full of salt and often faulty/dangerous. Marketing was to blame but then of course there were also parking tickets, rubbish collection, immigration, the declining NHS, school application processes, the rising cost of basic foods, pollution, the barren high streets ... the list went on. One minute you would be discussing a dry packet sauce and the next you'd segue into something far more significant. It made moderating the whole shebang very tiring and you needed your wits. The objective was to steer the conversation, and emerge with something that sounded like a palatable answer for the client.

I know you hate the new rubbish collection system on your street, but can you remember the idea I showed you ten minutes ago for a new toilet spray that activates itself whenever you lift the seat? How would you describe that idea in three words right now?'

'What's the best thing about this idea?'

'What's your favourite word on this concept?'

'Let's think of all the things we agree with, yes?'

The thing was the respondents were right. The world was full of plastic stuff that people didn't need. Happiness was not on the increase, in fact quite the opposite.

There had also been a time when I'd thrown myself into the travel that came with the job. I'd been to New York, San Francisco, Paris and Milan. The thing was it was lonely. You arrived at a hotel, checked in, went to a small, dark viewing facility, and listened to someone talking to a bunch of people about an idea that nobody liked.

The typical days back then went something like this:

5.30 a.m. – fly to Munich to research a new mustard sauce proposition

9.45 a.m. – arrive at hotel and schlep massive bag full of new mustard sauce packaging up in the lift, lie down on bed for half hour, look out of the window and then leave

10.45 a.m. – 6 p.m. – spend entire day at the viewing facility preparing for groups, looking through stimulus, reading documents that keep being changed by the client every two minutes

6 p.m. – clients arrive and change everything that you've been working on all day

8 p.m. – 10.30 p.m. – German colleague moderates groups, clients talk German so you can't understand anything that's being said. They also hate you on sight because you're too young/blonde/British/tired/depressed. Sit behind a mirror manically typing up everything the simultaneous translator is saying, then try to make sense in terms of which of the dreadful ideas is the least negative. Tell client your thoughts whilst he/she looks at you with disdain. Leave for hotel and feel sad, wishing you were a pop star, novelist, playwright etc.

11 p.m. – 1 a.m. – order room service, send emails and start to get grumpy emails back from the clients who are unhappy because the people you spoke to were wrong and they are going to ignore everything you suggest anyway. Watch infomercials for strange vegetable slicing machines and

exercise contraptions whilst brain ceaselessly whirrs around and around and you worry about whether you're going to sleep through your alarm and miss your dawn flight home again

Okay maybe there'd been a couple of trips that had been fun. New York, for example. And you got some time in the day to walk around the city. It wasn't all bad or if it was, why was I still here?

The last five years I'd stopped travelling – it made me too anxious. I was glad when I only had to get a train to Manchester or Leeds and if I was lucky, I could return the same night and sleep in my own bed.

Then Phoebe became my boss and things changed. The mood changed. It felt like things were even more accelerated. There was rarely time to sit down and eat lunch, and sandwiches were shoved down your neck whilst typing with one hand. It became permissible to take client calls in the loo whilst urinating. There was no down time or if there was you were called into a brainstorm.

Phoebe walked past as I was writing notes in my book. Writing notes was a good way of looking busy and avoiding her attention.

'MORNING REBECCA!' she boomed. 'TRAIN TROUBLE AGAIN?'

I was glad that everyone was wearing headphones and couldn't hear her.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I was on a client call and had to miss the first train so I could finish the conversation.'

'A client conversation with whom?' she said walking backwards towards my desk, and looking down at my notes which so far said: must get a scented candle for Pete's mum's birthday and pick up coat from dry cleaners.

'Um it was that cleaning wax enquiry. Remember? The one from a few months ago?'

She raised an eyebrow and clearly didn't believe me.

'Well send the brief over so I can have a quick look before you make a start,' she said dismissively and walked off.

She didn't walk. She STRODE. She was Sheryl Sandberg (the famous female head honcho at Facebook), to the power of ten. Later I would need to invent a reason as to why the brief hadn't arrived. I would drop her an email, and say that some other agency had got it instead.

The other problem I had with work was the fact that there seemed to be resentment coming from the younger generation. The previous Thursday during one of our 'Share & Care Hours' (you had to take a colleague you didn't know out for coffee), a young man had informed me that Gen X were to blame for everything that was wrong with our country – the flagging economy, corporate greed and corruption, not enough cheap, good quality housing in urban areas. He listed everything about my generation that he despised, whilst I quietly drank my coffee and reassured him that I wasn't personally responsible and weren't these coffee brainstorms supposed to be uplifting for us both?

There was a part of me that felt that there was some jealousy perhaps – we'd had fun, it was true (the travel had felt exciting for a while) and we'd been hedonistic (yes, me definitely, from what I could remember) and raved and all that, and now this generation were spending their youth taking photos of their food. The only office banter seemed to involve food or food-related activities.

There was a new Korean street food shop opening.

There was a place that sold seaweed soaked in gin.

There was a stall selling kimchi that had been aged for four years straight.

I loved eating as much as the next person, but where were the wild nights spent getting off with strangers? Or losing footwear whilst moshing at the front of a gig? Food was for old people who couldn't dance anymore. My generation had eaten chips and didn't worry about their 'carb-load'. We didn't find food sexy. We avoided it and spent our money elsewhere – fags and booze, mainly. Every time I went into the kitchen I braced myself for a lecture on the best coffee beans to buy (Jamaican, £12.99 a bag) and why I couldn't continue using Nescafé.

About seven years in, I'd started getting the itch to leave Mango-Lab. I had a few different ideas but none of them had much of a commercial angle. These included:

A Rock and Roll café, selling cupcakes inspired by seventies rock legends; a risotto takeaway business, with hot risotto delivered to your desk, 'Risotto to Go for the Days When Risotto is too Slow'; a vintage brooch dealership, this was very niche but at the time I lived in Ladbroke Grove, and admired Portobello market. I wanted to be one of those cool, bohemian women in long fur coats who sold knick-knacks and nattered to one another all day. That was the thing with cool jobs. They were often poorly paid. Though some would claim my job was cool too, I guess.

Whilst it wasn't as bad as some industries, marketing could still be a relatively sexist industry. If you were a woman, it made sense not to put your neck out or say anything too controversial. If you were a man you had to do the opposite. Early on in my career there'd been a male colleague (long gone now – he'd been head-hunted to work in advertising), who constantly scratched his balls whilst waiting by the printer. After scratching for a couple of minutes, he'd then lift his palm and sniff. It was a low-down, dog-like behaviour, but nobody said anything as he was seen to be a 'creative genius' and said '*fuck*' a lot in boring meetings, which created a lot of excitement. I knew early on that this tactic wouldn't work for me.

A woman scratching herself and swearing wasn't the done thing. It seemed like men had more leeway to be themselves. Swearing became a bit of a trend. The ball scratching didn't take off but instead there was lots of expansive body language that the men used to take up as much space as possible. The women who did well were of two ilk; pretty and hard-working to the point of nervous breakdown, or un-feeling and robotic. I had built my career on being sort of okay-looking (blonde, blue eyes, enormous arse), and saying '*that's interesting*' a lot. I made very high quality cups of tea.

I listened to boring men and told them they were right just so they'd shut up. I sometimes imagined what size penises they had. Other times I drew pictures of penises on my writing pad as they spoke. It was a small form of rebellion. It was a counterpoint to being so nice and not itching my fanny by the printer. Phoebe was different of course, because she had the stamina of a horse, and didn't buy into the whole people-pleasing thing.

If people were thirsty in a meeting then their mouths could remain dry and their spittle stuck in the corners. If a man swore then she mirrored this language right back to him. She was the only woman I knew who could actually play golf (and enjoyed it). She was old school in that way and had gotten into it to infiltrate the old boys' network (most male clients still loved golf). She also did long distance running. If I ever worked late (this was rare), I'd catch her running past with her laptop jiggling up and down in her rucksack, wearing a neon T-shirt that said '*LET'S DO THIS.*'

Overall at Mango-Lab, even if you set the sexism to one side, the priority was 'high-quality strategic thinking', which basically meant well-written decks on Pot Noodles, fizzy drinks and eye creams, peppering these presentations pulled together on PowerPoint, which we called 'decks', with one or two words that the client didn't understand, so they came away with the feeling that you were cleverer than them and they were lucky to have listened to you for well over an hour.

Phoebe and I were the same age, but she came across as far more put together.

I really wasn't happy this particular Monday. That wasn't unusual.

I had a creeping sense of unease. I had become a ball of the stuff.

Two

A FEW HOURS HAD passed and I was trying to write the final presentation for a project I'd just finished.

The client wanted to launch a wipe that cleaned a baby's bottom and also made them fall asleep. The name of the product was 'Goodnight Bum' and there was some mocked-up packaging and a potential scent idea (Lavender and Tea Tree oil). It was ambitious but had legs, or at least that was my argument. You see parents will always seek out *anything* that promises sleep, and nowadays we all believe there's a product that can fix anything. I'd interviewed twelve groups of mums in focus groups. They all reacted the same way. At first, they'd found the idea appalling (they were worried about the cleaning/sleeping benefit – was there some secret/toxic ingredient?) but I needed to come up with a positive slant for this presentation. Clients don't like to be told that their idea is shit. It's just like when a child holds up their drawing for approval. You try and be diplomatic and find something you *do* like – *You've drawn a cat with eight legs. How lovely! It's a spider cat. Don't cry, love. It's brilliant!*

'The 'Goodnight Bum' proposition is both challenging and disruptive,' I typed into PowerPoint.

