WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHOR

# I Don't Know How She Does It

'A bible for the working mother'
OPRAH WINFREY

'I can't think of a woman who wouldn't want this book'
INDIA KNIGHT

ALLISON PEARSON

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

## ALLISON PEARSON

Allison Pearson is an internationally best-selling author and award-winning journalist. Her novels, *I Don't Know How She Does It* and the sequel, *How Hard Can It Be?*, have sold over four million copies and been translated into 32 different languages. Allison is a columnist and interviewer for the *Daily Telegraph* and co-presenter of the hugely popular *Planet Normal* podcast. Allison was born in South Wales, educated at Cambridge University and now lives with her family in the beautiful market town of Saffron Walden.

ALSO BY ALLISON PEARSON

*I Think I Love You*
*How Hard Can It Be?*

ALLISON PEARSON

# I Don't Know How She Does It

A Comedy about Failure,
a Tragedy about Success

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For Evie,
with love

**Juggle:** v. & n. v. **1** intr. *perform feats of dexterity, esp by tossing objects in the air and catching them, keeping several in the air at the same time.* **2** tr. *continue to deal with (several activities) at once, esp with ingenuity.* **3** intr. & tr. *(foll by* with*)* **a** *deceive or cheat.* **b** *misrepresent (facts).* **c** *rearrange adroitly.* n. **1** *a piece of juggling.* **2** *a fraud.*

Concise Oxford Dictionary

*The wheels on the bus go round and round,*
*Round and round, round and round,*
*The wheels on the bus go round and round,*
*All day long.*

*The babies on the bus go Waah Waah Waah,*
*Waah Waah Waah, Waah Waah Waah,*
*The babies on the bus go Waah Waah Waah,*
*All day long.*

*The mummies on the bus go Shh Shh Shh,*
*Shh Shh Shh, Shh Shh Shh,*
*The mummies on the bus go Shh Shh Shh,*
*All day long.*

Trad.

# Introduction

## *Twenty Years On*

'Miss pearson, you're about to go live in front of 40 million Americans. Okay?'

I smiled weakly at the producer and nodded. Over her left shoulder, in the glare of the TV lights, I could make out a figure so swathed in caramel cashmere, so goldenly glowing, so astonishingly airbrushed, that she could well have been a hologram of one of the world's most famous people. Oprah Winfrey.

FORTY MILLION people? My mouth was dry (would I be able to speak?). My clothes were wrong. I swear the perfect jacket I'd scoured a dozen shops for had been a chic cerise only a week ago. Now it felt like the cherry-red bolero of a flight attendant. Should have picked the grey, damnit. But there was no going back. For months, Jill and Katie, senior publicists at Knopf and both working mums who believed passionately in my novel, had strained every sinew to land this interview. It was publishing's golden ticket. An endorsement from Oprah could add another million to your sales.

And then I heard my name. Oprah, the actual *Oprah*, was introducing me in that unmistakable mellow molasses voice. 'Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* is a Bible for the working mother,' she said. I walked onto the set and perched on a padded bench at the right hand of God (if the Almighty is female, she'd definitely be Oprah). I made myself a promise then and there: 'If you don't screw this up, if you don't fall off the back of this bench, you will never be nervous doing any public event ever again.'

Oprah cued a video of me with the family, filmed in our kitchen at home. I watched as my six-year-old daughter crinkled her nose and complained, 'I don't like it when my Mummy is writing. She don't play with me.' (Gee, thanks for the moral support, sweetheart!) I cringed, but the studio audience loved it. They roared with laughter and, despite the fact nerves had made my upper lip stick to my teeth, I joined in. After all, wasn't that why I was there? Because I'd made millions of women laugh out loud at how hard it was to juggle a career and motherhood.

The whole thing felt utterly surreal, not helped by the fact that, like the heroine of my book, I was unravelling quite badly by then, although I didn't know how badly. Here I was in Chicago after months on the road promoting my first novel. Kate Reddy had been born four thousand miles away in a narrow alcove that we optimistically called a study at the back of our living room in North London. Like nearly all of my friends at that time, my character was struggling to cope with two small children, one bewildered, occasionally resentful, husband, a full-time job and thirty-seven pending tasks on a to-do list that never got any shorter. Permanently fretting that she wasn't a 'proper' mum, like the Mothers Superior who made snide comments at the school gate, Kate bought mince pies in Sainsbury's and distressed them with a rolling pin so she could pass them off as home-made at daughter Emily's carol concert. That scene, which appears on the very first page of the book, entered into popular mythology. Two decades later, people still come up to me smiling broadly and say, 'Are you that writer who did the faked mince pies?'

Clearly, most women had never distressed a mince pie, although it's surprising how many readers wrote to me admitting they had steamed the labels off shop-bought jam and replaced them with a home-made sticker to be entered in the school fete. (Take that, Bonne Maman!) What the book did tap into, I can see looking back, was a secret parallel world, a world where millions of women believed that they carried their burdens alone, and their guilt. 'But that's *my life* you're talking about,' women who devoured *I Don't Know How She Does It* told me.

'I thought, Allison Pearson has been spying through my kitchen window,' recalls Jennifer, mother of two and now CEO of a bank, 'After Kate Reddy, I stopped beating myself up so much for being a failure.'

Reading makes us feel less alone. That is the great consolation of books. Twenty years ago, *I Don't Know How She Does It* held up a mirror to the life of that stressed-out modern mammal, the working mother, and she felt seen and heard for the first time. I wrote the story as a comedy, even though much of it was desperately sad. (My kids are in their twenties today, but I still remember what it felt like to peel a sobbing toddler's sticky fingers off my leg because I had to go to work. Your heart hurts.) As a writer, I prefer to laugh people into recognition. It's less threatening that way; the darkness lightened by mirth. Besides, a life divided between little kids and solemn professional duties very often plays as farce.

