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EATING THE AFTERBIRTH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing.

ABSTRACT

This research report consists of two parts: a theoretical introduction and a creative project. In the theoretical introduction I have examined various pregnancy and child-care manuals together with popular literature in an attempt to explore some of the representations of motherhood. The areas I touched on include: pregnancy, labour pain, natural birth, breastfeeding, postnatal depression, working mothers and child care. The creative project incorporates all these different facets of motherhood and consists of two chapters of a novel written in the popular form referred to as "chick lit".

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

_____

(Name of candidate)

_____ day of _____ 2005

DEDICATION

To my son Liam.

What did my fingers do before they held him?
What did my heart do, with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear.
His lids are like the lilac flower
And soft as a moth, his breath.
I shall not let go
There is no guile or warp in him. May he keep so.

Sylvia Plath. “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices” (as cited in Moore, 1999: 109, 110)

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1. THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Representation of Woman as Mother in Pregnancy and Childcare Manuals and Popular Fiction

The representation of women in society has been an important focus for feminist literary theorists. Definitive works such as "The Second Sex" by Simone de Beauvoir, pose the question "What is a woman?". And the first definition de Beauvoir discusses is "woman is a womb" (1997: 13). Women are therefore defined by their ability to bear children, an onerous and dangerous task according to de Beauvoir, who states that "gestation is a fatiguing task of no individual benefit to the woman but on the contrary demanding heavy sacrifices" (1997: 62). She goes on to mention how debilitating morning sickness is in the first trimester, how the foetus saps the mother's strength throughout the pregnancy and how the birth itself is painful and dangerous. Once the child is born, the mother still has no respite, for breastfeeding, according to de Beauvoir, is tiring, can cause fevers and be painful (1997: 62-63). She paints a grim picture but does concede – somewhat begrudgingly – in her footnotes that she is "taking […] a purely physiological viewpoint" and that motherhood can have psychological benefits for certain women (1997: 62); women who perhaps are more inclined to act on their so-called "maternal instinct".

But does the "maternal instinct" even exist? Jane Mills, in her dictionary for women entitled "Womanwords A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society", examines the Oxford Dictionary definition of the term "maternal":

> From the dictionaries a picture emerges of women unconsciously compelled to become mothers and, once they are, to feel and display 'natural' emotions of love, warmth and desire to breed and to nurture. Any woman who lacks this instinct is not 'natural'… (1991: 148)

Thus motherhood is not really a choice, but a compulsion to bear children which all "natural" women share. De Beauvoir disputes the existence of this "instinct", and in

"The Second Sex" lists numerous examples of women (including herself) who had no desire to become mothers and who did not feel diminished by their choice (as cited in Mills, 1991: 148). One cannot help but get the feeling that these women would have been labelled "unfeminine" and "unnatural" by the establishment for making such a rational choice. For anything rational is seen to be a male attribute, as opposed to the "irrationality" of the female position.

In both her definitions of "maternal" and "mother", Mills makes the link between women and nature (1991: 148, 169). Women represent nature because they are seen to be unpredictable and ruled by instinct; men on the other hand represent culture because they are supposedly governed by reason (1991: 148). As Mills points out "The picture of paternity" refers to a man whose "conscious feelings are governed by his intellect" (1991: 148). Adrienne Rich takes this discussion further:

> Institutionalised motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realisation, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (as cited in Oakley, 1993a: 199).

Thus the "good" mother is not valued for her intelligence, but for her ability to serve; she is the woman who puts her family's needs – and indeed everyone else's – before her own. After all, what a woman represents, Margaret Walters argues, is more important than what she experiences (as cited in Mills, 1991: 169). The "Virgin" Mary is a case in point, for the Madonna epitomizes the perfect mother despite the fact that the virgin birth is most likely a myth. "Thy will be done," Mary says to God's angelic emissary as she surrenders to the divine pregnancy. Like many women today embarking on their first pregnancy, she clearly had no idea what she was letting herself in for.

Due to the disintegration of the extended family, first-time mothers in Western society today often have little experience of newborns. This has increased the popularity of self-help books in the form of pregnancy guides and child-care manuals. The genre is more prosaic and less examined than literature or literary

criticism, but offers women representations of motherhood that seem more accessible and practical than the picture of motherhood painted by de Beauvoir. Deborah Jackson, in her alternative child-care guide entitled "Baby Wisdom", comments on the popularity of the genre:

> Home life is segregated so that only a few adults have extended experience of babies and small children. Schools keep children in strict peer groups. The workplace is surrounded by an invisible infant-repellent. It is possible for new parents never to have held a real, live baby before their own. So, like public school boys entering a world with women in it, we tend to regard newborns as an alien species. When we give birth to our own little alien, we seek simple formulas to help us tame this foreigner with his unrecognizable ways. (2002: xi)

To be pregnant now involves research and, as Joanne H. Wright says, most middle-class women have been taught to trust the "scientific" approach of these books rather than be influenced by the "old-wives' tales" of their mothers and grandmothers. She argues that these advice books are contradictory because they issue reams of technical advice on pregnancy and child-rearing and at the same time reiterate that mothering is instinctual (2001: 127, 128). She quotes Susan Maushart, who clearly feels that research is no substitute for experience:

> …what we don't know about motherhood is what we refuse to hear and refuse to see in the lives of women around us, in the arrogant presumption that we are unique, that we will be different. Ultimately, we will pay dearly for our hubris. (2001: 128)

For where once first-time mothers would have turned to their closest female relatives for advice on mothering and childcare, they now reach for the "What to Expect" series[1].

In her essay "Confinements: The Domestic in the Discourses of Upper-Middle-Class Pregnancy", Helena Michie explains the concept of the "domestic carcerel" through an examination of the rhetoric of the first "What to Expect" book

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[1] "What to Expect When You're Expecting" is a pregnancy manual sometimes referred to as the "yuppie bible" of pregnancy (Michie, 1997: 60). It's co-authored by three North American women: Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff and Sandee E. Hathaway. There are two other books in the series: "What to Expect the First Year" and "What to Expect the Toddler Years".

which illustrates how "home becomes both site and instrument of the policing of pregnant women" (1997: 60). Michie refers specifically to the "Best Odds Diet" which uses food as a big stick to threaten, cajole and control the mother. The correct diet is seen as a preventative measure for a whole range of conditions affecting the pregnant woman. "Promoting elasticity in your skin by nourishing it with a good diet may also help" (Murkoff et al, 2002: 162) in the prevention of stretch marks. "Following the Pregnancy Diet" can minimize depression (Murkoff et al, 2002: 128) and can reduce the risk of certain birth defects (Murkoff et al, 2002: 83). The "Pregnancy Diet" referred to is, however, not something the majority of women would choose to follow. The authors assume that women have time to bake delights such as "Fruity Oatmeal Cookies" (Murkoff et al, 2002: 102), sweetened with fruit juice, not sugar, and that all women naturally give up alcohol in their pregnancy (Murkoff et al, 2002: 87).

What is apparent whilst reading the majority of these pregnancy and childcare manuals is that above all they seek to reassure the mother or mother-to-be, even if it means massaging the truth. Many of the books gloss over the pain of labour and find other ways to describe it. The "What to Expect" refers to "increasing discomfort" (Murkoff et al, 2002: 364) to describe the contractions in the second stage of labour. The contractions during transition are referred to as being "very strong" (Murkoff et al, 2002: 367). North American midwife Ina May Gaskin in her "Guide to Childbirth" dislikes the term contractions and uses the term "rushes" instead (2003: 33). Her descriptions of labour verge on the orgasmic and make it sound like something one might like to participate in on a Friday evening after a few cocktails. "Chris" describes his partner's labour at Ina May's birthing centre, "The Farm":

> As Sue's labour intensified, time really lost all of its meaning. We cuddled up close, and I rubbed her back and the delicious belly, which erupted into quakes, making her navel point to high heaven. We welled into each other's arms and floated away on the waves of the contractions. (2003: 93)

The discourse of Gaskin's book promotes birth without fear; the authors want to empower pregnant women to give birth naturally and statistically they seem to be achieving this. During the period 1970 to 2000 95,1% of the births at "the Farm" were home deliveries and 8,8% of the women did not tear or require an episiotomy (2003: Appendix A). Extremely impressive when you consider that almost 50% of all births at private hospitals in Johannesburg are Caesareans (Sister Lillian, 1996: 141). But the high rate of natural deliveries at the farm is no accident and reading the book is no substitute for a highly experienced team of midwives and doulas. Women who try the methods favoured by Gaskin might feel cheated, if not downright terrified, when they discover that labour isn't quite as much fun as she makes out, and they have to resort to an epidural or Caesarean. And not all women feel comfortable with the idea of a home birth, or even want to labour in the soothing surrounds of a natural birth unit. Helena Michie recalls being taken on a tour of the natural birth unit at her local hospital where everything "folded out, up, or down in the process of turning into something else" like the apparatus in a gothic horror story. She alone in the group of expectant parents felt reassured by the normal operating rooms (1997: 59).