I sipped my coffee. I didn't have my headphones on, but there was complete silence in the office. I often wondered why we didn't all work from home. It would save a lot of money and wasted travel time. At least the quiet afforded me some thinking space.

'The challenge for 'Goodnight Bum' is to find a sweet spot between calming and cleansing.'

My phone buzzed with an incoming text. *'Bella has sustained a small head injury whilst hanging off the climbing frame but we applied a cold compress and she seems to be in good health,'* it said.

I felt a surge of panic. Nursery had been sending texts for some time now. I still felt it was more appropriate to *speak* to the parent, but then I also acknowledged that speaking was becoming far less common because it was so time-consuming. I resisted the urge to Google 'minor head injuries in small children,' and tried to focus. Bella was that kind of child. She was boisterous and outgoing. She loved to try new things. Hopefully she'd never experience the *slog* and sheer *averageness* of my own life. She was in good health. All was well.

Back to the presentation and the phrase 'sweet spot' was a good one. I used it a fair amount. It made me think of 'G-spot' and was just as mythical – it was where the truth lay, where an idea suddenly sprang into life and resonated, where it made people *orgasm*. In life, I'd failed to find this blissful truth for myself. For now, I could hear the boy next to me playing MC Hammer through his headphones. It brought back memories of a night in South London in my youth when I'd snogged a boy called Freddie. Freddie had been a very good dancer but a terrible kisser. I'd gone out with him for four months before finally realizing the truth. I wondered whether this music had come back into fashion, or was it part and parcel of this irony thing, where anything shit was cool? What was Freddie doing these days? Had someone taught him to snog properly?

Was he working on a 'disruptive proposition to send a baby to sleep whilst you cleansed its bottom?'

'Bella is still in good health,' a new text buzzed.

'Thanks for the update,' I replied.

'Log onto our portal for updates on our menus this week,' the next text said.

Was this a real person?

And would they text me when they took her to A&E? Or when she was in intensive care? I needed to call them to check she really was okay but that would mean staying an extra half an hour, and missing bedtime. Bedtime was the key objective – if I could get home by bedtime then my life wasn't completely messed up.

I tried to get back to work again.

'The idea is overwhelmingly negative,' I typed as this was closer to the truth, but this sounded, well, rather awful. *'The idea works on some levels,'* I concluded.

I looked up and the MC Hammer fanboy was wearing a baseball cap with the word 'TWAT' emblazoned across the front. He looked up for a second and then back at his screen. Many of these young folks thought I was an elderly person hired by the company to help with our diversity initiative. He had no idea that back in the day I'd been a hot shot. No, that wasn't true. I'd never been a hot shot. I wasn't strategic enough and I worked hard but not so hard that I ended up in hospital with nervous exhaustion.

A proper sissy pants, me. Besides not all of us can be Phoebe-Sheryl Sandberg-BIG-BOSS-PANTS. Not all of us want to be her right?



I checked my emails, and there was yet another one from Mum complaining that Dad was being anti-social. I didn't know why she was surprised by my father's tendencies to lock himself away – they'd been together for forty-five years now.

Your dad refuses to try line dancing with me. He says he's too busy but it's pretty obvious that he's just hiding away. I never thought my life would be so lonely.

Mum was prone to being dramatic. I could empathise as I could clearly see that there was very little to recommend getting old (unless you were rich and old). They lived in a different part of London, I rarely saw them. It took me two and a bit hours to travel from Acton to Beckenham where I'd grown up. It was quicker to take the Eurostar to Paris. Dad was usually tinkering in his shed with his model railway. He'd retired five years ago and had a history of depression. Maybe it wasn't depression but was just low mood. He'd set the railway up so it ran around the garden. Mum was a social animal and needed to be around people. Dad was happiest when he could spend uninterrupted periods alone. Mum was constantly experimenting with a range of different evening classes, from watercolour through to Mandarin. They were relatively healthy but each time I spoke to either of them there seemed to be the arrival of another ailment. It was hard to see how there could be much of a silver lining.

Both my parents had always instilled how important it was to work, to have a dependable income, to have financial stability. Sometimes I wished they hadn't.

And I went for a walk this morning and another big, frightening dog attacked Puddles. He's shaking with fear whilst I type this. I am at my wit's end.

Love Mum

Mum was often at her 'wit's end' and Puddles was my parent's Yorkshire terrier. Puddles was an unhappy dog that shook when he went for a stroll (or more accurately a 'shake'), shook when he took a dump, and shook when you offered him a treat. He was constantly being attacked by mean dogs and lacked confidence (something we had in common perhaps?). I made a mental note to ring Dad. We usually talked about the weather at great length and then I'd ask him how he was *really* and he'd say he had a cold (which meant his depression was mild) or the flu (which meant it was pretty bad) or a stomach bug (which translated to needing more antidepressants). We never used the word depression and yet this time I was worried about his reclusiveness. At the same time, I envied the fact that he could avoid people for long periods of time with nothing but Classic FM blaring out of the old ghetto blaster that had resided in my teenage bedroom. He didn't have to get crammed onto a train or listen to sad men swearing in meetings and he could amuse himself fixing little carriages together with glue and drinking tea (he even had a kettle in there so Mum had enabled him to be more of a recluse). He'd spent his working life in academia and this was how academics were. They pootled and liked quiet. This behaviour was not out of the ordinary.

Lunchtime arrived, and like every other work day I walked listlessly round the local boutiques trying to dispatch the sad feeling that lived inside me. It was cold and windy, so I bought a bobble hat. A scented candle. A new pair of gloves. None of these items were satisfying, and I went back to the canteen upstairs, bought my protein and salad lunch, and hunched over my phone, trying to see what was going on in the world of Instagram. It seemed that everyone else was doing far more interesting things than I was. There were a lot of motivational quotes about how today was the day where my life would finally take off. Others were preaching the benefits of feeling good about our bodies (which felt rather obvious, I thought, but these posts always proved popular). I spent ten minutes trying to think of something witty to fling into the mix, and then gave up. I called Pete instead. He worked at a catering company that provided posh lunches for corporate clients. He hated it but was good and rarely moaned. He accepted that part of life was doing a job you disliked. We were both very different in that regard.

'What's up?' he said picking up after the first ring.

'Not much. I just had lunch. Are you having a good day?' I asked. *'The nursery texted and said Bella fell off the climbing frame again.'*

'Is she okay?'

'I think so. No she's definitely okay or they would have sent another one. How's work?'

'Bit of a pain. There's a massive order in for a conference tomorrow. I've been on my feet all morning but I'm going to buy some tinned tomatoes on my way home and make a nice prawn pasta for dinner.'

'Did you take the prawns out of the freezer?'

'I think so.'

'If you didn't take them out then we can't have prawn pasta can we?'

'If they haven't thawed I'll do that sausage pasta thing Bella likes.'

'I don't think the sausages are still okay,' I said.

'I'll check when I get in,' he replied.

There were a lot of conversations about freezing and defrosting these days. I wondered if all couples were the same.

Yet I knew I was lucky to have Pete. He made delicious food. He still took pride in his appearance and hadn't lost his teeth and hair. He did more on the domestic front than many other men – in fact some weekend mornings, it was a race to see who could get the washing in the machine first. There was sometimes a tinge of passive-aggressiveness to it. We had sex every two months but there were also long periods where we didn't do it all and watched TV. Yes I needed to practice more gratitude. The problem was it was hard work, this long-term relationship stuff. The practicalities of life took over and you were left with two people exchanging functional information on how to get from A to B. A bit like when you ask someone directions and then don't listen and walk the way you originally intended anyway.

An image of Pete popped into my mind. The night we'd first met in a bar in Ladbroke Grove. It had been back in the days before mobiles, before screens, when people looked at each other a lot more (I'd heard from younger colleagues at work that this rarely happened much anymore). I'd had quite a lot of beer to drink (back when beer was trendy for girls to drink), and a friend had introduced me. He was tall, had a mop of dark hair, and an Irish accent.

'He's bad news,' my friend had said. *'He just goes from one girl to the next.'*

I was a woman that loved a challenge and I treated getting Pete like a project.

We'd spent that first night kissing in the corner. We kissed a lot. I tried not to think about it now because it felt like two different people. It had been. Two people without a kid, without the stress of paying a mortgage and bills each month, without all the domestic hum drum that took over, without acres of TV to get through each day.

Just two people that really liked one other.

In the beginning our relationship had been exciting. Like all couples, who fancy each other, we'd taken every opportunity to have sex. We'd had sex in a park, in a toilet, in my old bedroom when I took him to meet my parents (my parents weren't there for the sex part). Pete had never been a massive talker and had grown up in a family where his mum talked enough for the entire family – the rest of the family nodded or shook their heads. Nevertheless we had that initial phase of getting to know each other, sharing key childhood experiences, music we loved – all that stuff.



Then, like many couples who have been together a long time, we stopped asking those questions. Pete often said things like *'You told me that story already,'* or *'I know how this one ends.'* And it was true, there wasn't much original content. And he hated my work chat. Initially I'd come back full of venom and stories about my day, I'd download them the split-second I came through the door. I had that need to get it all off my chest. Pete was oftentimes looking to provide a basic solution to these problems, so he'd say things like, *tell him to bugger off,* or *just don't do that project if it isn't in your job description.* This was fine, but what he didn't understand was that I didn't want a solution. I JUST WANTED HIM TO LISTEN. And sympathise. Like a friend would.