On my first day back at work after my daughter was born in 1996, the *Telegraph* sent me to meet Tom Hanks at the Dorchester. I just about squeezed into my all-black interviewer's uniform and was feeling really chuffed with myself for getting out of the house and looking quite presentable. As I walked into the suite and the star rose to greet me, I extended my arm to shake his hand and noticed an epaulette of baby sick on my shoulder.

'I'm so sorry, I'm covered in sick,' I blurted out.

'Don't worry, happens all the time,' lied Tom Hanks valiantly. Such a lovely man; not many with his power would have seen the funny side.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, working mothers still felt judged the whole time (not least, it must be said, by themselves. We women are our own sternest critics). If there was a childcare problem, female executives invariably made a 'man's excuse' (the car, terrible traffic) lest they outed themselves as mothers and superiors judged them to be weak. There would be no judgment in my novel. With her calamitous mishaps (the nanny calling to say the kids have nits and Kate crazily scratching her head during a presentation to a major client), Kate Reddy was an uproarious, one-woman embodiment of a universal predicament.

It turned out to have extraordinary global resonance, far beyond anything I could have imagined. Eventually translated into 32 different languages, and surprisingly popular in French, Korean and Hebrew, *I Don't Know How She Does It* was published in the United States in 2003. Within weeks, the novel by an unknown British author was on every single bestseller list in the country. 'The breakout hit of the summer,' declared the *New York Times*. The book got enthusiastic reviews, but it was word-of-mouth that saw it spread like a forest fire from state to state. Women bought it for their sisters and their best friend. Mothers who were worried their adult daughters were doing too much and the grandchildren were suffering gave it to them as a gentle hint. Curious to discover what all the fuss was about, some men surreptitiously bought a copy. In London, one guy was spotted reading it on the Underground, the novel's distinctive pink jacket hidden inside his copy of the *Financial Times*. Seeing a sales opportunity, my British publisher, Vintage, brought out a paperback edition in boy-friendly blue. Women gave it as a gift to their male bosses. Some really got what it was saying.

'You helped me to understand and appreciate my female staff,' wrote David, a senior partner in a law firm, 'It had honestly never occurred to me to think how much they were dealing with as they tried to be both good mums and good employees.'

I still treasure a dog-eared postcard from a reader who simply called himself Bill from Brooklyn. 'Dear Ms Pearson, thank you for explaining why my wife yells at me the whole time.' My pleasure, Bill.

A bitter irony. In the midst of all that whirlwind success, I had never worked more or seen my children less. Evie and Tom stayed with Daddy in a rented apartment in New York while the publisher sent their mum on a mammoth book tour; 20 cities in 23 days or maybe it was 23 cities in 25 days. I lost track. Every day was Groundhog Day. Get up at 4.45am. Cab to the airport. Land in a new place, car to a TV station to do the morning news show. Try to explain why society needed to wake up to the stress working mothers were under. Joke about distressing cookies to

look home-made. Explain what a mince pie is. Then radio, often with someone who hadn't read the book ('I'm joined today by Alice Reason. Welcome, Alice!' Er . . .) then fit in a couple of press interviews back at the hotel. Phone home to say goodnight to the kids and pick up the strain in my husband's voice ('Don't worry, darling, they're fine') before going to an evening reading at a bookshop or a lecture theatre.

During that book tour, I heard hundreds of stories from working mothers and felt more determined than ever to campaign about the issues that would improve their lives: better maternity leave, getting your old job back when you returned from having a baby (not slyly being sidelined to the Mummy Track), flexible working, creating a workplace where 'parent' was not a dirty word and wanting to take the afternoon off to go to the school play didn't mark you out as 'slacking off'. Could a comic novel be a catalyst for social change? Maybe it could.

When I finally got back to New York after doing the Oprah show, I lay in bed for days, unable to move. I knew I had to get up and take my clothes to the dry cleaners on the corner of the street, but it felt more daunting than a trip to the Andes. The children, ravenous for my attention, swarmed over their shattered mother's body. My three-year-old son curled up on my tummy like a baby marsupial in a pouch; he would have climbed back into the womb if he could. 'Mummy, stay,' Tom said, wrapping his blankie around my arm to make sure I was tied to him, 'Mummy, stay.'

'Yes, my love, Mummy is staying, don't worry.'

A doctor who came to see me mentioned nervous collapse and prescribed antidepressants. I explained about the book tour and missing the kids and feeling guilty and totally overwhelmed. Oh, and Oprah.

'Gee, Ma'am,' said the doctor. 'Women like you, I don't know how you do it.'

⋆

Twenty years have blurred many of the details, although I know that *I Don't Know How She Does It* started life as a weekly

column in the *Daily Telegraph* in the spring of 2001. For quite some time, I'd been mulling over writing about the lives of my cohort of thirty- and forty-something women. We were supposedly the Having-It-All generation, enviably combining career and family, or so we were told by glossy lifestyle supplements. Somehow, though they didn't mention this, we'd ended up Doing It All.

Men of our generation had come a long way in a short time. But most of us still lived with partners who thought that toilet paper was restocked by the Toilet Paper Fairy. Socks and underwear appeared mysteriously in their drawers. Refrigerators were filled by unseen hands and children's trainers magically bought themselves. And then your husband would ask, 'Darling, what have we got my mother for her birthday?' That's the marital 'we' that means the wife, who has to remember all things domestic. In addition to all the stuff she carries around in her head from the day job.

This was an awkward subject for first-generation feminists. They believed that once women had access to free contraception, job opportunities and their own financial independence a brave new age of equality would be ushered in. 'We forgot about the children,' admitted Rosie Boycott, one of the founders of *Spare Rib*, with welcome candour. Someone would have to take care of the kids once women achieved parity with males. But it wasn't going to be the men, that's for sure. So women retained the unpaid, full-time job of mother alongside their paid full-time job; the result was a brutal double-shift.