The problem, as Susan Maushart sees it, is that giving birth has become a kind of performance for women, '"a testing of their maternal mettle"' (as cited in Wright, 2001: 126). In previous generations women were just grateful if the baby was born alive and without any birth defects. Now the type of birth itself has been given a disproportionate significance and involves rigorous preparation ranging from twice-daily perineal massage to prevent an episiotomy to the drawing up of a birth plan to avoid unwanted medical intervention. Different types of births are also considered to be "better" or "worse" for the mother and particularly for the child, depending on whether the literature concerned is pro-natural birth. For example, the "What to Expect" books clearly are not big fans of home births and suggest that women should rather seek out the natural birth unit at a local hospital (Murkoff et al 2002: 16),

whereas the opposite is true of Ina May Gaskin's guide where the majority of births are home deliveries.

But no matter where the self-help books stand on the natural birth continuum, they all like to present women with an image of the birthing mother who is in control of her situation. According to Maushart and Wright, the reality of the situation is not so much about choice as it is about chance:

> Recognizing the lottery of childbirth might be scary for some simply because it means we have to admit to ourselves that we do not control it, but at the same time it also frees us from the trap of seeing childbirth as a test or performance. (Wright, 2001: 127)

Maushart also rails against the rhetoric of the antenatal education classes which assign such weight to the actual birth, forgetting that it is just one or two days and that '"motherhood is forever"' (as cited in Wright, 2001: 126). The classes would do better to place more focus on coping mechanisms for new parents, with particular regard to breastfeeding which, as Maushart insightfully points out "is not merely an 'option' but a way of lif." (as cited in Wright, 2001: 127). "For most women new to breastfeeding, a shower is an accomplishment", says Wright (2001: 127), but women are given little idea of the commitment it entails in the self-help books or antenatal education classes.

There is also the mistaken notion that "breastfeeding comes easily and naturally to all women" (Wright, 2001: 127) as propagated by what Naomi Wolf in her book "Misconceptions" calls the "lactation fascists" (2002: 229). The "breast is best" brigade that Wolf refers to take an almost evangelical approach to breastfeeding, so much so that they tend to regard formula as the elixir of Satan, and mothers who choose to supplement as his emissaries. Wright comments on what she refers to as the "breastfeeding contract":

> Yes, on the surface, everybody gains: baby gets the best nourishment; mother does not have to prepare bottles; and both enjoy the unique bonding experience. But breastfed babies also tend to sleep for shorter durations, increasing their mother's fatigue, and breastfeeding is, for a significant number of women, a very painful experience. (2001: 127)

The less congenial aspects of breastfeeding, including conditions such as thrush and mastitis are, for the most part, breezily dismissed in the self-help books as only affecting a small minority of new mothers and fortunately being of a short duration. Any advice given seems to be somewhat superficial and does not fully acknowledge the fact that some of these conditions are arguably as painful as the labour itself.

Unfortunately the message implicit in the rhetoric of the antenatal education classes and the advice books is that from the moment of conception, the mother's rights and needs are seen to be secondary to that of the foetus/child. So much so that Helena Michie compares the image of the free-floating foetus from the Right-to-Life's "The Silent Scream" to the pictures and subtext in the pregnancy advice books:

> The rhetoric of liberal advice culture, with its benign gestures toward working women and its repeated invocations of female autonomy during the process of birth and labour, produces a fetus and a pregnancy eerily reminiscent of the one at the visual and emotional center of Right-to-Life propaganda. (1997: 67)

The woman as an autonomous individual ceases to exist the day she falls pregnant. It's little wonder then that, as Ann Oakley points out in an article on postnatal depression, "four fifths of women in our society are depressed after birth, about a third most or some of the time" (1993b: 203). The "What to Expect" once again sugarcoats the experience by using the term "blues" instead of "depression": "Roughly 60 to 80 per cent of all new mothers find themselves feeling at least a little blue at least occasionally during one of the happiest times of their lives" (Murkoff et al, 2002: 411). This description merely serves to trivialize what women have to cope with in those first few weeks and months post-partum.

Dr Paula Nicolson, in her book "Postnatal Depression – facing the paradox of loss, happiness and motherhood" says that the new mother should be allowed the space to grieve for the loss of self; indeed the grief reaction she experiences is normal and healthy (2001: 26). Nicolson argues that:

> Postnatal depression needs to be re-conceptualised as part of the normal experience of most women when they become mothers. […] Women and men have to understand the

> consequences of motherhood in the context of Western industrial life in the absence of kinship networks, in the face of financial struggle, gender inequalities and gender power relations in the family. (2001: 179)

Perhaps de Beauvoir's gloomy portrait of motherhood is not so far off the mark after all, even though it was written over fifty years ago when women were accustomed to less freedom, financial and otherwise, than they are today. The dilemma that women still face now is that: '…babies have an absolute need to be mothered but mothers, however "maternal" they are, only have a relative need for their babies.' (Oakley, 1993a: 199)

This dilemma is the subject of Allison Pearson's novel "I don't know how she does it". Pearson's story of protagonist Kate Reddy gives women a warts-and-all account of what it really means to be a working mother, and offers mothers the kind of support that is often lacking in the literary canon. Pearson describes the ambivalence felt by her protagonist on becoming a mother for the first time:

> …the sudden lack of liberty could be as stunning as being parted from a limb; entwined with the intense feeling of love for your baby was a thin thread of loss, and maybe we will always ache like an amputee. (2002: 293)

The novel has been described as chick lit, a genre which Erica Jong dismisses as being "nothing more than the contemporary version of the 'how to get married novel' invented by Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen – and done much better by them" (as cited in Jacobson, 2004: 24). However, if one examines the genre of Chick Lit within the framework of feminist critical theory, which has "attempted to free itself from naturalized patriarchal notions of the literary and the literary-critical" (Selden et al, 1997: 122), then the supposed lack of literary value of these books should not be an issue. As Princeton Professor Emeritus Elaine Showalter says, "I don't see myself as above any of this […]. Some of these women are writing really fine work about what women face in these times" (as cited in Jacobson, 2004: 14). This is particularly true of Pearson's novel, which in dealing with the conflicts of combining a corporate career and children, dares to mention the unmentionable – that

in fact women can't have it all. Unlike most traditional Chick Lit, there is no happy ending for protagonist Kate Reddy, who gives up work only to find that she is bored stiff by the demands of being a full-time mother.

North American academics, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, have coined the term "new momism" in their book "The Mommy Myth" to describe the pressures placed on mothers today, and say that it's no longer a case of "having it all"; now women are "having to do it all".

> By the mid-'90's in addition to piping Mozart into our wombs, we had to drill with flashcards at nine months, and pretty soon we had to wear them for the first three years of their lives, oh and we're supposed to look sexy while we're doing it! (as cited in Frey, 2004: 24)

Pearson's protagonist faces the same hurdles, but through a mixture of humour and pathos the book never descends to the level of a post-feminist rant. The shameful notion of the "bad mother" is explored and demystified through the use of humour, and in the safe space of the fictionalized form.

But not everyone is amused or sympathetic to the plight of the working mother. There are some who feel that Kate Reddy and her ilk should stop whining and count their blessings. Myrna Blyth, author of "Spin Sisters" and former editor of the Ladies Home Journal calls Pearson's novel "hysterical" and a "joke", and feels that someone with a cleaner, a nanny and a new-age husband should not be entitled to any sympathy (as cited in Turner, 2004: 78). Blyth's argument centres around the fact that women today – and clearly she refers to white, middle-class women – are the most fortunate generation in the history of the world as regards health, education, work and longevity and so should stop complaining (as cited in Turner, 2004: 77). Camille Paglia in an article entitled "The Big Udder" echoes these sentiments almost word for word in a kind of "God Bless America and particularly its sons" diatribe that condemns working women who complain about their lot in life (1993: 87 – 90). But unlike Blyth, Paglia does not agree that women can "have it all". She thinks they

should choose because, as she dramatically asserts, “There is nothing more important than motherhood” (1993: 89).