'You can't have conversations with your partner like you do with your mates,' Kath said.

But this left me wondering what you could do with your partner if conversations and sex were often off the agenda.

What did that leave?

And so I stopped telling him these work stories. I stopped telling him the old stories (he'd heard them all). I stopped telling him. It made me sad but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do about it. It didn't feel like something that dinner in a nice restaurant would fix.

On top of this we'd been through three miscarriages after Bella. Miscarriages can bring you closer together but they'd seemed to push us further apart instead. We wanted to stay together.

But life was tiring and we didn't have energy to put into it anymore.

After lunch, I went back to the silent, air-conditioned tomb. The air con had been turned up so high that several of my colleagues were wearing thick blankets wrapped around their shoulders. It made the whole place feel a bit desperate – like we were in some sort of disaster zone, just trying to hold our shit together until somebody rescued us. I shoved my headphones on, and spent twenty minutes trying to construct a Spotify playlist that would encourage me to run more often.

Phoebe came back into my field of vision. She mouthed the words, *WHERE'S THAT BRIEF?* at me and I made a sort of shrugged shoulder, not sure where, gesture and she was off again. It was obvious that there was a need for more briefs today. We were very busy but not busy enough.

I whacked some KRS-One on. An old P. Diddy track. The minute those beats started I felt more energetic. Hip-hop made me feel like I could conquer the world. Hip-hop artists never struggled with their careers or worried that they'd spent too much on a bobble hat and would need to return it. I love hip-hop (classics from the 90s). This stemmed back to my childhood growing up in Beckenham – basically you either liked hip-hop or dance music and I tended to be more of a hip-hop gal. It seemed as if those lyrics were written for a white, middle-class girl dealing with boys who thought I was too tall and boyish for them and friendship dynamics which changed every two minutes. Now if you clocked me in my Boden skirt, grey roots just starting to show through, you'd think I was listening to Coldplay or some such dross but I retained my tiny sliver of youthful abandon through listening to LL Cool J, DMX, Dr Dre and Wu-Tang Clan.

There was something about hip-hop that was remarkably confidence boosting.

Like many females, I didn't over-index on confidence and was drawn to people who did. LL Cool J never woke in the morning with imposter syndrome. He didn't have to read positive

affirmations to know what he stood for or what he wanted to accomplish that day. It's was awe-inspiring. One day I would launch a magazine and it would give advice from rappers to middle aged women. It would be called *Dope Housewives*, and would blow *Good Housekeeping* out of the water. Who wanted to look at Judith Chalmers in a floral jumpsuit or read articles about body brushing when you could read 'Snoop Dog's 10 Tips for a Hot Damn Sex Life?'. It was accepted that your tastes became more conservative, the older you became but why did this have to be so?

Eventually, I came back to the slides I needed to finish off. Some of the presentation seemed to be rather repetitive, but I could always hide those slides, or delete them once I'd finished.

I couldn't help myself and checked Instagram first, scrolling through another fifty images of women who were apparently 'killing it', 'nailing it', 'embracing the day,' and the like. I wrote another slide. Then went back on social media. I kept this not-very-virtuous-circle going for the rest of the afternoon.

'The synergy between cleaning and sleeping doesn't feel optimum for a bum product offering.'

'Today's the first day of the rest of your life.'

'A core barrier is the fear of toxicity next to baby's private parts.'

'The only thing to fear is fear itself.'

'The optimized proposition needs to reassure on naturalness as some respondents feared rashes and reactions due to strong offensive odour of product.'

I was increasingly feeling like I was just arranging words in different configurations, and they made very little sense. I took a few screengrabs from various baby websites and stuck smiling faces all over the deck. That jollied it up somewhat and made it feel a bit more accessible. At around three p.m. it was time for a team meeting. Darren was my team leader – I'd hired him just before going on maternity leave and he was now my line manager. It wasn't uncommon of course. Having a baby was not a good idea and your career rarely survived – unless when you came back you worked ten times as hard and denied the baby's existence. It was a thorny issue and one that showed no signs of going away.

'So, are we all SMASHING it today?' Darren said as the four of us settled around the table.

There was something about him that gave me a visceral response – a queasy feeling. He was a strange hybrid of 'macho surfer' and 'steely banker'. It was a horrid combination.

'We are smashing it today,' I said under my breath but this was far from the truth.

I'd only had one brief in two weeks, and had been finishing up this debrief for three days now (when usually I should have moved onto a new project already). On the table there was a young female intern who seemed about fourteen, then a lovely girl called Sam who had joined Mango-Lab after her gap year in Belize rescuing turtles, and the guy with the TWAT cap who I'd seen around the office, but who had only just been put on Darren's team. Then me – the Grandma of hip-hop.

'Let's each take a turn and say the one thing we're proud of achieving today.' Darren said.

Darren had whitened his teeth, and smiled a lot to make sure to get his money's worth. In my last appraisal, he'd told me to study the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He'd learnt all his 'tricks and strategies' from it, he said. I needed to be more *like him* if I wanted to win in business. The thing was, I wasn't sure Mango-Lab wanted a forty-two-year-old surfer chick who slapped people on the back without warning ... but he was right that I needed to be more enthusiastic – my enthusiasm levels were not great. He also told me that my business-winning target had tripled. He delivered this news with a grin, and then slapped the table to signal our one-on-one had finished.

'Great dude! Do you want to high five?'

I just glared at him. I clearly didn't want to do that at all. It had taken me forty minutes to fill in one line on the review form which was all in Excel – I found it impossible to use at the best of times. I had the sense that Darren was trying to catch me out and make my life as difficult as possible. I didn't like the cut of his jib. Even by Mango-Lab's standards he was a viper. If I'd been Phoebe, I would have taken his advice on the chin and *manned up*. Instead I went into the toilet and cried, and

then went to Pret and bought myself a cheese and ham croissant. I rang Mum and vowed to escape this terrible job as soon as possible. I understood we needed to bring business in but they needed to be practical about just how much a part-time mum could bring in on her own with little support.

'You'll never achieve this huge figure Rebecca,' Darren had said in one of our more recent catch-ups. *'You won't even come close but let's set the bar REAL high? Let's see where that tide takes you.'*

He'd grinned, flashing those ghastly gnashers. He delivered bad news whilst smiling like Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining*. This might have come from his self-help book but it didn't work for me. Many were terrified of him.

'I worked until three a.m. on a debrief last night.'

'I typed the whole thing whilst cycling on my bicycle.'

'My Fitbit says I got one hour of sleep but I just had a twenty-minute cat nap so my metabolism is back on form.'

'I missed my daughter's birthday because I was winning this new project from Ribena and so she didn't mind.'

'I've worked out that if I nap for ten minutes at three p.m. I can keep working till ten and feel fine.'

These were typical Darren statements. People who are workaholics smell bad. This was something I'd noticed about him from day one. His body was slowly decomposing as he became a man/robot hybrid. When he sweated it smelt like someone had died. The human elements were rapidly being broken down. He often appeared from nowhere and was suddenly right behind you like he was floating around. His legs replaced by wheels because legs were useless and didn't transport you from one laptop to the next in quick enough time. Meanwhile in that same appraisal meeting, Phoebe had sat in the corner and taken notes the whole time he was speaking – *'This loser will probably last no more than six months,'* or something close. Maybe she drew penises in the margins too. And I tried to do these things – to be more enthusiastic, more dynamic, but it felt as if I was sinking.

They knew this of course and I felt like this was part of the plan.

We were back in the meeting. Darren was using the corner of a piece of paper to pick something out of his teeth.

'I'm proud that I took good notes during the banking groups and learnt some super interesting insights about people and their favourite financial services apps,' the intern said cheerily.

She was very pretty but would soon be very tired. I often witnessed their pink, healthy cheeks become hangdog and pale as the long hours drained the life force from them.

'Great work,' Darren said tapping his pen noisily on the table. *'Banking is one of my favourite categories. Well done Sasha.'*

'It's not Sasha,' she replied.

'Whatever ... next dude!'

'I'm proud that I've identified a new paradigm shift in the pet food market,' said the TWAT.

I drew a little penis in the margin.

'I'm constantly surprised by the pet food category,' Darren said. *'Such rich behavioural data when you compare dry versus wet. There's definitely a breakfast innovation session in there somewhere if you'd be interested in writing it.'*

TWAT nodded and then glanced at my pad. I worried that perhaps he'd noticed my penis drawing, so I quickly drew some branches coming out of the bell-end so it looked more like a blossoming tree.

'And what are YOU proud of this week, Rebecca?' Darren asked.

I could always sense sarcasm in his voice. I had violent fantasies which ended with me punching him in the face. I knew these feelings were irrational, but Darren had come to represent my failure and lack of popularity. I stared back at him, and thought about how I'd need to bandage up my hands properly to get a good punch in. How I'd never punched anyone before but this first punch would be very powerful. How his teeth would shatter one by one, like in a cartoon, and then fall to the floor.

How I would perhaps pick these teeth up and keep them as mementos. How I would leave the office with them in my pocket and then make a bestselling rap album where I dissed Darren in every song. Then I stopped and felt a wave of panic. It wasn't Darren's fault that I was becoming less relevant. Or that I only had two clients commissioning business. Or that I didn't share his boundless enthusiasm for dog kibble.