Many women, especially professionals, decided they couldn't make it work. Or, rather, work made it impossible to make it work. There was a seismic change in the reproductive habits of millennials. One study showed that 40 per cent of female graduates were still childless by the age of 35, a staggering increase of 20 per cent in just over a decade. A third of female university graduates will never have children, the research concluded. Of course, there were some women who made the positive choice not to have children. For too many, though, it was a case of postponing getting pregnant as long as possible, to reach a

higher rung on the career ladder and not piss off the boss, and then discovering that your body – the obstetricians charmingly call us 'elderly primigravida' – would not play ball. At the start of the twenty-first century, to build a successful career women needed to start their families much later but, sadly, Mother Nature didn't get the memo. The birth rate in the UK plummeted while IVF clinics boomed. She can be a right bitch, that Mother Nature.

This dilemma of enormous national importance was hardly discussed two decades ago. Back then, if a woman dared to complain about sexism or returning to work after maternity leave to find herself demoted, the response was, 'If you can't stand the heat get back to the kitchen, love!'

So, by and large, we kept quiet, worked incredibly hard, as good girls always do, and felt lucky to be allowed to do our two jobs. But doubts began to surface. In 1999, a few months after I brought my second baby home from the hospital, parked him in his little seat under my desk and finished writing a magazine interview (I really can't believe I did that; I was still bleeding heavily into a nappy-sized sanitary towel), I spotted a survey in *Good Housekeeping* magazine that asked working women what they wanted for Mother's Day. The answers were strikingly poignant. Some 74 per cent said all they wanted was 'a little bit of time to myself'. The respondents felt they were failing to meet their own high standards, both at work and at home. Not surprisingly, they reported that they were too exhausted to have sex with their husbands. The most shocking thing, though, was that women thought they had tougher lives than their own mothers.

Wow. That wasn't how it was supposed to turn out, was it? In my newspaper column that week, I asked a question which had really started to bother me: Why is it so hard to make equality work in practice? 'A woman can do the same job as a man,' I wrote, 'and often do it as well if not better. But it will always be the woman who carries the Puzzle of Family Life in her head. We just do. All the shoe sizes and the wedding anniversaries and the birthdays and the dental appointments and the

costume you're frantically making at midnight for sodding World Book Day because you only found the note in your child's bag at 9.57pm.

'A few months ago,' the column continued, 'I was going abroad for work and I handed my husband a list of all the tasks that would need doing in my absence. Anthony looked at the two sheets of A4 for quite some time. Finally, he said plaintively, "But it looks like a plan for invading a small country." In a way, of course, that's exactly what it was. Millions of British women are now running a small country called Home in their spare time. No wonder so many working women of my age suffer with depression or hit the bottle.'

When I revisit that column now, I sense how my exasperation, even anger, was growing. Not long after it appeared, I was invited to a seminar on work-life balance at the London Business School. The room was full of MBAs – older women at the peak of their professional powers, younger ones a rung or two below. Members of the all-female audience began to stand up and volunteer their own accounts of what it felt like to combine a job with a female life. One stunning black woman, a New York lawyer, said she had recently intercepted a memo from a senior partner in her firm. A line in the memo said, and I have never forgotten this: 'Why does childbirth have to take so long?'

The room was filled with laughter. Not bitter laughter, not nasty laughter, it was just – What the hell can you say to a brute like that? – the laughter of the servants when the master is away.

It was at that moment that I heard an answering laugh in my own head and somehow I knew that I was hearing the woman who would become the heroine of the novel I didn't even know I was going to write. Kate Reddy didn't have a name back then. (Eventually, I would call her Kate for Katharine Hepburn, that glorious pioneer of women wearing the trousers, and Reddy after Helen Reddy whose anthem, 'I Am Woman' ('I am strong, I am INVINCIBLE') I always played at university to give me courage). What I did know is that this nameless character had a fantastic sense of humour about the crazy, man-

shaped world of work to which women like her must adapt themselves.

But what job should I give her? I asked Miranda Richards, a hedge fund manager in the City of London whom I had met when we were both on maternity leave. (The bump in Miranda's belly is now my beloved goddaughter, Theodora, who graduated this summer from Edinburgh University. How time flies.) We were lying on the floor doing Pilates, trying to reconnect our distended belly buttons to our spines. 'Give her my job,' said Miranda, 'it's horrible'.

Sure enough, after returning to the office, Miranda negotiated one day a week working from home so she could better balance a frantic business life with three adorable daughters under the age of six. But her colleagues soon set her up to fail, organising key meetings on her Fridays at home, gradually pinching her best clients. Eventually, she resigned and put together a portfolio career while being a hands-on mother and chief writer of the school Christmas panto, a route that so many disillusioned Kate Reddys ended up taking.

'The problem,' I explained to the *Telegraph's* deputy editor, Sarah Sands, over lunch in Covent Garden, 'is that we got to do our fathers' jobs but we retained our mothers' responsibilities. That's why we're all going mad.'

An immensely gifted editor with a sixth sense for a hot topic (she later took the helm at Radio 4's *Today* programme), Sarah's enormous doe eyes lit up. She delved into her handbag to get out her credit card to pay the bill and, instead of a purse, produced a tube of golden fluid. 'Oh, God. Boy's urine sample, forgot to drop it off at the GP,' she said.

'See what I mean?' I laughed. 'No male executive is producing a child's urine sample from his briefcase.'

'Allison, you really have to write this story,' Sarah said.

I really did. When the first Kate Reddy column appeared in the paper a few weeks later, it was as if I'd opened a furnace door, so intense was the blast of recognition from readers. Women started to send me their own crazy stories and I began a file of what I called 'Kate Reddy Moments'. One marketing manager

said she had just got back to work after giving birth to her second child and took a client out for lunch. Sleep-deprived, she drifted off during the main course and awoke with a jolt to see her client putting a forkful of food into his mouth. Before she could stop herself, she cooed, 'Is that yummy in your tummy?'