Paglia lays the burden of child care firmly on the mother’s shoulders. “No husband or day-care center can ever adequately substitute for a mother’s attention” (1993: 89), she declares. But Naomi Wolf in “Misconceptions” (2002: 187) and Deborah Jackson in “Baby Wisdom” (2002: xii) both point out that Western society has done new mothers a grave disservice by expecting them to recover from the birth, nurture their newborn, and perhaps even care for other children almost single-handedly. Ann Oakley explains the exhaustion and depression she experienced as a young mother: “I did have every reason to feel exhausted. Two young children have not been one woman’s exclusive responsibility and workload throughout most of history.” (1993b: 203). The old saying, “It takes a whole village to raise a child” never seems more apt than in the early years of child-rearing.

Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels agree that mothers do have a heavy burden to carry and see good, affordable day care as the solution (as cited in Frey, 2004: 24). Naomi Wolf echoes this, but adds that men need to share some of the responsibility. She also voices her concern about the children of the caregivers in her Washington neighbourhood in the United States:

> The kids were almost all white. Women cared for the children. In our Washington neighbourhood, during the week, there were no men. The women who cared for the white children were brown and black caregivers and white mothers. The brown and black children of the caregivers […] were nowhere to be seen in that picture. (2002: 215)

She goes on to talk about the illegal immigrants – women who have had to leave their children behind to find work as nannies in North America. She also highlights the plight of the local African-American caregivers who have to send their children to substandard day-care facilities to enable them to look after the white children of the employers (2002: 219).

The situations she describes seem eerily familiar to the child-care system in South Africa, where women from countries to the North of us or semi-literate women from the rural areas leave their children in search of domestic employment in the urban areas. Even the workers who live locally generally have a two-hour bus trip from the townships to the suburbs where they are employed and they either have to rely on the extended family or find some sort of day care for their children. Domestic workers who live in depend on the goodwill of their employers to allow them to have their children living with them, and this brings its own set of problems. As Wolf points out, the caregiver may seem to be "one of the family" due to the nature of the work, but she is still only "an employee" (2002: 217).

More affluent (mostly white) South Africans do have access to decent child-minders or day care, but there is still the pressure for women not to work. Douglas and Michaels comment on this issue: "The mythology of the new momism, now insinuates that, when all is said and done, the enlightened mother chooses to stay at home with the kids" (as cited in Frey, 2004: 24). The pair are both working mothers themselves, and admit that despite the love they feel for their kids they still do not want to spend 24 hours a day with them. They think that women should stop apologising for wanting to work and state that "many mothers work because they like it" even though "they're not supposed to say that" (as cited in Frey, 2004: 24). But they also rightly point out that for most working mothers it's not an issue of choice – they work because they have to and not because they're "well-heeled yuppies who dump their newborns off at day care six weeks after delivery" to "streak back to the office" as described by Paglia (1993: 89).

In addition to affordable day care, Douglas and Michaels feel that there needs to be some "change in consciousness among women themselves" so that they are able to make certain demands without feeling like bad mothers (as cited in Frey, 2004: 24). Naomi Wolf concludes her book "Misconceptions" with "A Mother's Manifesto", a kind of "way forward" which discusses the ways in which westernized

societal structures need to change to accommodate not only mothers, but fathers and children too (2002: 243-246). Wright, in her article, speaks of how women need to break the silence and engage in an open and honest dialogue about the "mask of motherhood". She emphasizes that it will only be through talking about these issues that we, as mothers, will be able to effect real social and economic change (2001: 128-129).

It was in this spirit that I began writing "Eating the Afterbirth", a fictionalized account of my own experiences as a working mother, combined with the collective experiences of other mothers I have interacted with at antenatal classes and on the crèche and school circuit. The title "Eating the Afterbirth" is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the practice (mostly amongst alternative intellectuals) of eating the placenta, as some mammals are known to do after giving birth, to ward off post-natal depression. The discourse of "Eating the Afterbirth" is primarily concerned with exploring the ambivalence felt, but not always acknowledged, by women towards the process of mothering and, more painfully, towards their offspring themselves. It also examines the challenges faced and sacrifices made by both working and stay-at-home mothers who are often vilified by society for neglecting their children in favour of their careers, or are patronized for not having a "proper job".

The protagonist of the novel, Jo, is a 35-year-old scriptwriter, wife and mother of two who is struggling to cope with the demands of a stressful career while simultaneously trying to be the perfect mom to her two small children. The other story arcs deal with different facets of motherhood and how it is represented in society. The first of these centres around Jo's correspondence with her best friend Carrie, who is newly pregnant with her first child and living in London. I placed Carrie in London for three reasons: firstly to explore the device of letter-writing in the form of emails; secondly to examine the differences and similarities of pregnancy and childbirth in the UK as opposed to South Africa; and to make the novel more appealing to a wider audience.

Both Jo and Carrie are obsessed with celebrity culture, feel-good talk shows and self-help books. Carrie eagerly absorbs the advice dished out in her pregnancy manuals, but is disappointed when it seems to be at odds with her own experience of pregnancy:

> I wondered if there was such a thing as prenatal depression, the books talk about "mild mood swings" but I feel really awful. […] And whoever called it morning sickness should be shot. It's like an all-day hangover without the party.

Jo, in her role as second-time mother, gives Carrie the kind of practical, "tell it like it is" advice that can't be found in any book. She instructs Carrie to:

> [i]gnore the books, most of them talk utter crap. It's totally normal to feel depressed and then to feel guilty because you should be happy that you're pregnant and then to be depressed again because you're sure your guilt and depression are having a negative effect on your darling child. I was totally depressed when I was pregnant with Dom – so much so that I even took Prozac for a while and he is the calmest, sunniest child imaginable (must have been all that Prozac). The nausea is kak and there is no cure, but it usually goes away by the thirteenth week – I used to find that cheese and tomato sandwiches and salt and vinegar chips were the best things to eat.

Jo tells Carrie to "ignore the books" because, unlike Carrie, she has already experienced the gap between the reality of motherhood and the rhetoric of the advice books. Jo constantly compares and contrasts "what the book says" with her own less "perfect" behaviour. In this extract Jo "adapts" some of the advice from a child-care manual in an attempt to get her son to stop whining:

> At this point I have to take a deep breath and try to remember the six steps to effective anger management when dealing with irritating toddlers.
>
> 1. Stop!
> 2. Take a deep breath.
>
> Already did that. Suppose another one can't hurt. I look like I'm hyperventilating. The caretaker regards me with interest.
>
> 3. Do not smack!
> 4. Do not shout!

5. Get down to your child's level and calmly and clearly explain to him why his actions are inappropriate.
6. If he continues to behave in an inappropriate manner resort to time out.

Right. I plaster a frightening Stepford Wives smile on my face and drop down to his level.

"Luke, you are pissing Mommy off," I hiss through a rictus grin. "Now shut up and get in the car otherwise you won't go to the party this afternoon."

Another important story arc concerns Jo's domestic worker, Christina, who has a five-year-old daughter called Brooke (after the popular television character from "The Bold and The Beautiful"). As the novel progresses Jo finds it increasingly irksome having Christina's child living on the property, and when both Christina and her daughter are diagnosed with HIV she is faced with a whole new set of challenges. I included the character of Brooke to highlight the difficulties experienced by employer, employee and the children who stay with their mothers in the homes of their employers. I added the complication of the HIV infection to explore the prejudice experienced by people living with AIDS on a daily basis. For even Jo, with her post-graduate education and left-wing principles, has to cope with her irrational fears that somehow her children will be infected with HIV through contact with Christina and her daughter.

A more minor story arc deals with Nick's sister-in-law Angie, who is married to Nick's older brother Andrew, a successful advocate. Jo likes Angie, who she says would be "completely irritating if she weren't so goddamn nice", but she also feels inadequate compared to this "supermom" who has four children, but always seems to have everything under control. Angie represents the archetypal "perfect mother", but it becomes increasingly clear as the story unfolds that her life is far from perfect when she discovers that her husband has been having an affair. As a result of all the upheavals that these revelations bring her eldest son, Aston, begins experimenting with drugs and her eldest daughter, Aja, starts showing signs of becoming anorexic. Angie moves out, leaving Andrew to cope with the kids on his own, and eventually

gets herself a part-time job after admitting that being a stay-at-home mom was boring her to death.