'I feel like I've finally had a breakthrough on this baby wipe presentation.' I said, which was not true but no one was going to read it apart from the client. Darren flashed me his *winning business smile*.

'Well there's a surprise. You're being AWESOME. Well done dude.'

'Rebecca, I'd love to run some ideas past you about the pet food market,' TWAT said.

'That's a great idea,' Darren said. *'Rebecca, remember we said you needed to collaborate more with the semiotics and cultural insights team moving forward? It would be great if you two could hit those waves REAL hard if you know what I mean?'*

Darren had managed to make this sound rather perky. That was another thing he specialized in – innuendo. I scribbled over the penis tree on my pad and nodded. I didn't like this TWAT but would play the game. If it helped me appear more dynamic and *with it* then so be it.

I went back to my desk. The meeting had felt a bit staged. Had the TWAT and Darren agreed ahead of time that we would collaborate? Who was this boy? A spy? A flash drive in a baseball cap? I continued writing slides and checking Instagram as before, but I suddenly felt like my head was detaching from itself, and travelling up to the ceiling. *Had the nursery texted but I'd accidentally lost the text? Was Bella really okay? Were the prawns defrosted or not? What about the sausages? And the non-existent brief? I'd lied about that and Phoebe would soon uncover the lie.* Once it reached the ceiling my head stayed resting on the plastic tiles, and softly bounced around looking down on everyone; the young people in their blankets; the green smoothies in massive plastic bottles; the headphones; the grey carpet; the photocopier which was always broken and required a complicated access code; the herbal teabag stuck to the floor. I'd done a pill or ten in my youth and the whole sensation would have been pleasant if I'd been in a nightclub back in the noughties, but here under the florescent lighting, with the tinny echo from headphones and relentless air con being blown down our necks, this was not pleasant at all. I had to hold onto the desk to stop myself from falling out of my chair. Was this a stroke?

I got up and half walked, half staggered to the kitchen. No one looked up from their laptop. It wasn't unusual. We were all alone with our emails and anxiety. Once inside the kitchen, I stared at the cupboard and repeated the instructions stuck to the door. *Dispose of ALL teabags in the bin provided. The fridge will be cleaned every Friday and all EDIBLES will be disposed of PROMPTLY.* My head was still not attached to my body. It was somewhere outside seeking a blanket. I wondered whether I was dying. I tried to normalize my breathing. I rested my head against the cupboard. *I am okay. I am okay. I am okay.* I repeated. Then I turned around and the TWAT was right next to me.

'Are you feeling alright?' he said not unkindly. *'I read one of your blog articles and you'd written about the unique connection between cats and their owners and I wanted to try and tap into some of that for this proposal I'm writing.'*

'Yes,' I said weakly, could he not see I was dying right now? *'I will check my diary and be in touch.'*

I turned back to face the cupboard.

'I hate the instructions, everywhere don't you?' he said. *'Do you want a cup of tea or are you just chilling in here?'*

My head has come off and is floating somewhere next to the bookcase thanks.

'Chilling,' I said.

Now please leave me be. I really didn't want him to notice my hands shaking as I took the coffee out of the cupboard and deposited a spoonful into my cup.

Back at my desk I wrote an email to Phoebe and copied in Darren, explaining that I needed to go home as I felt like I was coming down with something bad. Before leaving I sat in the toilet and tried to compose myself for the journey home. It was frightening to feel so out of control. Was this a panic attack? A breakdown? Or was I about to drop dead?

'We used to have Molton Brown soap and now they're getting it from Tesco,' I heard a girl outside the cubicle saying, *'Do you think there will be redundancies soon?'*

I recognized the voice as one of the admin team.

'Phoebe's just won that big frozen food account,' another voice said – it sounded like the receptionist – *'It's massive. Phoebe is pretty amazing really.'*

'Phoebe is incredible.'

'I heard she only took one week for her maternity leave.'

'I heard she had no pain relief during labour.'

'She did a climb up Kilimanjaro a month later.'

'I heard her husband is very good-looking.'

'Their kitchen is huge – I saw a picture on Facebook.'

'She has lots of dinner parties and I heard that Piers Morgan came to one.'

'Well maybe we'll get Aesop in the toilets again.'

'I hope you're right.'

On the train, I stared out the window. I felt like you do at the end of a hangover. The feeling you get at roughly 3 p.m. My head was back on my body but my head was aching. I felt flat. I looked down at my phone and saw an email labelled URGENT.

Re: FISH FINGER INNOVATION OPPORTUNITY

Hey Rebecca,

I have some great news on a new fish finger proposition that the client wants to research next month. It's an exciting challenge. It fits perfectly with the goals and objectives we drew up with Darren at your last appraisal.

Hope you're feeling better already.

Phoebe.

P.S. What happened about that brief? Was it a false alarm?

Better already? I'd only just left the office! There was nothing about the email that made me feel better. I had ZERO interest in fish fingers. Who did? Well Phoebe was different. She could fake an interest in anything. This was why she was successful. She had the stamina of an ox. She never woke up with the sheets imprinted into her face. She never laughed and weed herself because her pelvic floor was shot to buggery. Okay, she wore terrible clothes and had no style but I was clutching at straws. All you saw when you looked at her was confidence and strategic prowess. She was *dynamic*. This was the word she constantly waved under my nose – the word she bandied about as if it was some sort of magic formula, but what did it actually mean? How could I be more dynamic if my head was flying off all over the place and everyone was talking like a surfer dude? I was sorely tempted to send her an email telling her to FUCK OFF. Wasn't this a benefit of getting older? Saying exactly what you thought and not mincing your words? This was what I loved about Mum. The older she got, the less she cared about anyone and the more swears she became. I wished I could channel some of her now so I could overpower Phoebe.

I typed a reply.

AWESOME! I LOVE FISH FINGERS. Sorry, the brief was a false alarm but will definitely chase again next week. They said they needed to spend more time working out the objectives.

Rebecca x

She was also the kind of person who got off a transatlantic flight, and went straight to a meeting, then got straight back on the plane (perhaps turning her knickers inside out in the airplane toilet), slicked on a bit of lip gloss, readying herself to cook a delicious three course meal for her dinner

guests when she got home. So it was true that she'd only had a week off for her maternity leave, and I'd also heard another rumour she'd come back with the umbilical cord still dangling out the bottom of her tights (she'd been *dynamic* right from the get go then). She lost her baby weight the next week by only eating nuts and drinking water. Her baby boy started talking when he was five months old. His first words were 'Yaki Soba' (his favourite dish from Wagamama). She did a successful pitch to an online retailer on her first day back in the office. She never drew penises on her notebooks (as far as I knew), and she was constantly giving me advice on how to be more productive.

'Rebecca – you need to get up an hour earlier and work on your emails.'

'Why don't you use the commute time to ATTACK some of your top objectives? You can actually use your phone to record your TO DO LIST and you need never forget anything important again.'

'Have you tried that new productivity app called RELENTLESS? It means you can fill in every single moment of the day with tasks?'

Both Phoebe and Darren were cut from the same cloth. Phoebe was the CEO and Darren the Managing Director but Phoebe liked to monitor me at close range. There had been a time, when I'd been doing better, and she'd been more hands off. So, the fact that she was so in my face was not good news. I sometimes thought they would have had amazing children together, who never had to sleep (waste of time), never got ill (illness was for wimps) and worked 24/7. The only difference was that Darren tried to pretend he was a nice person and Phoebe didn't bother with that at all.

I didn't like to fill in every available moment with work. It was bad enough that no one had dead time, that no one stared or observed anything because they were constantly on their phones. I still cried now and then when I left Bella at nursery and was then too teary to check emails on the way in. Unlike Phoebe, I had still looked pregnant eighteen months after the birth. My pelvic floor was a giant plastic bag flapping about, and I peed without warning. Each time I wrote a business proposal, I usually lost the project. I kept thinking how pointless this stuff was. Who cared about the positioning strategy for some ear buds? Or an innovation path for an Asian suppository brand? I felt like I had no insights to offer unless they involved my daughter and her sleeping habits. I watched colleagues' eyes glaze over as I talked about her. I wasn't *dynamic* it was true. Clients liked me because I was kind. I made them feel good by laughing at their jokes and asking about their family.

Some people are top strategists and others are ... nice.

As I made my way out of the station, walking to the bus stop for the second stage of my journey, I still wasn't feeling right. There was an uneasy sensation working its way through my body. The email from Phoebe had only made it worse. The month before I'd just finished a project for a frozen yoghurt product. I had found it all so demoralizing. There were people dying in wars and famines, and I was contemplating whether this product should be called 'Milky Joy,' or 'Full of Milkyness.' Then whether it should have a cartoon dog or a koala as its mouthpiece. I knew this was where I was going wrong. I had to talk myself into it. I had to try and emulate Phoebe.

Then I remembered Dad and quickly left him a message. *'Dad, can you please pick up? Mum is worried about you. She says you're spending all your time in the shed and haven't come out in a while now. Ring me back or send me a text just so I know all is okay.'*

Back home I couldn't wait to see Bella but she was grumpy and tired, kept flailing about and kicking off about the fact that her pasta had tomato sauce ON TOP rather than ON THE SIDE and I'd mixed the broccoli in too. On the positive side, her head just had a small bruise on the side so the fall obviously hadn't been serious. Nevertheless I lost my temper and ended up shouting at her. Eventually things calmed down, I put her to bed, and spent some time stroking her hair. These were my favourite moments in the day.