To research the novel, which was starting to take shape in my mind, I went down to the Square Mile, London's financial district, where I met many Kates – accountants, consultants, traders, lawyers – and in dark, furtive corners of Starbucks they told me their stories. I learned a lot of things. I learnt that a man would have photographs of his kids on his desk because that proved what a virile provider he was. A woman would rarely display photos of her children because, unfortunately, that would identify her as a mother, a deeply suspect creature who was 'lacking in commitment'. One banker joked that it would be safer to come out as a cocaine addict in her firm than as a mum. 'At least they have a programme for drug addicts,' she said. 'Motherhood is a lifelong and incurable condition.'

I felt privileged to be smuggling out that samizdat material and getting it into print. One of the regular readers of my *Telegraph* column was then the head of Vintage paperbacks, an imprint of Penguin Random House. The brilliant, indefatigably enthusiastic Caroline Michel rang my literary agent, the late, great Pat Kavanagh, and said, 'Everyone is reading Allison's column. We all think we are Kate Reddy! It has to be a novel.'

The rest is herstory.

Twenty years on, the novel is now granted a second life in this special anniversary edition for a new generation of working mums to read. I wonder what difference, if any, did *I Don't Know How She Does It* make to their lives? Well, I've spoken to thousands of female readers and had emails and letters from many more. They say the book enabled them to start a conversation in their office about things that had been too hard to say before. The Kate Reddys found each other and that gave them courage. For the first time, they knew they were not alone.

Back then, many of the (predominantly male) bosses were of

an age and background that meant they were married to women who stayed home to raise the children. They had no clue how demanding things could be for a mother who worked. Today, many male executives play a much more hands-on role as dads and their partners are likely to have a career. And, of course, many more bosses are women, and hooray for that! This has made a huge difference in transforming workplace attitudes.

For several years, I campaigned with the charity Working Families for better work-life balance. I knew how mums were prepared to slave all hours of the day and night to get the job done, they just needed some flexibility to fulfil their caring responsibilities – taking a little one to a medical appointment or their first day at school.

Politicians eventually cottoned on to what a huge issue this was for female voters. Michael Howard, then leader of the Conservative party, mentioned Kate Reddy in a speech. So did Theresa May who, to her great credit, was one of the earliest champions of flexible working, grasping that it would encourage women to continue their careers and aim for senior positions. I was asked to write a speech for Prime Minister David Cameron on policies to ease the burden of working mothers. Kate Reddy left the page and entered politics.

In the end, it took a global pandemic to prove that working from home was not only possible, but actually good for families and firms. Millions of mums and dads discovered the pleasure of spending proper time with their children in 2020/2021 and they won't give it up in a hurry.

After a long delay, *I Don't Know How She Does It* was made into a film starring Sarah Jessica Parker as Kate. I still believe the project, which was adored by the women executives working on it, was underplayed by its producer, Harvey Weinstein, whose own predilections, we now know, ran to females a lot younger and less encumbered by kids than Kate Reddy. The leering look Harvey gave my children's young nanny when we visited the set in Manhattan is a permanent stain. A much happier memory is watching Sarah Jessica using a dustbuster to blow icing over distressed cakes for the school bake sale. As I wrote

so long ago, 'Women used to have to fake orgasms. Now, we can manage the orgasms, but we have to fake the pies. And they call this progress'.

Do I think that things are better today for working mothers than when I set down the experiences of the Having-It-All generation in a tragi-comic novel? Thankfully, I'm sure they are. In 1996, when I had my first baby, paid maternity leave to which all employed women were entitled was eighteen weeks. Most women I knew didn't dare take more than four months and the truly ambitious were back at their desk the day after a C-section. It was madness; bad for baby and mother.

In 2022, women can take up to 52 weeks' maternity leave. If they return to work after six months, they have the right to return to exactly the same job they had before. Campaigners point out that true equality won't be achieved until more fathers feel confident to take shared paternity/maternity leave as they do in Scandinavia. Still, vastly improved maternity leave, allowing women proper time to bond with their baby before picking up their other passion, is a huge leap forward towards a kinder, more civilised society.

More than that, women in the workplace no longer have to hide motherhood like a guilty secret as Kate Reddy did. They don't have 'tougher lives than their own mothers', in that devastating phrase which inspired me to write a novel. If *I Don't Know How She Does It* played any part in improving the lives of our daughters and granddaughters then I am the proudest author alive.

Allison Pearson, May 2022

# *Part One*

# 1

# *Home*

*1.37 am:* How did I get here? Can someone please tell me that? Not in this kitchen, I mean in this life. It is the morning of the school carol concert and I am hitting mince pies. No, let us be quite clear about this, I am *distressing* mince pies, an altogether more demanding and subtle process.

Discarding the Sainsbury luxury packaging, I winkle the pies out of their foil cups, place them on a chopping board and bring down a rolling pin on their blameless, floury faces. This is not as easy as it sounds, believe me. Hit the pies too hard and they drop a kind of fat-lady curtsy, skirts of pastry bulging out at the sides and the fruit starts to ooze. But with a firm, downward motion – imagine enough pressure to crush a small beetle – you can start a crumbly little landslide, giving the pastry a pleasing home-made appearance. And home-made is what I'm after here. Home is where the heart is. Home is where the good mother is, baking for her children.

All this trouble because of a letter Emily brought back from school ten days ago, now stuck on the fridge with a Tinky Winky magnet, asking if 'parents could please make a voluntary contribution of appropriate festive refreshments' for the Christmas party they always put on after the carols. The note is printed in berry red and at the bottom, next to Miss Empson's signature, there is a snowman wearing a mortar board and a shy grin. But do not be deceived by the strenuous tone of informality or the outbreak of chummy exclamation marks!!! Oh, no. Notes from school are written in code, a code buried so cunningly in the text that it could only be deciphered at Bletchley Park or by guilty women in the advanced stages of sleep deprivation.