The last narrative strand deals with pregnancy and birth as it is depicted in popular culture and follows the story of the newly pregnant Cat, the leading character in the soap opera Jo writes for. Cat's experiences bear little relation to reality and are in direct contrast to Carrie's experience, which runs the gamut from nausea, depression and piles during pregnancy to the episiotomy, stretch marks and colic after the birth.

The graphic nature of this type of subject matter can be alienating, so the book follows a classic chick-lit format: "working mother realizes the grass is not greener on the other side" to make it more accessible despite the relentlessness of the topic. The comedic element particular to the "romcom" genre allows the narrator to highlight the absurdity of the social order without being polemical. The following extract is taken from Jo's experiences at a four-year-old birthday party:

> The party drags on. […] I wish they'd just do the bladdy cake so we can get out of here, but first we have to sit through a very bad puppet show which the Kaftan has written herself in honour of little Nontsikelelo's fourth birthday. Nontsikelelo is lily white, I might add, and speaks with cut-glass vowels, but the Kaftan insisted on giving her an African name to demonstrate her commitment to the Rainbow Nation. The Kaftan also likes to talk mistily about the Struggle, forgetting that we were at the same university and the only struggling she did was with assorted boys at parties in the Student Union.

Humour, according to Freud, is useful because it allows for "the harmless release of antisocial emotions" (as cited in Double:89). Thus the protagonist, in trying to cope with her child's tantrum, speaks of "having a lot of sympathy with the woman who drowned her five children in the bath". The use of black humour in this way allows the protagonist to express her "antisocial emotions" so that the reader can empathize with her and be amused rather than shocked. Especially considering that the case referred to was an extremely tragic true-life event where a mother with a bad

case of PND and very little support killed her five small children. Despite the initial shock that this story evoked, many women felt a sneaking sense of sympathy for the mother, because in some small way they could identify with the extreme emotions that looking after young children can engender in a caregiver. Humour allows a taboo subject like this to be explored without it being offensive.

However, the story also needs to have more poignant moments to contrast with the humour, as at the end of chapter one where Jo gets to bed and finds her husband already sleeping:

> Nick is snoring by the time I climb into bed, his face slack, his mouth half-open. His snoring reminds me of my father. Oh God, what happened to the young, sexy couple we used to be? I lie in bed, mind racing, unable to sleep even though I'm exhausted. The snoring is really starting to irritate me.
>
> "Nick," I hiss, "you're snoring." It reaches a crescendo. "NICK, YOU'RE SNORING!"
>
> "Whaaa, what's the matter?"
>
> "You're snoring."
>
> "Sorry." He turns over and goes back to sleep.
>
> Wistfully I remember the days when I used to fall asleep on his chest. Now we never even seem to touch each other. I close my eyes and try to sleep.

The last two lines make the protagonist seem more vulnerable and consequently more likeable, which is important for this genre. They also prevent the writing from becoming glib and one-dimensional.

For the character of the husband, Nick, the challenge was to make sure that he did not appear to be too unsympathetic, otherwise the reader would find the relationship between him and the protagonist not believable.

> "You're not going to work now, are you?"
>
> "I have to. I've still got two scenes to write."
>
> "Hmm." Nick looks pissed off.
>
> "What?"
>
> "Nothing." I wait. "It's just that you always seem to be working. D'you know we've had sex only once in the last eight weeks?"

> I think the fact that we've managed to have any sex at all is pretty amazing considering we have a baby, a toddler, and two full-time jobs between us.
>
> "Sorry."
>
> "It's not your fault," he says impatiently.
>
> "It'll get better. It's just difficult now with me breastfeeding and the kids being sick…did you give Dom some Calpol?"
>
> "Yes." I can see he's not impressed that I've changed the subject, but this is really not the time to have a big heart-to-heart about our non-existent sex life. I try to concentrate on the scene I'm writing, but I can't because now I'm also irritated. Perhaps if you earned more money then I wouldn't have to work, I think. It's not as if I wanted to go back to work when Dom was three weeks old. Maybe I'd like to spend a bit more time at home with the kids. Actually scrap that last bit, if I spent anymore time with the kids I'd be a certified child-batterer by now.

This extract illustrates to the reader that Jo's irritation with her husband has less to do with his shortcomings, and is a result of the normal tension that exists between a couple who are struggling to balance career, family and relationships. Just as Nick understands that their non-existent sex life is not her fault, so Jo realizes that even if they didn't need the money, she would still work because she needs to be something more than just Nick's wife or the mother of his children.

Jo begins the novel by saying "I'm 35 years old and what have I done with my life?" She feels as if she is drowning in domesticity, which explains why she is attracted to the glamour of celebrity culture, and the easy formulas of the self-help manuals. It takes the loss of her job and the near breakdown of her marriage for her to realize that there is no formula, and that certain aspects of life will always be beyond her control. "Research is no substitute for experience" becomes her mantra and the foundation for the column she is approached to write for a local baby magazine, "Thula na na". Her witty, no-nonsense approach catches the eye of a local publisher and she is commissioned to write her own alternative, child-care manual which she calls "Eating the Afterbirth".

I was going to end the novel at this point but it seemed too much like "and they all lived happily ever after", so I decided to add a postscript where Jo discovers that she is pregnant for the third time. When she realizes that the test is positive, she feels the same sense of ambivalence that she felt with her first two pregnancies. There is excitement, but it's tempered with a real sense of apprehension about how this new child will affect her marriage, her other children and her work. I want the readers of the book to be left with a sense of curiosity about "What Jo did next", and I hope that this revised ending manages to accomplish that.

Through this theoretical introduction, I have attempted to explore some of the aspects concerning the representation of mothers and motherhood, which relate to my creative project. From the bleak portrait of mothering painted by de Beauvoir to the ecstatic labouring of the residents of "the Farm", I have tried to highlight the plethora of contradictory messages that women – particularly first-time mothers – are bombarded with. Trying to navigate through this minefield of information can be a daunting task, but it could be less intimidating if more women were prepared to be honest about the challenges of motherhood. Both in this introduction and in my creative project, I have drawn on my own experiences and the experiences of other mothers in my circle, in the hope that the women who read this will better understand or even avoid some of the pitfalls we encountered along the way.

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2. CREATIVE PROJECT

2.1 Character List:

Jo de Villiers:	35-year-old scriptwriter and mother of two
Nick de Villiers:	Jo's husband
Luke de Villiers:	Jo's four-year-old son
Dominic de Villiers:	Jo's six-month-old baby boy
Carrie:	Jo's best friend who lives in London
Will:	Carrie's husband
Christina:	Jo's domestic worker
Brooke:	Christina's five-year-old daughter
Jack:	Leading male character in "Jozi Nights"
Zack:	Jack's evil twin brother
Cat:	Leading female character in "Jozi Nights"
Dorothea:	Headmistress of Luke's school
Nonsikelelo:	four-year-old girl in Luke's class
The Kaftan:	Irritating mother of Nonsikelelo
Gaddafi:	Two-year-old son of the Kaftan
Keagan:	Luke's friend from school
Jasmine (Jazz):	Keagan's mother and Jo's ally
Tamzin McMurray:	Irritating member of the "Mommy Mafia" at Luke's school
Loretta:	Script editor at "Jozi Nights"
Bee Bee Hall:	Producer of "Jozi Nights"
Tarryn:	Receptionist at "Jozi Nights" Production House
Susie:	Nick's colleague
Arlene:	Nick's secretary
Jake:	Jo's therapist
Angie de Villiers:	Nick's sister-in-law and Jo's friend
Andrew de Villiers:	Nick's eldest brother

Aston de Villiers:	Angie’s 14-year-old son
Aja de Villiers:	Angie’s 12-year-old daughter
Anka de Villiers:	Angie’s nine-year-old daughter
Ash de Villiers:	Angie’s five-year-old son

2.2 Synopsis

2.2.1 Main Plot:

Jo de Villiers is a 35-year-old scriptwriter for a popular TV soap opera called "Jozi Nights". She lives in Melville in Johannesburg and is married to Nick, who is the director of a PR company called Catalyst Inc. They have two children; four-year-old Luke and six-month-old Dominic. At the beginning of the novel Luke is experiencing emotional difficulties related to the birth of his brother. His jealousy is expressed through spectacular tantrums, which Jo finds difficult to handle. Jo is obsessed with parenting advice manuals and tries to be the perfect wife and mother, as depicted in the books. She feels constantly torn between being a mother and being a successful writer. Nick wants her to have a career, but doesn't want her work to impinge on their lives. Jo's "superwoman" complex and the lack of support she receives from Nick, cause both her work and her home life to deteriorate. Her scripts start losing their edge and eventually the producer asks her to leave.