'Mummy, is it nursery day tomorrow?'

'Yes it is darling.'

'I don't want to go.'

She sat up and flung her arms around me, planting tiny kisses on the side of my head.

'I know. But listen, just two more days and we'll be together again. We can do lots of fun things.'

I put her back into bed, and pulled the duvet up which she immediately kicked off again. I often came in in the night and found her lying on top of the covers, her tiny feet freezing cold.

'I don't like the grown-ups at nursery, they're horrible.'

'But you never want to leave when I pick you up.'

'They said I was a baby because I cried this morning.'

'Well that's not true. You're clearly a big girl.'

'They're monsters. They're horrible. Mummy isn't a monster.'

'Sometimes Mummy is a monster right?'

She closed her eyes, sucking on the ear of her bunny toy and fell asleep. I remembered the nights standing over her cot, willing her to sleep, crying with the tiredness of sleep deprivation. It was true that things got easier. It was perhaps a blessing that I'd never had another baby. I was too old to cope. She murmured in her sleep, and something tugged inside. I leant in and smelt her hair. This was *one of those happy moments*. These moments usually involved Bella. Moments when I felt like life had a bit more meaning and purpose. When I wasn't lost in a panic of information and things to do.



The prawns had been defrosted.

Pete and I watched TV like most evenings.

'Why is she running back into the factory when she knows the psychopath is in there?' I was holding a pillow in front of my face.

'She's not. She's going back to warn him – she wants to save him most likely.'

'Yeah but she's the one having an affair with the gangster. Why does she even care about the other guy?'

Pete didn't answer. He refused eye contact. He hated it if I talked during a dramatic moment.

That had been all the words for the day. No more content. In bed, he gave my arm a quick squeeze, rolled over onto his side, and started snoring.

That night I dreamt I was floating in the sea and I came upon a giant fish wrapped in plastic. He kept floating past me, mouthing the words DYNAMIC then lying very still, like he was in a coma. Was this the fish finger proposition? Was this my career? Was this Dad? Was this Bella? My relationship with Pete stagnating?

Three

Your dad came out of shed for exactly one hour yesterday. I am feeling lonely. What is the point? Also I got a parking ticket in Sainsbury's car park. How is that even possible? I thought the parking was free? Is it free?

Mum



I needed to ring Mum and speak to her properly. I popped it on the bit of ticker tape that ran through my brain and it promptly disappeared down a chute labelled –‘the millions of things to do at some point in the future.’

After dropping Bella off, I bumped into a mum who'd been at the local park a couple of weekends ago. We'd ended up having coffee – she was in the newborn phase and had that drawn-out, anxious expression that was characteristic of that time. Her name was Bryony.

'Love your trainers,' I said as we stopped near the station.

They were bright green with purple flashes. Despite looking knackered she had that ability to look dishevelled in an attractive way, her hair piled up in a bun on the top of her head, a big leopard print scarf wrapped around her neck. She was probably about twenty-seven. Her baby was wrapped in a dozen blankets despite the warm sunshine. I had been exactly the same. It paid to ensure your baby was as warm as possible and poor Bella had often ended up clammy by the time we got home.

'Thanks. I must take your number,' Bryony said. *'I thought we could meet up for another coffee soon perhaps.'*

I sympathized with the need to talk to another adult. When Bella had been tiny I'd have had coffee with the postman if he'd have been interested (he wasn't – instead he always shouted *'Oi Average! Cheer up!'* whenever he saw me on the street. I wasn't sure how my nickname had come about but guessed he was referring to my appearance in a casually sexist/offensive manner – ignoring the fact that he had one remaining strand of white hair that was plastered across his forehead. Last time we'd met, Bryony had told me she'd worked in advertising for a big London agency in Soho, but was now on six months' maternity leave (advertising was an unforgiving industry for mothers, much like marketing). She now had ambitions to be a photographer. She wanted to take photos of children that weren't cheesy, the opposite to those studio portraits where you get a family gurning holding onto a bunch of nonsensical props.

'I feel completely rootless nowadays,' she'd said with the candour that lack of sleep and a bit of welcome adult conversation tends to create. *'I need to find something that energises me again. I think having a baby really brings it all into focus. Why would I want to sacrifice spending time with Ralph to do something I hate?'*

It was a good question. It was one that puzzled me most days. Ralph was suckling from her breast. He was beautiful – white blonde hair and grey eyes, tiny fingers which wrapped around one finger, nails translucent and pale. Bella meanwhile span round and round in a chair kicking the bottom of the table. I'd always struggled with breastfeeding. Perhaps because of my age?

'It's a phase. You'll feel better,' I'd replied but I wasn't so sure.

At least when you were on maternity leave you could dedicate all your anxiety to raising a small person. Once you went back to work, it got mixed together with a whole heap of other shit (which in some ways was beneficial as it diluted the brutal levels of worry you'd previously dedicated to your baby).

We swapped numbers and agreed to meet up for a coffee. It was against my usual anti-social instincts but I sensed she needed a friend and so did I (I wasn't exactly swimming in them).

I got to work on time (no sarcastic comments from Phoebe) and after checking my inbox went with Simon/TWAT HAT for a coffee to discuss pet strategy.

'I definitely feel much better,' I lied as I sipped my turmeric latte, which I was trying to convince myself was nice, but was *not* as nice as a regular coffee at all. I was hoping Simon would be impressed by my ideas, and would pass it on to Phoebe/Darren so they'd see how *dynamic* I was. The only problem was the day hadn't got off to a flying start. Bella had cried again at nursery, and I'd then spent five minutes looking for a nursery assistant who would take her from my arms. Many of the other children were crying too, and the whole scene made me sad. Why were we leaving these poor saps with other people so we could do jobs we hated? Simon was quite sweet though, and when I arrived he listened as I did my usual brain dump about my travel problems/childcare/woes/bad commute. He was softly spoken and intelligent. He also didn't talk over me like many of the other men at work.

'So how long have you worked at Mango?' he asked.

'Since the early noughties,' I said. *'I guess you would have been about ten years old when I started. Mad hey?'*

And in a flash I saw that classic catchphrase, *'You don't have to be mad to work here but it helps!'* printed on tea mugs and mouse mats everywhere. Was that what had happened to me? Had I been institutionalized at Mango-Lab and made crazy? Why had I never tried anything else? Bryony and the way she effortlessly considered a new career, simply moving onto something new, felt unimaginable.

'So how come Phoebe is your boss if you've been at Mango even longer than she has?'

I thought about it for a moment and chose to tell the truth.

'I think I just ran out of steam – something like that anyway – Phoebe has always been fiercely ambitious,' I wanted to change the subject because I wasn't quite sure how I'd managed to progress so little in such a long period of time. *'Anyhow, let's talk about this pet food presentation. I did a project a few years ago about scented cat litter so I could talk you through some of that?'*

'That sounds spot on. Did it have essential oils in it? Also I always thought there was a subtle relationship between cat litter and cat food. They look the same but culturally we don't have the same amount of shame around faecal matter that we used to. Perhaps there's a role for a product that fulfils two roles at the same time?'

'An edible cat litter?'

'Something like that yes.'

'I haven't heard of such a thing and I can see a few barriers but it's worth identifying as a route forward.'

'The client is open-minded and wants NEW ideas. Do you think the accompanied feeding time depths were the best method?' he asked.

'Yes but I might have added some follow-up phone interviews. And made sure I got a good spectrum of pet owners. Highly involved, less involved – that kind of thing.'

'We don't call them phone interviews anymore,' he said. *'They're in-depth digital pow wows.'*

'Well those. You know, talk to the owners after they've used the product and get their feedback.'

'I like that. I wonder whether we should frame it as a litter or a food? I'll have to think it through.'

The turmeric was catching in my throat. I was tired. Perhaps I needed a supplement for women in their forties who struggled to be enthusiastic. I wished it was time to go to bed. The senseless back and forth. It was kind of enjoyable ... sort of ... like the sensation of peeling off old nail varnish from your thumb, and it coming off in one piece.

When you worked in market research for long enough you realized that whatever category you worked in the stories you told the clients were, more often than not, the same. It was all about finding some sort of human insecurity or lack, then addressing this lack with your product. For pet owners, the lack was usually a guilt that they weren't spending enough time with their pet. It was the same for working parents. We all want to believe that we're doing everything we can for our loved ones. In an unpredictable world, this sense of control was important. There might be a terrorist attack at any moment but at least your cat had a nice smelling bottom and your baby had eaten three vegetables. It's the little things and all that.

I thought about Bella and what she might be doing right now. It was mid-morning and they'd probably be playing outside. I hoped she didn't have any accidents today. They usually asked me to log into the portal to check on her progress. I could never remember the password.

Did this make me a bad parent?

As we were talking, Simon's eyes scanned down to his phone screen to see if there was any fresh update on his news feed. He was continually showing me his screen to show some fresh horror that was kicking off – a primary teacher who was a rampant paedophile, a dead elephant with its tusks ripped out, a woman raped on a packed train, a terrorist chopping someone's head off. When I'd been Simon's age, I'd spent an inordinate amount of time listening to Radiohead and feeling sad but there was rarely a specific reason for this sadness (aside from the time I shaved my eyebrows off). I felt sorry for his generation because there were now so many reasons to feel unhappy. There was too much information on the stuff that was going wrong. If we'd been peasants we would have just muttered into our mashed potato whilst people far away were burned and villages pillaged. The culture of being constantly plugged in wasn't healthy.