Take that word parents, for example. When they write 'parents' what they really mean, what they still mean, is mothers. (Has a father who has a wife on the premises ever read a note from school? Technically, it's not impossible, I suppose, but the note will have been a party invitation and, furthermore, it will have been an invitation to a party that has taken place at least ten days earlier.) And 'voluntary'? Voluntary is teacher-speak for 'On pain of death and/or your child failing to gain a place at the senior school of your choice'. As for 'appropriate festive refreshments', these are definitely not something bought by a lazy cheat in a supermarket.

How do I know that? Because I still recall the look my own mother exchanged with Mrs Frieda Davies in 1974, when a small boy in a dusty green parka approached the altar at Harvest Festival with two tins of Libby's cling peaches in a shoe box. The look was unforgettable. It said, what kind of sorry slattern has popped down to the Spar on the corner to celebrate God's bounty when what the good Lord clearly requires is a fruit medley in a basket with cellophane wrap? Or a plaited bread. Frieda Davies's bread, manoeuvred the length of the church by her twins, was plaited as thickly as the tresses of a Rhinemaiden.

'You see, Katharine,' Mrs Davies explained later, doing that disapproving upsneeze thing with her sinuses over teacakes, 'there are mothers who make an effort like your mum and me. And then you get the type of person who' – prolonged sniff – 'doesn't make the effort.'

Of course, I knew who they were. Women Who Cut Corners. Even back in 1974, the dirty word had started to spread about mothers who went out to work. Females who wore trouser suits and even, it was alleged, allowed their children to watch television while it was still light. Rumours of neglect clung to these creatures like dust to their pelmets.

So, you see, before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the twin-tub, and there were the other sort. At

the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of 13th December, hitting mince pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother made. Women used to have time to make mince pies and had to fake orgasms. Now we can manage the orgasms, but we have to fake the mince pies. And they call this progress.

'Damn. Damn. Where has Paula hidden the sieve?'

'Kate, what do you think you're doing? It's two o'clock in the morning.'

Richard is standing in the kitchen doorway wincing at the light. Rich with his Jermyn Street pyjamas, washed and tumbled to Babygro bobbliness. Rich with his acres of English reasonableness and his fraying kindness. Slow Richard, my American colleague Candy calls him, because work at his ethical architecture firm has slowed almost to a standstill and it takes him half an hour to take the bin out and he's always telling me to slow down.

'Slow down, Katie, you're like that funfair ride. What's it called? The one where the screaming people stick to the side so long as the damn thing keeps spinning?'

'Centrifugal force.'

'I know that. I meant what's the ride called?'

'No idea. Wall of Death?'

'Exactly.'

I can see his point. I'm not so far gone that I can't grasp there has to be more to life than forging pastries at midnight. And tiredness. Deep-sea diver tiredness, voyage to the bottom of fatigue tiredness; I've never really come up from it since Emily was born, to be honest. Five years of walking round in a lead suit of sleeplessness. But what's the alternative? Go into school this afternoon and brazen it out, slam a box of Sainsbury's finest down on the table of festive offerings? Then, to the Mummy Who's Never There and the Mummy Who Shouts, Emily can add the Mummy Who Didn't Make an Effort. Twenty years from now, when my daughter is arrested in the grounds of Buckingham Palace for attempting to kidnap the King, a

criminal psychologist will appear on the news and say: 'Friends trace the start of Emily Shattock's mental problems to a school carol concert where her mother, a shadowy presence in her life, humiliated her in front of her classmates.'

'Kate? Hello?'

'I need the sieve, Richard.'

'What for?'

'So I can cover the mince pies with icing sugar.'

'Why?'

'Because they are too evenly coloured and everyone at school will know that I haven't made them myself, that's why.'

Richard blinks slowly like Stan Laurel taking in another fine mess. 'Not why icing sugar. Why *cooking*, Katie, are you mad? You only got back from the States three hours ago. No one expects you to produce anything for the carol concert.'

'Well, *I* expect me to.' The anger in my voice takes me by surprise and I notice Richard flinch. 'So, where has Paula hidden the sodding sieve?'

Rich looks older suddenly. The frown line, once an amused exclamation mark between my husband's eyebrows, has deepened and widened without my noticing into a five-bar gate. My lovely, funny Richard, who once looked at me as Dennis Quaid looked at Ellen Barkin in *The Big Easy* and now, thirteen years into an equal, mutually supportive partnership, looks at me the way a smoking beagle looks at a medical researcher: aware that such experiments may need to be conducted for the sake of human progress, but still somehow pleading for release.

'Don't shout,' he sighs, 'you'll wake them.' One candy-striped arm gestures upstairs where our children are asleep. 'Anyway, Paula hasn't hidden it. You've got to stop blaming her for everything, Kate. The sieve lives in the drawer next to the microwave.'

'No, it lives right here in this cupboard.'

'Not since 1997 it doesn't. Darling, please come to bed. You have to be up in five hours.'

Seeing Richard go upstairs, I long to follow him, but I can't leave the kitchen in this state. I just can't. The room bears signs of heavy fighting; there is Lego shrapnel over a wide area and a couple of mutilated Barbies – one legless, one headless – are having some kind of picnic on our tartan travel rug, which is still matted with grass from its last outing on Primrose Hill in August. Over by the vegetable rack, on the floor, there is a heap of raisins which I'm sure was there the morning I left for the airport. Some things have altered in my absence: half a dozen apples have been added to the big glass bowl on the pine table that sits next to the doors leading out to the garden, but no one has thought to discard the old fruit beneath and the pears at the bottom have started weeping a sticky amber resin. As I throw each pear in the bin, I shudder a little at the touch of rotten flesh. After washing and drying the bowl, I carefully wipe any stray amber goo off the apples and put them back. The whole operation takes maybe seven minutes. Next, I start to swab the drifts of icing sugar off the stainless steel worktop, but the act of scouring releases an evil odour. I sniff the dishcloth. Slimy with bacteria, it has the sweet sickening stench of dead-flower water. Exactly how rancid would a dishcloth have to be before someone else in this house thought to throw it away?