Jo is devastated at the loss of her job, but decides to use the time productively and takes some time out to be with her children. Unfortunately she discovers that being a stay-at-home mom is more challenging and less stimulating than she thought it would be. Because she is "just a housewife", she is considered to be a "non-person" by many of their friends and by Nick's colleagues. The balance of her relationship with Nick also changes when she no longer earns her own money. Her self-esteem plummets, and she begins to suspect that Nick is having an affair with Susie, one of his employees. She starts stalking her husband and is suspicious of every woman with whom he interacts. Nick becomes irritated at her lack of trust in him and insists that he has always been faithful to her. Jo doesn't believe him and seeks solace in her weekly therapy sessions with her psychologist, Jake. The attraction between Jo and Jake is mutual, but the relationship is never consummated.

Eventually Jo realizes that her feelings for Jake are jeopardizing her marriage; she leaves therapy and joins a parenting class instead. The class is very beneficial in helping her to deal with Luke's tantrums, which gradually become less frequent. She also meets the editor of a parenting magazine called "Thula na na", who commissions Jo to write a weekly back page article for her publication. Jo's columns are a great success and she is approached to write her own alternative advice book on pregnancy, birth and mothering. Her relationship with Nick starts to improve as she recovers her self-esteem. Nick confesses that Jo's suspicions were not entirely unfounded, and that Susie did make a pass at him during an overseas trip. Jo gets her revenge when she serves Dominic's afterbirth to Susie in the guise of liver pâté, at a dinner party at their house, and then writes an article on the benefits of "eating the afterbirth". This also becomes the title of her book. The novel ends with Jo discovering that she is pregnant for the third time.

2.2.2 Major Sub-Plots:

Carrie is Jo's best friend from university; they keep in touch with each other via email. She directs TV inserts for a magazine show in London and is married to Will, who is a merchant banker. She is newly pregnant at the beginning of the novel, and struggles to come to terms with the way her life changes, both during her pregnancy and with the birth of her child. The birth itself is a huge shock, and she suffers from debilitating post-natal depression during the first few months after her daughter is born. Her husband is not particularly supportive, and she turns increasingly to Jo for advice. She is desperately miserable in London and decides to come home to South Africa with baby Scarlett. Will is devastated when he realizes that his wife has no intention of coming back, and comes to South Africa to try and persuade her to return. While visiting Johannesburg he is seduced by the weather and lifestyle and starts looking into possible job opportunities.

Christina is Jo's domestic worker, and has been with the family for four years, since Luke was born. She lives in a cottage on their property with her five-year-old daughter Brooke, who is named after the character in the TV soap opera, "The Bold and the Beautiful". Christina suffers from frequent migraines and is a codeine addict. She has a rocky relationship with the father of her child who is sexually promiscuous himself, but expects fidelity of the women in his life. His sudden death seems to be AIDS-related, which leads Jo to encourage Christina to have an HIV test. Both Brooke and Christina are found to be HIV positive. This shocking diagnosis tests Jo's left-wing ideals as she finds herself getting irritated with Christina's frequent absences from work to attend the clinic. She also has to steel herself not to react when Luke wants to play with Brooke, and secretly rages when her baby picks up infections from Christina. Eventually Jo is forced to hire a second domestic worker when it becomes apparent that Christina is not coping. It is a battle to get the required antiretrovirals for the mother and daughter, but eventually after pulling strings Jo manages to obtain the necessary drugs.

2.2.3 Minor Sub-Plots:

Angie is a stay-at-home mother and is married to Nick's older brother Andrew, a successful advocate. They have four children: Aston, aged 14; Aja who is 12; Anka aged nine; and Ash who has just turned five. Angie is the quintessential perfect mother who ditched a thriving career as an interior decorator to bring up her children. During the course of the novel it becomes apparent that all is not well in paradise when Angie discovers that Andrew's been having an affair with a colleague in Cape Town. The children react badly to the domestic upheaval these revelations bring: Aston starts flirting with drugs and Aja shows signs of being anorexic. Angie moves out to give Andrew a taste of what it's like being a stay-at-home parent and gets herself a part-time job. A shaky reconciliation is achieved towards the end of the novel.

Cat is the leading female character for the soap opera that Jo writes for. In chapter one she is pregnant with twins and is not sure of their paternity. Her husband, Jack, could be the father, or it could be his evil twin brother, Zack. Cat confesses to Jack that Zack seduced her while impersonating his brother. Jack cannot come to terms with her infidelity and moves out. Cat is distraught, and Zack takes advantage of her vulnerable state and manages to worm his way into her affections. They start a relationship. Jack is incensed and confronts Cat. They have a big fight and Cat falls down a flight of stairs, which sends her into premature labour. Cat nearly dies during the birth and the babies have to spend a week in the intensive care unit. Jack is full of remorse, but Zack persuades Cat to take out a restraining order against him to keep Jack away from the children. A paternity test is done and they discover that one of the twins was fathered by Jack and the other by Zack. Zack's behaviour towards Cat and the children becomes increasingly abusive and Cat realizes that she has to leave. She turns to Jack for help. Eventually Zack discovers her perfidy and kidnaps both children. Zack is killed in a car accident trying to escape from the police, but thankfully the children are discovered unharmed.

2.3 EATING THE AFTERBIRTH

2.3.1 Chapter One

I open the freezer and stare blearily inside, looking for something I can take out for supper tonight. Dominic's afterbirth stares back at m,e looking pretty much like a large frozen lump of liver except for the label on it proclaiming "AFTERBIRTH. DO NOT EAT". I really should bury it in the garden and plant a rosebush on top of it or something – after all it has been sitting there for six months – but I'm terrified the dog will dig it up and munch it, which I'm sure wouldn't be good for Dom's karma. I find some mince and hoick it out. Oh well, it'll just have to be spag bol. Again. I sigh. The sameness of everything just really gets me down.

I'm 35 years old and what have I done with my life, I think dramatically as I look out of the kitchen window at the bleak winter landscape of dry grass and bare trees, a haze of smog shrouding the gaudily flashing sign on top of Ponte. I hate winter. Our beautiful house with its wooden floors and pressed steel ceilings faces the wrong way and it's dark and cold. And the kids are always sick, which means they don't sleep. I have that strange slightly hungover sensation from being woken up every couple of hours, which is not enhanced by the sight of the lumpy brown porridge I'm stirring, porridge that looks more like baby shit than something you can actually eat.

"Momma, Momma are we having brown porridge?" My eldest son bursts into the kitchen, hopping up and down in his excitement. "Are we having brown porridge, Momma?" He started calling me Momma when my youngest was born. A normal regression according to my therapist, but pretty fucking annoying all the same.

"I can't see, Momma, I can't see. Can I stir the porridge, Momma? Can I? Can I?"

"No. It's hot. Mind out the way."

"But I want to seeeee."

"No!"

"But I want to."

He starts throwing one of his tantrums.

"I don't care what you want. Just get out of my way and stop irritating me!"

His face crumples and he starts wailing in earnest.

"Stop it, okay? Just stop being silly!" I didn't mean to raise the decibel level of my voice quite so high, but it seems to have done the trick. He is shocked into silence. He stands there whimpering, hurt blue eyes overflowing, looking like a poster child for neglected kids. Oh dear. I am breaking every rule in the "How to nurture your child's self-esteem" book. Never mind – at least he'll have something interesting to discuss with his therapist when he's older. Wearily I kneel down next to him.

"Sorry, Lukey. Mommy didn't mean to shout. It just gets a bit irritating when you nag me, that's all."

"And you also irritate me. I'm berry, berry irritated." He folds his arms and pouts.

"I'm sorry you're irritated. Now please go and get changed."

"But I want to eat my porridge"

"Get changed first."

"Don't want to."

"Just stop arguing and go do it."

"No."