'You look a bit pale,' he said as we both stood up to go back upstairs. *'Do you want to get a fish burrito later?'* he asked. *'I'm walking down to Borough Market at twelve and they're super tasty.'*



I nodded. It would be good for me to do something different and get over my cynicism towards younger people and their food obsessions. I was saying YES to life today. Yes to a coffee with Bryony! Yes to lunch with Simon! We went up to our desks and put our headphones on. The blankets still seemed to be out in force, and I wondered why nobody said anything or just went home where it was warm. Wasn't there a law about keeping employees at a comfortable temperature? It seemed today that they'd despatched with both air-con (which was a relief) and heating. Maybe the girls in the toilet had been right to worry that the soap wasn't posh anymore. This was all symptomatic of a broader money-saving initiative. Perhaps being kept chilly made your brain less sleepy. There wasn't enough time to worry about these macro things, and by the time I'd answered the fifty and then some internal emails about meetings, innovation sessions, new initiatives and brainstorming to land on the names for these initiatives, it was time for lunch.

Kath had sent me a text. She had three beautiful children who looked like they'd stepped out of a Boden catalogue. Back when I'd been romping around the capitals of Europe with my Top Shop blazer, and bag full of bad marketing ideas, she'd been bringing up kids, and being generally excellent at it. She thought my life was exciting and I thought hers was calmer and more authentic. We were both bored but she argued that at least I was getting paid for my time.

Hey high flyer? How's things?

Fine, I replied. I might be coming down with something – feel a bit yukky.

There's a lot of bugs about. Lara has an Instagram account. What do I do?

Lara was her twelve-year-old daughter, and I was surprised she hadn't had an IG account for longer. We weren't the first generation to have no real idea what our children were doing.

Just follow her and ask her to keep the account private.

I think she's putting videos of her making slime on there.

I think that's pretty normal.

Is Bella okay?

She won't wear tights and keeps falling over.

I remember that phase too.

Ring me later.

Cool will do 😊

Later Simon and I walked towards Borough Market. It was a nice day, the sun was out, and I had that momentary pop of happiness that comes with realizing that you're not dead yet. Perhaps this was the thing. The small moments of happiness and nothing more.

When Bella squeezed me tight.

When I leant in and smelt her hair.

When the sun came out after a few days of grey.

The prawns being defrosted.

Leggings instead of tights – signalling a small parenting victory.

The market wasn't busy, and I picked up a box of raspberries (priced at six pounds so I set it back down). I thought about how much Bella would enjoy eating these and picked them up and paid for them. If you're a working mum, you basically have a child-ghost who follows you about all day, making you feel pain in your heart and angst about whether you're doing the right thing. It wasn't unusual for me to buy stuff for her to make myself feel better. I was sure we all did the same thing.

We ordered our burritos and I tried to eat mine but about fifty per cent fell on the pavement. I didn't like this trend towards eating whilst in motion. It wasn't enjoyable. It also made a mess of your clothes. Simon smiled. He had a wise face, and blonde hair that sprouted out the sides of his cap. He was wearing braces with his black skinny jeans and giant high-top trainers which had come back into fashion again. I had a feeling that he saw me as a benevolent granny type. Was he seeking some sort of mentor? I couldn't recall the last time I'd been to lunch with someone. Usually the dynamic types were cliquy and didn't want to come too close as they sensed I had a losing streak.

'So, I read that report you wrote about "Scouting for Trends,"' Simon said biting into his burrito. 'It was cool.'

I was finding his interest in me quite curious. He'd never spoken to me before. There was also a side of me that felt suspicious. Was he a spy? Was he *Darren's spy*?

'Yes. We presented it at a "Global Youth Research Trends" conference in New York about ten years ago. It was fun,' I said trying to retrieve a bit of lettuce from my teeth. 'We met Thurston Moore at a bar in Greenwich village.'

'Who's he?'

I started explaining about Sonic Youth, and how important they'd been as a band, (in fact I'd never really been into them but I got exasperated when people didn't know much Gen X popular culture). I stopped. It was hard trying to impress people with name-dropping if they had no idea who you were on about.

'I will have to look them up on Spotify,' Simon said. 'Maybe I can send you a playlist and you can listen to some of my favourite music?'

I nodded but I'd had enough exposure to millennial music in the office. The speakers constantly played stuff that sounded like you'd heard it before. Where was New Order? The Smiths? The Cure? All the other great bands with 'The' in their name? Why did much of it sound like bad 90s dance music? I knew I sounded like my dad now but it really felt like everything was just regurgitated from the previous generation. It was impossible to create something new. But it was also clear that Sonic Youth wouldn't give me cut through. Thurston Moore was probably claiming his pension by now and eating lettuce sandwiches, avoiding crusty bread so his dentures didn't drop out, all that stuff. There came a time when you had to hang up those cool shoes and get down with the slanket-posse. I wasn't quite ready for my stand-up bath but I wasn't at the cut and thrust either. It was the mid-line. It was the pits.

Too young to surrender to old age and watch *Inspector Morse* all day long, and too old to be twerking and taking spice. I got back to my desk and re-read the fish finger research project brief

that Phoebe had sent over. It would be an important project if it was part of a bigger frozen piece of business.

Everything about it filled me with despondency.

FISH FINGER INNOVATION BRIEF

Fish fingers have been a much-loved family snack for close to three decades but have recently faced challenges because of their lack of healthy cues. We want to reinvigorate fish fingers and position them in the 'healthy, family, pleasure' quadrant so that families feel like they're making a healthy choice. Our ambition is to be the in the TOP THREE food brands in the next two years.

I underlined key phrases and thought about the possible challenges. Fish fingers were fine. Everyone loved them, even if they weren't entirely fascinating. Generally people loved them because they reminded them of their childhoods. I started jotting some notes. We would need to do some research groups to find out what current consumers of fish fingers thought, and then maybe some with people who didn't buy them to discover the barriers. I scribbled away some ideas and then added in a couple of ideas from the semiotics team (I still had no clue what they did but Simon had emailed me a few studies they'd undertaken previously on family brands), and in this way the afternoon passed by quickly. In this sense, work was good. It felt meaningless, but it was like doing an arrowword puzzle, and kept you from going senile. I sent the ideas to Phoebe so she could approve before I sent them to the client. When I looked at my phone it was five thirty and I hadn't got up from my seat for more than two hours. It had been a productive day. I had eaten an overpriced burrito. I'd talked about popular culture with someone younger than me who wore braces and wasn't a clown.

I managed to log into the nursery portal after three failed attempts. Bella had eaten chicken curry for lunch and made a kite out of an old washing up bottle and some string. There was a photo of her holding it, looking proud. I sent a copy to Pete with a text.

LOOK HOW PROUD SHE IS! X

I was missing these moments because I was trying to come up with a reason as to why people didn't eat more fish fingers. I felt the head detaching sensation but it went away again. I had to fight to stay afloat. My life was okay. I was okay. The office was okay.

I just needed to finish the baby wipe presentation and things would be okay.

I phoned Kath on the walk back to the train station. I often thought it would be quicker to just create a moving pavement on the walk from Southwark to Waterloo. It was a waste of energy to do the same walk. It made me impatient. There were so many offices here that the moving pavement thing would come. Perhaps we'd sit on the pavement and have our phones attached to our eyeballs so we could really *chill*. There was a sea of people streaming out of the three glass and concrete towers. Everyone was smiling like it was the summer holidays. And everyone was on their phones, ordering pizzas, scheduling waxes, texting their spouses to say they were off to the pub. This was the best part of the day, the going home part where you shook your blanket off and felt a tiny glimmer of sun on your face. It was possibly worth going to work just so you could get this feeling regularly.

'How's things?' she said. *'Have you done any 'blue sky thinking?'*

'I feel so old,' I replied, crossing the street and narrowly avoiding a cycle courier who had a boom box attached to the back of his bike.

'The boy I was talking to today didn't even know who Sonic Youth were.'

'Well NEWSFLASH LADY. WE ARE OLD. Do you know that I have a walking stick? My back has seized up and I can't walk!'

'How?'

'I was doing these HIIT sessions online, and I guess I was doing these burpees and going too hard and THWWAAKKK I heard something in my back. I've been told I can't do any exercise for six months. I need to exercise. It's the only thing that is mine and nothing to do with children and all that shit.'

'Oh that's sad. Mind you, any excuse not to exercise,' I said.

'But I like to exercise,' she said.

'You'll be doing marathons next.'

'Not with a sodding walking stick I won't!'

'Well you'd be proud of me. I did one good thing. I arranged to have a coffee with a local mum.'

'A local mum! Wowsers! That's uncharacteristically social of you.'

When had I got this reputation for being anti-social? Was it still a hangover from having a young child and being too tired to face going out in the evenings?

'She's called Bryony and she's really nice and she's much younger.'

'Well that sounds promising,' Kath said. *'You need more local friends love. I rarely see you anymore. In fact I don't think any of the old crowd see one another. We're all too busy.'*

It was true. The only good thing was that Kath and I spoke on the phone. We didn't just text. It meant something. The people you *spoke* to versus those you *typed* to.