I ram the dishcloth in the overflowing bin and look under the sink for a new one. There is no new one. Of course, there is no new one, Kate, you haven't been here to buy a new one. Retrieve old dishcloth from the bin and soak it in hot water with a dot of Dettol. All I need to do now is put Emily's wings and halo out for the morning.

I have just turned off the lights and am starting up the stairs when I have a bad thought. If Paula sees the Sainsbury's cartons in the bin, she will spread news of my Great Mince Pie forgery on the nanny grapevine. Oh, hell. Retrieving the cartons from the bin, I wrap them inside yesterday's paper, and carry the bundle at arm's length out through the front door. Looking right and left to make sure I am unobserved, I slip them into the big black sack at the front of the house. Finally, with the evidence of my guilt disposed of, I follow my husband up to bed.

Through the landing window and the December fog, a crescent moon is reclining in its deckchair over London. Even the moon gets to put its feet up once a month. Man in the Moon, of course. If it was a Woman in the Moon, she'd never sit down. Well, would she?

*

I TAKE MY TIME brushing my teeth. A count of twenty for each molar. If I stay in the bathroom long enough Richard will fall asleep and will not try to have sex with me. If we don't have sex, I can skip a bath in the morning. If I skip the bath, I will have time to start on the e-mails that have built up while I've been away and maybe even get some presents bought on the way to work. Only ten shopping days to Christmas, and I am in possession of precisely nine gifts, which leaves twelve to get plus stocking fillers for the children. And still no delivery from KwikToy, the rapid online present service.

'Kate, are you coming to bed?' Rich calls from the bedroom. His voice sounds slurry with sleep. Good.

'I have something I need to talk to you about. Kate?'

'In a minute,' I say. 'Just going up to make sure they're OK.'

I climb the flight of stairs to the next landing. The carpet is so badly frayed up here that the lip of each step looks like the dead grass you find under a marquee five days after a wedding. Someone's going to have an accident one of these days. At the top, I get my breath back and silently curse these tall, thin London houses. Standing in the stillness outside the children's doors, I can hear their different styles of sleeping – his piglet snufflings, her princess sighs.

When I can't sleep and, believe me, I would dream of sleep if my mind weren't too full of other stuff for dreams, I like to creep into Ben's room and sit on the blue chair and just watch him. My baby looks as though he has hurled himself at unconsciousness, like a very small man trying to leap aboard an accelerating bus. Tonight, he's sprawled the length of the cot on his front, arms extended, tiny fingers curled round an invisible pole. Nestled to his cheek is the disgusting kangaroo that he

worships; a shelf full of the finest stuffed animals an anxious parent can buy and what does he choose to love? A cross-eyed marsupial from the Woolies remainder bin. Ben can't tell us when he's tired yet, so he simply says Roo instead. He can't sleep without Roo because Roo to him means sleep.

It's the first time I've seen my son in four days. Four days, three nights. First there was the trip to Stockholm to spend some face time with a jumpy new client, then Rod Task called from the office and told me to get my ass over to New York and hold the hand of an old client who needed reassuring that the new client wasn't taking up too much of my time.

Benjamin never holds my absences against me. Too little still. He always greets me with helpless delight like a fan windmilling arms at a Hollywood première. Not his sister, though. Emily is five years old and full of jealous wisdom. Mummy's return is always the cue for an intricate sequence of snubs and punishments.

'Actually, Paula reads me that story.'

'But I want Dadda to give me a bath.'

Wallis Simpson got a warmer welcome from the Queen Mother than I get from Emily after a business trip. But I bear it. My heart sort of pleats inside and somehow I bear it. Maybe I think I deserve it.

I leave Ben snoring softly, and gently push the door of the other room. Bathed in the candied glow of her Cinderella light, my daughter is, as is her preference, naked as a newborn. (Clothes, unless you count bridal or princess wear, are a constant irritation to her.) When I pull the duvet up, her legs twitch in protest like a laboratory frog. Even when she was a baby Emily couldn't stand being covered. I bought her one of those zip-up sleep bags, but she thrashed around in it and blew out her cheeks like the God of Wind in the corner of old maps, till I had to admit defeat and gave it away. Even in sleep, when my girl's face has the furzy bloom of an apricot, you can see the determined jut to her chin. Her last school report said: 'Emily is a very competitive little girl and will need to learn to lose more gracefully.'

'Remind you of anyone, Kate?' said Richard and let out that trodden-puppy yelp he has developed lately.

There have been times over the past year when I have tried to explain to my daughter – I felt she was old enough to hear this – why Mummy has to go to work. Because Mum and Dad both need to earn money to pay for our house and for all the things she enjoys doing like ballet lessons and going on holiday. Because Mummy has a job she is good at and it's really important for women to work as well as men. Each time the speech builds to a stirring climax – trumpets, choirs, the tearful sisterhood waving flags – in which I assure Emily that she will understand all this when she is a big girl and wants to do interesting things herself.

Unfortunately, the case for equal opportunities, long established in liberal Western society, cuts no ice in the fundamentalist regime of the five-year-old. There is no God but Mummy, and Daddy is her prophet.

In the morning, when I'm getting ready to leave the house, Emily asks the same question over and over until I want to hit her and then, all the way to work, I want to cry for having wanted to hit her.

'Are you putting me to bed tonight? Is Mummy putting me to bed tonight? Are you? Who is putting me to bed tonight? Are you, Mum, are you?'

Do you know how many ways there are of saying the word no without actually using the word no? I do.