"Luke, I'm warning you…"

His face assumes the same expression Nick gets when I ask him to put the butter back in the fridge.

"Right! That's it. Go to your room."

He shakes his head defiantly. I shout.

"Go to your room at once!"

He doesn't budge. I lose it completely.

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS BEHAVIOUR!" I scream as I pick him up, sling him under my arm and carry him kicking and screaming down the passage. I deposit him none too gently in his room and close the door. This is what the experts refer to as "Time Out".

> Remove the child from the situation before he or she becomes truly fractious. Calmly lead them or carry them to their bedroom or other designated area. Let them play quietly on their own for a few minutes, not to punish them but to allow them time to gain control. Then welcome them back with a kiss and a hug. Remember time out is much more effective than smacking!

That may be so, but a good hiding would make me feel a lot better. In fact, at this precise moment I'm having a lot of sympathy with the woman who drowned her five children in the bath. I take a deep breath and try to block out his screams. I hear a cooing noise from next door. All this commotion has woken his brother up. I open the door. Dominic is lying in his cot, laughing at his mobile and kicking his legs. His face lights up when he sees me and he chirrups ecstatically. His room feels like a haven of calm compared to his brother's. I pick him up and softly stroke the down of his head. He smells of baby shampoo and milk. He snuggles into my neck, little mouth trying to latch on to my collarbone.

"Are you hungry, my little frog? Do you want some milky-milks? Hey beautiful? Hey my sweet boy?" I murmur nonsense as I unhook my feeding bra and cradle him in the crook of my arm. He latches on enthusiastically and starts gulping. The milk pours out and he coughs and splutters. I sit him up and pat his back gently.

"Not so fast, silly noodle." I coo as I latch him back on.

Child-care expert Marina Petropulos says that you should take note of the dulcet tones you employ to address your baby, compared to the Cruella de Vil voice you use for your toddler, and adjust it accordingly. But my baby's just so much nicer to me, I want to whine. That might be so, says Marina Petropulos sternly, but how would you feel if your husband came home with a cute twenty-something blonde with washboard abs, perky tits and a tight butt and told you she was his new wife? Frankly, Marina, I'd probably be delighted – especially if she gave good head – then I

wouldn't have to do it. As if he heard someone mention the word "blowjob", Nick bursts into the room.

"Look at this fucking shirt."

"Shhh!" I hiss, but it's too late. Dominic unceremoniously shoves my breast out of the way as he sits up and beams at his father. Milk spurts in every direction. I look suitably unimpressed.

"Sorry."

"What's wrong with the shirt?" I ask in a martyred voice as I mop up and shove my breast back into my bra.

"It's creased." He says in the kind of voice that suggests that I'm completely blind. He's right, the shirt does have a kind of crumpled, cheesecloth type of look.

"Why don't you wear something else?"

"There isn't anything else to wear." I can see where Luke gets the pout from.

"Then ask Christina to iron it for you."

Nick hesitates and looks uncomfortable. It never ceases to amaze me how Nicholas Michael Leighton de Villiers MBA manages a staff of 50 and deals with budgets that run into millions, but is incapable of speaking to our domestic worker.

"If you don't want to ask her, you could always do it yourself." I suggest sweetly.

"I would, except I'm really bad at ironing."

"You know what they say, 'practice makes perfect'."

Nick laughs as if I've just said something really hilarious. "Ja, but the laundry's like her domain, I'd feel like I was intruding."

God, he should've been a bloody politician.

"Give it here." Impatient I grab the shirt from him with one hand as I hoist Dom onto the changing mat with the other. "I'll sort it out." And perhaps I could wipe your bum for you too while I'm at it, I add mentally.

"Thanks." Relieved, he beats a hasty retreat.

It's amazing the way Nick always manages to wriggle out of doing things he doesn't like, I think sourly to myself as I try to prise the nappy cream out of Dom's fingers. Women (i.e. his mother) never believe me when I tell them that he's not quite as perfect as they like to think he is.

"But he cooks (once in a blue moon) and he even helps with the children," they say in reverential tones as if he should be put on a pedestal next to Nelson Mandela for his contribution to humanity. Of course no-one ever waxes lyrical about my contribution to the relationship. I don't ever hear anyone saying, "You gave birth to a four kilogram baby without drugs and with no episiotomy? My God! You mu,st have been an absolute whiz at perineal massage."

In actual fact whenever other women hear that I gave birth to a four kilo baby naturally they look at me as if I'm totally insane and start muttering about elective Caesareans. After all, Joburg is the Caesar capital of the world, there's absolutely no reason why one should put oneself through all that agony. Not to mention the mess. Men always want to know if everything's bounced back. One guy even asked Nick if sex after babies wasn't a bit like throwing a sausage up a tunnel.

Shi,t why is there nothing for Dom to wear? Nothing except for this really naff purple track suit printed with bugs. It's the kind of touristy pseudo-ethnic stuff that I hate.

"Christina! CHRISTINA!"

"Ma?" She appears as if by magic. I feel like a tit for screaming.

"Christina, why hasn't Dominic got any clothes?"

"It's been too cold so everything is wet."

"So put them in the tumble-dryer."

"All the clothes have that sign."

Huh? Is this some kind of religious thing that I'm missing here? She obviously realizes I don't know what the hell she's on about and shows me the tag that lists all the cleaning instructions.

"See – the sign that says 'no tumble-dryer'"

I cannot believe they still make clothes for babies that can't be tumble-dried.

"They just put that sign on the clothes to cover their arses," I explain.

"Ma?" She's understandably confused.

"I'm sure his Babygros can be tumble-dried." I try to be patient. " Just put him in that purple monstrosity." I point to the awful purple tracksuit. "And I'll go and check. Oh and please can you iron that shirt for Nick. It's all creased." She doesn't look too impressed because Christina would much rather play with the kids all day than do any actual housework.

Someone is knocking at the door. Oh God, it's Luke. I forgot to let him out.

"Mommee, I wanna come o-ut. Mommeee."

I open the door.

"Sorree Momma."

My heart melts at the sight of his little tearstained face.

"It's okay, boysie. Let's get some clothes out for you."

"I wanna wear my Spiderman t-shirt."

Please let it be in his drawer. It is, thank God. World war three is averted. The stove starts beeping.

"Momma, the porridge is ready. The porridge is ready, Momma. Momma…"

"I know, Luke. I heard it."

I finish dressing Luke and rush off to the kitchen. I start trying to dish up the porridge, organize some baby cereal for Dom, make the tea and find Luke's lunchbox. Nick comes sauntering in.

"Is breakfast ready yet? I've got an early meeting and I don't want to be late." I wonder why the woman who drowned her kids didn't do her husband while she was at it.

Later on I try to do some work. I write scripts for a very popular local soapie that is also seriously bad. Bad in the traditional sense of the word as in not good. I have a script to hand in by tomorrow and I still have four scenes to write. The outline of the first scene goes like this:

"Cat confesses to Jack that she's pregnant and tells him that it could be his evil twin Zack's child. Two pages."

Not a hell of a lot to go on. And to make matters worse, the actress who plays Cat tends to take any mind-altering substance she can lay her hands on and therefore is not really that fantastic when it comes to remembering her words. Which is why the script department has been told very firmly to restrict all her speeches to not more than two lines. Hmm. She also can't act, which doesn't help but at least she's really beautiful, which is something. The guy who plays Jack (and Zack) on the other hand is a screaming queen and a very fine theatre actor who says and I quote: "Whoever writes this shit doesn't know their arse from a hole in the ground when it comes to writing dialogue." Unfortunately I have to agree with him.

Ah well, enough procrastination.

CAT

We need to talk, Jack.

JACK

Should I be nervous?

Scrap that. I've used it too often AND it's a leading question which is a big no-no. Try again.

JACK

You seem preoccupied, my darling.

"He can't read her mind, Jo." I can almost hear the editor sighing as she takes the red pen to my work. I'm feeling blocked so I decide to just write and worry about editing later.

JACK

You're a million miles away. What're you thinking about?

CAT

I…I've got something to tell you, Jack…and I don't think you're going to like it.

JACK

What? What is it?

CAT

I slept with Zack.

JACK

What did you say?

CAT

You heard me.

JACK

You had sex with my brother?

Shamefacedly she nods.

JACK

How could you? You…you…

CAT

Go on say it. I know I deserve it.

JACK

You little whore.