I thought back to our school days. They didn't seem that long ago. We'd spent our time sitting in Kath's bedroom, talking about boys, listening to music and smoking out the window. We'd started clubbing at fourteen, then everything was a blur of getting off with boys called Danny, Jody and Bobby, and then came university and quite a lot of parties and some drugs, then our thirties and Kath was popping out her children, and I was necking Nurofen Plus, and carrying enormous bags of ideas, before showing them to people who had no interest in them at all. The mudslide into our forties had come next and now we had walking sticks and no one had even heard of Sonic Youth FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.

'I'll ring you soon,' I said. *'Don't worry about the Instagram. It's just like that Talkabout phone line we used to use. Remember? It's like that but with pictures.'*

'But that was moderated by adults wasn't it?'

'Yes, you're right but do you remember those two ugly boys we went to meet in Clapham? One said he looked like Brad Pitt but he was actually very short with acne?'

Kath laughed.

'I think we walked straight past and pretended we hadn't seen them.'

'Instagram is just a modern version of networking, that's all.'

'You've made me feel better. I need to see you soon. There's a bottle of gin waiting.'



On the train home, my head ached and I felt it detaching itself from my body again and working its way down the carriage so it was moving towards the toilets. This time it happened without warning and I tried closing my eyes and enjoying the session. Wasn't it nice to be detached from reality for a few moments?

I checked my phone. A message had buzzed up from the nursery but I'd not seen it.

Bella almost fell over today but she is now in good health. No medical intervention was necessary. Please log into the portal to see the latest update on her health.

Hadn't I just logged in and she was fine? I would see her soon anyway. This was the problem with the continuous updates – there were too many 'crying wolf' occasions, so you became jaded and stopped worrying. What if something really serious happened?

After a minute, the sensation stopped and I opened my eyes. I felt normal again. I wasn't going mad. I called Mum, and she said that Dad had come out to eat lunch but had then gone back to the shed. He hadn't washed his hair in two weeks and was sleeping in his clothes. Apparently, he'd set up a makeshift bed in there. He was playing very loud classical music in the middle of the night and the neighbours had complained that it was keeping them awake.

'Did you have some sort of argument?' I asked. *'What kicked it off?'*

'I'm worried darling. I think he's sinking into his old ways. I don't know what to do.'

'This is his personality, Mum. He doesn't like too much social activity. He likes to be on his own. It's fine. Stop trying to make him do stuff.'

There were times when I suspected I was actually more like my dad – it wasn't in my nature to be overly social.

'But the hair thing is driving me crazy. What if someone sniffs him in the supermarket?'

'There are plenty of smelly people, Mum. No one will notice. Just get him dry shampoo.'

'Dry shampoo?'

I explained the concept in detail (I'd worked on a project recently all about it – it was one of those things that was doing well because we were TOO BUSY NOW TO EVEN WASH OUR HAIR) and she promised she'd buy some. I wasn't sure why the head-detaching thing had come back because I was clearly being very successful today. I was solving problems, being social and managing to control the head-detaching feeling. If I could keep this up then maybe I'd get over this bumpy patch (if that was what it was) and start some sort of upward trajectory.

I looked out the window at the trees draped in plastic carrier bags and felt my heart sink. I then got my laptop out and spent fifteen minutes wrapping up my baby wipe presentation. We stopped for ten minutes so it bought me more time. *YES, the IDEA of the baby-wipe-sleep-aid was flawed ... but DESPITE these challenges it showed potential AS LONG AS it kept a focus on CLEANING benefits rather than SLEEP ENHANCEMENT.* If the client was nice, and not too demanding, then things usually went well. It was only when they wanted innovative and weird methodologies (anything that had the word DIGITAL in it was usually a warning sign) that I felt out of my comfort zone. Perhaps I was going to be okay and wasn't losing relevance with each passing day.

As I came out of the station, I looked down at my phone and right on schedule i.e. AFTER regular work hours, Phoebe had sent an email. She wasn't happy with my ideas for the fish finger thing. She thought they were outmoded and showed a lack of strategic thinking. She just came out with her critique and didn't mince words. I bit my lip and used words and phrases like 'awesome' and 'thanks for the interesting feedback' and 'I look forward to collaborating on some interesting strategy'. I promised I would do better tomorrow. Then visualized her head being squeezed between the doors of an elevator. Her head would be hard and it would take a while to squash it completely but I tried to conjure up her expression, and how I would stand there with my turmeric latte in one hand just smiling (or maybe with no expression at all, which would possibly be more frightening). Just when I felt I was still relevant and could contribute, something would happen to tell me otherwise.

Pete had texted to say he'd collected Bella. As I turned into our street, I felt my blood pressure finally return to normal. We lived in a beautiful, leafy suburb. There were lots of families, a lovely park with swings and some climbing equipment, and it felt like the opposite of the glass monster I'd been freezing my ass off in all day. Our overweight tabby cat was sitting on the kitchen table. The early evening autumnal sun was coming through the French doors. Bella was playing with Pete upstairs. Dad would come out of the shed and wash his hair. I would write some more fish finger strategies. I had a beautiful daughter who would hopefully never work in an air conditioned brick like me. I also had breasts that were saggy, but not actually touching the floor. I could listen to Radio Four and understand about forty per cent of what was being discussed (less if it was the news but on *Women's Hour* I could understand more, as it was trying to be more accessible). I ate burritos. Perhaps one day I would be more like Bryony and change careers. Like just change ... it might be possible?

I had no idea who was in the charts but I was the SAME AGE as Kate Moss and younger than Kylie Minogue. I would always be younger than Kylie. I hadn't seen any photos of her of late. Was she going to move into the Helen Mirren phase next? Or was she stuck in the middle like me? Not yet in the 'it's amazing that she can still speak and walk,' bit.

Despite these positive affirmations – *I am younger than Kylie. I ate a burrito. I am younger than Kylie. I ate a burrito* – I felt confused. This head detaching thing was perplexing. If I'd been Mum I would have Googled 'brain cancer' or some such but I wasn't a hypochondriac. Despite being self-

obsessed (though, arguably, no more than your average modern woman), I didn't go to the doctor until I needed stitches or a limb fell off. I avoided them at all costs.

I heard a shriek coming from upstairs. Bella ran down, her face flushed and rubbing her eyes. She was excited to see me. She wrapped her arms around my head and squeezed hard. Another moment noted. It was enough right? We sat on the small, stained sofa in the kitchen (*I must replace it at some point*), and she told me about her day (drawings, fights, cake for one child and not for her because she'd called another child 'a bum hole'). Pete and I nodded at one another, and he went to fetch his iPad. I put Bella to bed (we chatted a bit first about unicorns and whether they were real and she told me how much she hated her the nursery grown-ups again). Then once she was asleep I sat stroking her hair, and when I came back down, Pete was still glaring at the screen. Technology wasn't good for couples who were looking for excuses not to talk to one another.

'How was work today?' I asked.

'Fine,' he replied.

'Anything interesting happen?'

'No.'

'How was my day then?'

'How was your day?' he said looking up for a millisecond.

'One of my colleagues didn't even know who Thurston Moore was.'

'Well they're much younger than you so it's hardly surprising.'

'Well thanks, I know that already.'

Suddenly I felt angry. There'd been a time when I'd have vented about Phoebe but there was no point. His advice was always the same – '*why don't you just tell her to fuck off?*' Pete had a low tolerance for office politics because he'd never worked in one. It was also boring. I knew it was boring. I was goddamn bored by it all too.

'There's a new drama with Suranne Jones starting tonight,' he said finally putting his iPad down on the floor. I sighed. We were back on familiar territory. We either talked about TV or food (but this seemed to be true of the population at large). Later on we watched a drama about a couple going through a marital crisis, and the female protagonist murders her husband by poisoning him a tiny bit each day. I secretly felt envious that they still had the will to even bother – I didn't think Pete and I could be bothered to murder one another unfortunately.

I hadn't said anything to Pete about my weird headache/dizziness. If I had said something then it might have gone something like this:

Me: I feel like my head is coming off sometimes and then it floats off somewhere and comes back again.

Pete: You need to get more sleep perhaps?

Me: No I think it might be something else. Maybe a panic attack?

Pete: What have you got to panic about?

Me: What are you looking at now (gesturing to iPad)?

Pete: Why do you bug me about what I'm looking at ALL THE TIME? I never ask you what you're doing on your phone and you're on it constantly.

Argument moves onto my phone addiction, Pete's need to chill out with his iPad after a long day, how I justify being on my phone and say it's 'work' but how it isn't because he knows I'm looking on ASOS at dungarees.

This was the problem. We were locked into a pattern. One said *this* and the other *that*. We were two store mannequins frozen into specific poses, unable to break out. There were rarely any surprises. It had been a long time since anything unexpected had happened. We were parents, we were tired.

I thought back to the miscarriages I'd had after Bella. Each one had been relatively early (before twelve weeks) but they'd taken their toll. We'd also had to do a lot of baby-making sex. I'd used ovulation tests and special lube that promised to 'nurture and support sperm on their special journey'.

After the first miscarriage, I'd been eager to try again, almost as if getting pregnant would erase what had happened. When it happened a second time I felt a distance grow between us (apparently I was miscarrying because my eggs weren't top notch – the doctor said miscarriages were much more prevalent in women my age). Pete continued to be supportive, we entered a third phase of trying.