*Must Remember*

*Angel wings. Quote for new stair carpet. Take lasagne out of freezer for Saturday lunch. Buy kitchen roll, stainless steel special polish thingy, present and card for Harry's party. How old is Harry? Five? Six? Must get organised with well-stocked present drawer like proper mother. Buy Christmas tree and stylish lights recommended in* Telegraph *(Selfridges or Habitat? Can't remember. Damn). Nanny's Christmas bribe/present (Eurostar ticket? Cash? DKNY?). Emily wants Baby Wee-Wee doll (over my d. body). Present for Richard (Wine-tasting? Arsenal? Pyjamas?), in-laws book – The Lost Gardens*

*of Somewhere? Ask Richard to collect dry-cleaning. Office party what to wear? black velvet too small. Stop eating NOW. Fishnets lilac. Leg wax no time, shave instead. Book stress-busting massage. Highlights must book soonest (starting to look like mid-period George Michael). Pelvic floor squeeeeze! Supplies of Pill!!! Ice cake (Royal icing? – chk Delia). Cranberries. Mini party sausages. Stamps for cards Second class x 40. Present for E's teacher? And, whatever you do, wean Ben off dummy before Xmas with in-laws. Chase KwikToy, useless mail order present company. Smear test NB. Wine, Gin. Vin santo. Ring Mum. Where did I put Simon Hopkinson 'dry with hairdryer' goose recipe? Stuffing? Hamster???*

# 2

# *Work*

*6.37 am:* 'O, come let us a door him. O, come let us a door him. O, come let us a door hi-mmm!' I am stroked, tugged and, when that doesn't work, finally Christmas-carolled awake by Emily. She is standing by my side of the bed and she wants to know where her present is. 'You can't buy their love,' says my mother-in-law, who obviously never threw enough cash at the problem.

I did once try to come home empty-handed from a business trip, but on the way back from Heathrow I lost my nerve and got the cab to stop at Hounslow where I dived into a Toys'ЯUs, adding a toxic shimmer to my jet lag. Emily's global Barbie collection is now so sensationally slutty, it can only be a matter of time before it becomes a Tracey Emin exhibit. Flamenco Barbie, AC Milan Barbie (soccer strip, dinky boots), Thai Barbie – a flexible little minx who can bend over backwards and suck her own toes – and the one that Richard calls Klaus Barbie, a terrifying über-blonde with sightless blue eyes in jodhpurs and black boots.

'Mummy,' says Emily, weighing up her latest gift with a connoisseur's eye, 'this fairy Barbie could wave a wand and make the Little Baby Jesus not be cross.'

'Barbie isn't in the Baby Jesus story, Emily.'

She shoots me her best Hillary Clinton look, full of noble, this-pains-me-more-than-you condescension. 'Not *that* Baby Jesus,' she sighs, 'Another one, silly.'

You see, what you can buy from a five-year-old when you get back from a client visit is, if not love or even forgiveness, then an amnesty of sorts. Entire minutes when the need to blame is briefly overcome by the need to rip open a package in

a tantrum of glee. (Any working mother who says she doesn't bribe her kids can add Liar to her CV.) Emily now has a gift to mark each occasion of her mother's infidelity – playing away with her career – just as my mum got a new charm for her bracelet every time my father played away with other women. By the time Dad walked out when I was thirteen, Mum could barely lift the golden handcuff on her wrist.

I'm lying here thinking things could be a lot worse (at least my husband is not an alcoholic serial adulterer) when Ben totters into the bedroom and I can hardly believe what I'm seeing.

'Oh God, Richard, what's happened to his hair?'

Rich peers over the top of the duvet, as though noticing his son, who will be one in January, for the first time. 'Ah. Paula took him to that place by the garage. Said it was getting in his eyes.'

'He looks like something out of the Hitler Youth.'

'Well, it will grow back, obviously. And Paula thought, and I thought too, obviously, that the whole Fauntleroy ringlet thing – well, it's not how kids look these days, is it?'

'He's not *a kid*. He's my baby. And it's how I want him to look. Like a baby.'

Lately, I notice Rich has adopted a standard procedure for dealing with my rages. A sort of bowed-head, in-the-event-of-nuclear-attack submissive posture, but this morning he can't suppress a mutinous murmur.

'Don't think we could arrange an international conference call with the hairdresser at short notice.'

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

'It just means you've got to learn to let go, Kate.' And with one practised movement, he scoops up the baby, swipes the gangrenous snot from his tiny nose and heads downstairs for breakfast.

*7.15 am:* The change of gear between work and home is so abrupt sometimes that I swear I can hear the crunch of mesh in my brain. It takes a while to get back on to the children's

wavelength. Brimming with good intentions, I start off in Julie Andrews mode, all tennis-club enthusiasm and mad, sing-song emphases.

'*Now*, children, what would you *like* for *break*-fast to-*day*?'

Emily and Ben humour this kindly stranger for a while until Ben can take no more of it and stands up in his high-chair, reaches out and pinches my arm as though to make sure it's me. Their relief is plain as, over the next frazzled half-hour, the ratty bag they know as Mummy comes back. 'You're having Shreddies and that's it! No, we haven't got Fruitibix. I don't care what Daddy let you have.'

Richard has to leave early. A site visit with a client in Battersea. Can I do the handover with Paula? Yes, but only if I can leave at 7.45 on the dot.

*7.57 am*: And here she comes, flourishing the multiple excuses of the truly unapologetic. The traffic, the rain, the alignment of the stars. You know how it is, Kate. Indeed, I do. I cluck and sigh in the designated sympathy pauses while my nanny makes herself a cup of coffee and flicks without interest through my paper. To point out that in the twenty-six months Paula has been our children's carer she has managed to be late every fourth morning would be to risk a row, and a row would contaminate the air that my children breathe. So no, there won't be a row. Not today. Three minutes to get to the bus, eight minutes' walk away.