JACK (cont)

(She winces)

I can't believe I trusted you. I feel like such a fool.

CAT

I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean to do it. It just happened. He pretended-

JACK

(cuts in)

You just happened to sit on Zack's dick?

Okay, time out. We're not really allowed to talk about people's penises in "Jozi Nights" and the fucks are mostly of the zipless kind so perhaps it's time for a break. I decide to go and make myself a cup of tea. I used to be absolutely addicted to Tanganda tea from Zimbabwe, but when I fell pregnant with Luke I went right off it and I haven't touched it since. At the moment I either drink coffee or that herbal stuff that looks (and smells) like cat's pee. It's supposedly much healthier and better if you're breastfeeding, but I have to admit that I miss the whole ritual of warming the pot and setting the tea tray. Now we all drink something different so there doesn't seem to be much point. Nick's on a health kick and drinks black rooibos and Luke likes this special brand of decaff coffee. I know it seems ridiculous for a four-year-old to drink coffee, but that's what he likes and after a while it's just easier to give in. My homoeopath nearly had an aneurysm when I told him. He almost made it sound as if Luke was downing a half-jack of vodka every day. I assured him that it's the brand that uses the water method for getting rid of the caffeine and not the chemical method, but that didn't seem to appease him. He's the same man who told me I should keep Dominic off all wheat and dairy until he turns two. I told Nick this but he just gave me one of those looks that says, "Where did you park your flying saucer?"

The whole issue with food and kids is such a minefield. We went to these terribly trendy-leftie, ethno-bongo antenatal classes that believed that everything natural was good. Especially breastfeeding. I was so brainwashed by everything I

heard that Luke was only given breastmilk and plain organic food without any salt, sugar, oil or butter for the first year of his life. I'm embarrassed when I think how far up my own bum I used to be. I mean Luke even had rice cakes at his first birthday party. Of course he took one bite of the cake and that was that. He took to junk food like a duck to water and has never touched a rice cake since.

And the lactation consultant made it sound as if our children would be extra bright, they'd never suffer from obesity, allergies or any serious childhood illnesses in fact they would be the second coming of Christ on earth if we just breastfed them for a year. Imagine my horror when Luke was diagnosed with asthma when he was two. Of course I should have taken a closer look at the lactation consultant before embracing the La Leche movement with such fervour. She had six kids and breastfed her youngest, Tristan, till he was five. Nick nearly threw up when Tristan came up to his mother while she was in the middle of her lecture, lifted her shirt and latched on. Her boobs were not a good advert for breastfeeding. In fact, at that stage she probably could've safely tucked them into her knickers. Nick wasn't helluva keen on breastfeeding after that, but I kept on chanting "It's not the breastfeeding, it's the pregnancy that does it," until he gave in, although he did keep on muttering about giving me a boob job as a present for my fourtieth birthday.

Of course, when I actually started breastfeeding I wished that I had just given Luke a bottle because my one nipple cracked so badly it almost looked like the dog had been chewing on it. Not to mention the fact that I had thrush and mastitis in both breasts by the time he was three months old. And the books are no fucking help. They talk about how "shooting pains may signal thrush", but if you just put some antifungal cream on your nipples and in the baby's mouth it will soon clear up. Bollocks to that. I had to take the thrush medication that's given to patients in the advanced stages of AIDS to get rid of my thrush.

And as for the mastitis . . . Well! It took six weeks, four different types of antibiotics, daily breast scans and cortisone nipple cream to sort that one out. Nick used to have to hold my head really tightly while I fed because I used to scream from the pain. Of course the book just says:

> A blocked milk duct can lead to mastitis. Your breast may be streaked with red and can feel hot to the touch. You may also experience flu-like systems and a burning sensation when you feed.

What it should say is:

> "You will feel as if you are giving birth all over again, only this time through your nipple and you will pray for the angel of death to come and put you out of your misery."

My tea has gotten cold, so I quickly pop it into the microwave while I check on Dom. He's sitting in the washbasket chewing on a green plastic peg while Christina hangs up the washing. He looks completely adorable even in the hideous tracksuit.

"Ma ma ma." He waves his hands enthusiastically when he sees me and gives me one of his gorgeous gummy grins.

"Clever boy," says Christina. "You already know your mummy's name." Christina's convinced that Dom can talk although what he said actually sounded more like "mba mba mba" even to my somewhat partisan ears. There's great competition amongst the domestic workers in our street to see whose baby does what first and Christina's not about to let the side down. I give him a quick kiss, grab my tea and head back to the office. I make a deal with myself that if I finish the Cat/Jack scene in the next fifteen minutes, I'll allow myself to surf the net.

CAT

I'm sorry, Jack. I didn't mean to do it. It was a mistake.

JACK

A big mistake.

CAT

I mean it, Jack. I thought it was you and by the time I found out it wasn't, it was too late.

JACK

Too late. You're right it's too late.

CAT

And that's not all…

JACK

Whatever it is I don't want to hear it.

CAT

Please Jack. You're the only person I can really talk to.

JACK

What about Zack? Why don't you go speak to him about what's bothering you.

CAT

Because I don't want to speak to Zack, I want to speak to you.

JACK

Fine. What is it?

CAT

I'm pregnant. They think it's twins…

JACK

Twins! Who's the father?

CAT

That's just it. I don't know.

Jack looks…

Oh who the hell cares how Jack looks. I quickly double click on Internet Explorer. The modem on my new laptop is agonizingly slow, but it eventually finishes downloading and there on my home page is a picture of Charlize looking glowingly beautiful as usual and discussing her next movie. I try to imagine what it must have felt like to be the first South African to win a major Oscar, but I can't. In fact I can't even imagine what it must be like to be that thin. The interviewer wants to know all about her childhood. She skirts round the issue of her mother shooting her father and instead describes how it was growing up on a farm in Africa. I can't help but be amused at the thought of a plot in Benoni being described as a farm. It's nice to know that someone that successful is also insecure about her background, but I still feel depressed. There's nothing like reading about someone else's success to bring on the "I'm 35 and what have I done with my life" feeling.

"Count your blessings" my mother always says, and "Think of all those poor people in Ethiopia". Actually I could just drive a few ks down the road and see all the poor people in the Joe Slovo squatter camp if I wanted a reminder of how fortunate I am. But thinking of the starving and the homeless just makes me feel helpless and guilty and confirms my suspicions that the world really is a crap place. Would someone please pass the Prozac?

I'm too depressed to face my script, so I decide to download my emails – it makes sense really to do it while I'm still online. Yippee, there's an email from Carrie.

Hi Jo-Jo

> I am a bad, bad friend for not writing to you sooner but I've got an excuse. I'm knocked up – nine weeks and three days to be exact. I shouldn't be telling people this early but you know what a blabber mouth I am…

Poor girl, I think to myself. She doesn't know what she's letting herself in for. I'm shocked at my negativity, but I can't help thinking about how her life is going to change. At the moment she lives in London and works for an incredibly frivolous magazine show, the sort that's interested in feng shui for your pets. She jets around the world interviewing celebs and happily puts in 15- hour days. Her partner, Will, does something in merchant banking, but seems to spend most of his time going to the latest restaurants and clubs "with clients".

> Will wants to wait till three months before making a general announcement so please don't breathe a word to anyone. I thought he'd be more pleased when I told him but it's almost like he doesn't want to get too excited just in case. Maybe that's why I'm feeling so down. I wondered if there was such a thing as Pre-natal depression, the books talk about "mild mood-swings" but I feel really awful.

Oh dear.

> And whoever called it morning sickness should be shot. It's like an all-day hangover without the party. Not that I'm in the mood to go out. I had to go to a work function with Will last night. It was so smokey I just kept on thinking of my poor baba coughing inside me which made me want to weep. And the more wasted Will got, the more dog's bum mouthed I got. I was dying to go home but they all wanted to go on to some poncey club that's just opened so I went home by myself. I was in such a rage I couldn't sleep, I just kept on having arguments with Will in my head which turned into reality when he

eventually rolled home at three fifteen pissed out of his skull. Did Nick behave like a complete prick when you were pregnant with Luke?

Oh yes and he still has his moments.

I'm sorry this is such a grouchy email. I promise I'll write you a really fun, newsy one as soon as I can get my head out of the loo.

Lol,

Carrie

Shame.