It felt like it was something we were toiling through together, like a fairground ride that we'd paid for but hated (but it was too late to get off).

'*Can we just stop now?*' he'd said as I told him it was a super fertile time again and I wanted us to have a quick bunk up upstairs.

I want to give it one more try,' I said.

'But Rebecca, it's so depressing, look what it's doing to our relationship!'

'We're okay. We're okay aren't we?'

He made a face like 'no, we certainly weren't' but to his credit, we had sex that night, then the three nights after that (the more the better in that forty-eight hour window according to my online research). I couldn't seem to let it lie. I was trying to prove a point – I could get something I wanted out of sheer determination. When I miscarried again at ten weeks, it felt as if both of us had shut quite a lot of feelings away. We put the idea to bed (he did this more quickly and I resented how he seemed to be capable of moving on). I also felt like Pete was great in an emergency, could make cups of tea, rush to the shops get supplies, make a hot water bottle, but didn't know what to do when life rolled along without having to visit the 'Early Pregnancy Unit' for scans. Or have your partner bleeding in the middle of the night and call an ambulance, and the neighbours coming outside to watch her screaming as she was wheeled into the back.

Was that how it was in relationships? Did you just hunker down and *endure*?

We were both fascinated with our screens. Screens were so much easier to interact with. I wanted to scroll across Pete's face and see a different expression. I wanted to type '*interesting conversation that is not TV related,*' onto his forehead. He probably wanted to type '*find girl that doesn't complain about work and not having a second child*'.

By the time I'd brushed my teeth, and rubbed expensive cream into my face, Pete was asleep; his mouth making a strange flapping noise like a fish out of water. I'd read that many couples liked to have separate bedrooms nowadays – it was a nice thought but it worried me that I thought it was a nice thought. At least when we were in bed together our bodies touched now and then (even if was usually an accident and we moved away again as soon as it happened). Separate rooms also amplified the idea that you didn't want to be around the other person. You could argue that it kept the mystery alive or some such but the reality was that they just got on your nerves too badly.

Something was bubbling away inside of me – something not right. Tomorrow I would schedule a visit to my parents. I would start the day positively and not tell myself negative things as soon as I woke up.

Tomorrow would be more good moments, more moments of happiness than bad, sad, anxious, worrying moments.

I put my headphones on and listened to a positive thinking visualization. I tried to hide my phone under the covers so it wouldn't wake Pete up. He grunted at me to put it away, and I hunkered down under the duvet.

Just me and my little phone friend. Being mindful and positive together.

I am excited about my new future.

I am excited to embrace my new life.

I am going to be more positive.

I am open to new and different things.

Four

THE THING ABOUT BEING ‘in your forties’ is that you feel like you haven’t much to look forward to. For a start, appearance-wise things go to hell in a hand-bucket. I was pretty much invisible to the opposite sex now. A couple of younger female colleagues had told me that it was rare to get chatted up these days so maybe it was society that was changing.

But there were simple truths that you couldn’t escape.

- I could never be an ‘enfant terrible’.
- I would never own my own swimming pool
- I wouldn’t be able to get beads plaited into my hair on holiday, without looking like one of those old women that gets beads plaited into their hair on holiday.
- I would always be referred to as ‘good for my age.’
- If I got a tattoo, it would be seen as symptomatic of a mid-life crisis.
- A hangover lasted a week

Age wasn’t just a number. We all wanted to be pumped up, youthful, dewy, glowing, energetic, sexy and dynamic. It was exhausting. My body wanted to age. My face wanted to be left alone to slide and sag. I sometimes thought ageing was easier when we just threw on a moth-eaten cardigan, collected stray cats and collected coupons from the back of *Woman’s Own*.

Okay maybe I *was* still attractive. Two months ago I’d been eyed up by a man in his sixties on the tube but this kind of event didn’t make me feel better. Old men were not ideal. I made a list in my head of exciting, dynamic and sexy older women who still got plenty of male attention.

There was Jennifer Aniston.

Kate Winslet.

Rachel Weisz.

These were all Hollywood actresses who were a different breed to ordinary middle-aged folk. I tried to imagine what it would be like to not feel quite so invisible, to still be able to arouse interest from the opposite sex, to actually make young men look at you with fresh eyes; for them to want to have rampant sex with you.

I concocted a fantasy letter in my mind to these ageless beauties.

Dear Jen, Kate and Rachel,

I love the way you’re so sassy and look like you’re in your twenties despite being well into your forties. I imagine you have good cosmetic surgeons and possibly have facials once a week and do yoga and HIIT training every morning. You may also be wearing heavy-duty support underwear but that’s cool. I just wish you could be more honest about how you look the way you do and cut the rest of us some slack.

I want men to get erections as I walk past in my red swimsuit. I want them to cross their legs as I walk past because their penises hurt. I want Bradley Cooper to be hopelessly in love with me. I want to water-ski, and not have people laugh as I fall off and plunge underwater. I want to be a ballet dancer. I want to play the drums like Dave Grohl. I want to have a hit comedy series. I want people to laugh at the prospect of my comedy series before they’ve even seen it.

I want to feel there is MORE coming my way rather than less.

Love Rebecca x

I dropped Bella at nursery. My chin felt painful, and I realized I’d been too eager that morning in plucking out my chin hairs, and now had a bad rash. Bella cried and clutched at my legs like she was a baby seal about to be clubbed. Both the nursery assistants ignored me, and I ended up walking like a zombie from side to side trying to shake her off.

‘Is there some way to turn off all the texts I keep getting each day?’ I asked one of them (the slightly less grumpy one).

'Don't you want to know how she's doing each day?'

'Yes but is there an option to shut it off if my day is particularly busy? It's quite stress-inducing sometimes.'

They glared at me. This was the wrong thing to say. I was a bad parent.

'You can choose to ignore the texts I suppose,' one said.

'No of course, forget it. I love the updates,' I said.

I gave Bella a final squeeze and ran for my train.

As I left the building, Bella's cries were still reverberating in my ears. The tug inside, the desire to turn back and get her was too strong. It was wrong to leave your kid with a bunch of strangers each day but work demanded it. I tried calling Mum, but she didn't answer – she was probably at one of her classes. I needed some distraction and I also wanted to find out if Dad had improved any. I looked up at the trees and tried to remember the positive visualization from the night before.

Little moments of happiness. This was something to hold onto. Tiny fragments. This would stop my head leaving my body entirely.

I can imagine the life I want.

The office felt upbeat and people were chatting. There had just been a breakfast presentation by Darren on 'How Meat Substitute Represents a Massive Opportunity in The Fast Food Sector.' He was on a real high and was walking around clapping people on the back like he'd just won the lottery. His eyes looked haunted though, as if he'd put in another late night and had perhaps even slept in the office (there was a futon in one room and it was no secret that when the workload was heavy, you could sleep there for the night). I was happy to have missed this presentation, but also nervous that Darren would report back to Phoebe on my lack of initiative. Ever since the appraisal they'd kept me on the back foot.

Simon sat next to me and smiled. I asked him for some more ideas – *innovative, new, fresh ideas* for my fish finger proposal, and he talked to me about packaging, and how we should try and decode the packaging, and then look at the semiotic and cultural significance of fish in the wider world, and cod, how the notion of scarcity played out in society in general, and how this impacted on our perceptions of meat. I asked if he could type it all into my proposal (as I didn't understand what he was talking about and had tuned out for most of the chat). He agreed.

There was something sweet about this chap, and I wondered again why he was bothering with an old fruit like me, but he seemed to think I was eccentric – perhaps he liked that kind of thing. Perhaps I was his 'Helen Mirren.' Besides, Mango-Lab was just a temporary holding pattern in his career until he spotted something more interesting. He had a myriad of options because he was young and healthy and full of beans. He was a shark, and I was a giant fish finger with my head stuck in a plastic bag.

'Would you like to go out for a drink?' he asked. *'A few of us are going to the pub later and I thought maybe you'd like to come along.'*

'Hey?' I said.

I was surprised. I couldn't remember ever being asked to the 'yoof' drinks. I wasn't in that demographic anymore. Besides on the rare occasion I was asked I usually turned it down. I needed to get back to Bella and see her for that precious hour for bed (which was usually the most fractious, stressful hour of her day, so not pleasant at all).

'The pub is super nice and they serve this street food from Korea which is delicious so we could grab some of that perhaps?'

Korean street food? Drinks? I hadn't been for a works drink for months – in fact the last time had been Christmas and now it was almost May. Yes, I usually raced out the door at five thirty (or a bit earlier if the coast looked clear). Then again, maybe this was *exactly* what I needed. Part of the reason I was no doubt failing at work, and not being strategic enough was because I didn't hang out with these young people. I was feeling stuck in a routine – work, home, bed, work, home, bed

and this would shake things up. I agreed I'd go along for a couple of drinks. I texted Pete. He said he was fine with it.

As I've already said, going out was extremely rare.

I spent the afternoon listening to a Spotify playlist of my favourite nineties hip-hop, and amending my fish finger proposal. *I'm gonna take this itty bitty world by storm. And I'm just getting warm.* I could feel the benefit of collaborating with Simon – he'd given me some fresh insights, and I was proposing a whole new digital platform whereby fish finger loyalists could upload footage of themselves and their families, and we could regularly check in and ask them questions. The head detaching from my body thing had passed and I felt better again. *Things could be much worse*

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