*8.27 am*: I am going to be late for work. Indecently, intrepidly late. Bus lane is full of buses. Abandon bus. Make lung-scorching sprint down City Road and then cut across Finsbury Square where my heels skewer into the forbidden grass and I attract the customary loud *Oy!* from the old guy whose job it is to shout at you for running across the grass.

'Oy, Miss! Cancha go round the outside like everyone else?'

Being shouted at is embarrassing, but I am beginning to worry that a small, shameful part of me really likes being called Miss in a public place. At the age of thirty-five, with gravity and

two small children dragging you down, you have to take your compliments where you can. Besides, I reckon the short cut saves me two and a half minutes.

*8.47 am*: One of the City's oldest and most distinguished institutions, Edwin Morgan Forster stands at the corner of Broadgate and St Anthony's Lane; a nineteenth-century fortress with a great jutting prow of twentieth-century glass, it looks as though a liner has crashed into a department store and come out the other side. Approaching the main entrance, I slow to a trot and run through my kit inspection.

Shoes, matching, two of? Check.

No baby sick on jacket? Check.

Skirt not tucked into knickers? Check.

Bra not visible? Check.

OK, I'm going in. Stride briskly across the marble atrium and flash my pass at Gerald in security. Since the revamp eighteen months ago, the lobby of Edwin Morgan Forster, which used to look like a bank, now resembles one of those zoo enclosures designed by Russian constructivists to house penguins. Every surface is an eyeball-piercing Arctic white except the back wall, which is painted the exact turquoise of the Yardley gift soap favoured by my Great Aunt Phyllis thirty years ago, but which was described by the lobby's designer as an 'oceangoing colour of vision and futurity'. For this piece of wisdom, a firm which is paid to manage other people's money handed over an unconfirmed $750,000.

Can you believe this building? Seventeen floors served by four lifts. Divide by 430 employees, factor in six button-pushing ditherers, two mean bastards who won't hold the door and Rosa Klebb with a sandwich trolley and you either have a possible four-minute wait or take the stairs. I take the stairs.

Arrive on Floor 13 with fuschia face and walk straight into Robin Cooper-Clark, our pinstriped Director of Investment. The clash of odours is as immediate as it is pungent. Me: Eau de Sweat. Him: Floris Elite with under-notes of Winchester and walnut dashboard.

Robin is exceptionally tall and it is one of his gifts that he manages to look down at you without actually looking down on you, without making you feel in any way small. It came as no surprise to learn in an obituary last year that his father was a bishop with a Military Cross. Robin has something both saintly and indestructible about him: there have been times at EMF when I have thought I would die if it weren't for his kindness and lightly mocking respect.

'Remarkable colour, Kate, been skiing?' Robin's mouth is twitching up at the corners and on its way to a smile, but one bushy grey eyebrow arches towards the clock above the dealing desk.

Can I risk pretending that I've been in since seven and just slipped out for a cappuccino? A glance across the office tells me that my assistant Guy is already smirking purposefully by the water cooler. Damn. Guy must have spotted me at exactly the same moment because, across the bowed heads of the traders, phones cradled under their chins, over the secretaries and the European desk and the Global Equities team in their identical purple Lewin's shirts, comes the Calling-All-Superiors voice of my assistant. 'I've put the document from Bengt Bergman on your desk, Katharine,' he announces. 'Sorry to see you've had problems getting in again.'

Notice that use of the word 'again' – the drop of poison on the tip of the dagger. Little creep. When we funded Guy Chase through the European Business School three years ago, he was a Balliol brainache with a four-piece suit and a personal hygiene deficit. He came back wearing charcoal Armani and the expression of someone with a Master's in Blind Ambition. I think I can honestly say that Guy is the only man at Edwin Morgan Forster who likes the fact that I have kids. Chickenpox, summer holidays, carol concerts – all are opportunities for Guy to shine in my absence. I can see Robin Cooper-Clark looking at me expectantly now. Think, Kate, think.

It is possible to get away with being late in the City. The key thing is to offer what my lawyer friend Debra calls a Man's Excuse. Senior managers who would be frankly appalled by the

story of a vomiting nocturnal baby or an AWOL nanny (mysteriously, childcare, though paid for by both parents, is always deemed to be the female's responsibility) are happy to accept anything to do with the internal combustion engine. '*The car broke down/was broken into*.' '*You should have seen the – fill in scene of mayhem – at the – fill in street*.' Either of these will do very well. Car alarms have been a valuable recent addition to the repertoire of male excuses because, although displaying female symptoms – hair-trigger unpredictability, high-pitched shrieking – they are attached to a Man's Excuse and can be taken to a garage to be fixed.

'You should have seen the mess at Dalston Junction,' I tell Robin, composing my features into a mask of stoic urban resignation and, with outstretched arms, indicating a whole vista of car carnage. 'Some maniac in a white van. Traffic lights out of sync. Unbelievable. Must have been stuck there, oh, twenty minutes.'

He nods: 'London driving almost makes one grateful for Network Southeast.'

There is a heartbeat of a pause. A pause in which I try to ask about the health of Jill Cooper-Clark, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in the summer. But Robin is one of those Englishmen equipped from birth with an early-warning system which helps them to intercept and deflect any incoming questions of a personal nature. So, even as my lips are forming his wife's name, he says, 'I'll get Christine to fix a lunch for us, Kate. You know they've converted some cellar by the Old Bailey – serving up lightly grilled witness, no doubt. Sounds amusing, don't you think?'

'Yes, I was just wondering how—'

'Splendid. Talk later.'

By the time I reach the haven of my desk, I've regained my composure. Here's the thing: I love my job. It may not always sound like it, but I do. I love the blood-rush when the stocks I took a punt on deliver the goods. I get a kick out of being one of the handful of women in the Club Lounge at the airport,