Dearest Car,

Ignore the books, most of them talk utter crap. It's totally normal to feel depressed and then to feel guilty because you should be happy that you're pregnant and then to be depressed again because you're sure your guilt and depression are having a negative effect on your darling child. I was totally depressed when I was pregnant with Dom – so much so that I even took Prozac for a while and he is the calmest, sunniest child imaginable (must have been all that Prozac). The nausea is kak and there is no cure, but it usually goes away by the thirteenth week – I used to find that cheese and tomato sandwiches and salt and vinegar chips were the best things to eat. Don't even try to keep up with Will – sleep is what you need. And to answer your question – yes, Nick was a real dickhead when I was pregnant and we had some spectacular rows. He only started to get with the programme when Luke was born and I made him wake up with every breast-feeding. He was so tired after that he didn't have time to be a party monster.

Make him feel your pain, Carrie – it's the only way!

Damn, it's already 12 o'clock.

Must go – I've got to pick up Luke from school and I'm late as usual!

Take care,

Jo-Jo
xxxxx

Where are the bladdy car keys?
"Christina!"
"Ma?"
"Have you seen the car keys anywhere?"
"They're in the kitchen."
"And my…"
"Your glasses are next to your bed, ma." She knows me too well.

If you don't pick your child up by quarter past they fine you R50. I put my foot down and scream into school with three minutes to spare. Luke frowns when he sees me.

"You're late, Momma". He's not impressed that he's one of the last children to be fetched.
"I'm sorry my boysie, but I was working" I lie.
"Why?"
"Because I have to."
"Why?"
"To pay for your school fees and for your pottery lessons…"

"But why?"

"Because why's a crooked letter and you can't put it straight." Oh dea,r I sound just like my mother. "Go get your bag so we can go home."

"I'm too tired."

"Okay, I'll get it." I hope the headmistress is not watching as I slink off and get his bag. She believes that four-year-olds are quite capable of carrying their own things and she's not afraid to explain this theory at length if she catches any mothers carrying their offspring's clobber. Shit, she's seen me.

"Hello Jo."

"Dorothea, how are you?"

As soon as the words are out of my mouth I realize that I've made a grave mistake. Dorothea is the type of person who hasn't yet cottoned on to the fact that when people ask how you are they're just being polite, they don't really want to know. I glaze over as she starts giving me a blow-by-blow account of her last trip to the physiotherapist who no longer thinks she has a muscle spasm in her left buttock, but actually is worried that it might be sciatica. She massages her bum as she speaks and I begin to worry in case she decides to pull down her pants and show me.

"We've got some lovely home-made chutney for sale if you're interested." I'm totally blindsided by the sudden change of subject.

"Um, I don't think I've got any change."

"We take cheques."

"I don't have my purse with me."

"No problem. We'll just put an IOU in the tin. All the proceeds go to the Friends of the Cat." Does she never give up?

"Momma, I wanna go home."

"Okay Luke." I smile apologetically, "Sorry Dorothea, maybe next time." Like hell. I allow myself to be dragged off.

"I wanna ice-cream, Momma. Please can I have an ice-cream? Momma? Please Momma. Please."

"You know the rules, Luke. We only have ice-creams on Friday."

"What?"

"We only have ice-creams on Friday."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"What did you say, Momma? What did you say?" At this point I have to take a deep breath and try to remember the six steps to effective anger management when dealing with irritating toddlers.

2. Stop!
3. Take a deep breath.

Already did that. Suppose another one can't hurt. I look like I'm hyperventilating. The caretaker regards me with interest.

4. Do not smack!
5. Do not shout!
6. Get down to your child's level and calmly and clearly explain to him why his actions are inappropriate.
7. If he continues to behave in an inappropriate manner resort to TIME out.

Right. I plaster a frightening Stepford Wives smile on my face and drop down to his level.

"Luke, you are pissing Mommy off," I hiss though a rictus grin. "Now shut up and get in the car otherwise you won't go to the party this afternoon."

"You said a rude word, Momma"

"I know and there are a lot more where that came from."

Ah, children's parties. The ultimate in one-upmanship amongst the middle-classes. The one this afternoon is being held at the house of quite a well-known academic. She writes these incredibly depressing plays about South Africa that always win slews of those slightly dubious local awards with the twee African names. I guess I'm just bitter because I've never won anything. "No-one ever remembers the

guy who came second" I hear my father's voice in my head after coming second in class for about the fourth year in a row. After that I stopped trying altogether.

There is a large princess pink jumping castle in the garden which Luke regards with suspicion.

"Hello there, Joan," booms the mother of the birthday girl. She's not a small woman, in fact she looks like a ship in full sail in her kaftan.

"It's Jo," I mutter, but she doesn't seem to hear me.

"Here." Luke hands over the present. I hope she doesn't notice it's wrapped in Christmas paper.

"Why thank you, Luke. Why don't you go and jump on the jumping castle?" It's not a question, it's a command.

"Don't want to."

"Why not, sweetie?" hoping like hell that he's not going to spend the afternoon attached to my leg.

"Don't like pink." He scowls. "Pink's for girls." I smile indulgently as if I'm completely unfazed. The Kaftan looks concerned.

"Pink is for everyone, Luke," she says seriously.
Oh stop being so fucking P.C. I want to say, but don't. Luckily Luke spots a couple of boys from his class and runs off to play some incredibly violent cops and robbers game with sticks for guns. Because naturally toy guns are considered beyond the pale in these surrounds. The Kaftan looks even more concerned, but before she can sign me up for a gun-free South Africa I spot one of the mothers I really like who's trying to have a quiet smoke without setting a bad example for the kids. I go over to her.

"I thought good Hindu girls weren't supposed to smoke."

"No, no . . . good Hindu girls should not be seen to be smoking. There's a difference."

"I hate to break it to you Jazz, but everyone can see you."

"This bunch of whiteys? Puleeze. They don't know my mother and they don't come from Lenasia."

"But I thought you'd given up." She looks unrepentant.

"I did, but then Keagan got chickenpox and it was either a case of killing myself immediately or doing it slowly. This way seemed more fun."

"This winter's been an absolute killer."

"Tell me about it. I'm not lying when I say we've been at the paed twice a Week,, for the last three months."

"The guy must be coining it."

"And how. I heard he's just bought a holiday home at Knysna."

We are so busy gossiping that we don't see Tamzin McMurray bearing down on us, clipboard in hand. Tamzin supposedly runs a training company from home, but God knows when she ever does any work because she's always at the school planting herbs, painting the jungle gyms or feeding the bunnies with organic carrots.

"Jo, just the person I wanted to see. Has Luke sold all his raffle tickets yet?"

"I'm not sure, Tamzin. Perhaps you should ask him." Jazz snorts, but Tamzin is not amused.

"You know some kids have sold as many as five sheets." Meaning her precious little darling who gets his name up on the board every term for The Most Tickets Sold. She gaans aan about how we all need to Make an Effort and Pull Together and how it's Not Fair if only some of the kids do ALL of the work. When she thinks I'm looking sufficiently browbeaten she ends off with:

"And remember you've only got a week left."

"I'll tell Luke." She rolls her eyes and turns to Jazz.

"How are you, Jasmine?" she asks warmly. Tamzin is much nicer to Jasmine than she is to me because Jazz is a Person of Colour.

The party drags on. Someone starts talking about babies which makes me think of Dom and my breasts immediately and painfully fill up with milk. Damn, I'm not wearing any breast pads which means that my sweatshirt will soon be soaking. I rush to the toilet to get some loo paper. Of course they only have the rough grey recycled type which feels like sandpaper. I wish they'd just do the bladdy cake so we can get out of here, but first we have to sit through a very bad puppet show which the

Kaftan has written herself in honour of little Nontsikelelo's fourth birthday. Nontsikelelo is lily white, I might add, and speaks with cut-glass vowels, but the Kaftan insisted on giving her an African name to demonstrate her commitment to the Rainbow Nation. The Kaftan also likes to talk mistily about the Struggle, forgetting that we were at the same university and the only struggling she did was with assorted boys at parties in the Student Union.

The two characters in the puppet show speak in very high voices and there's a lot of shouting which soon gives me a headache. The kids, who are looking smeary and hyped up, quickly lose interest and start squabbling. The actors realize that they are losing their audience and do the rest of the show on fast forward. The Kaftan rushes in with the cake even before the show is over, singing "Happy Birthday" in a very loud, determined sort of "no-one's bloody leaving till we've done the cake" type of voice. It is a pink, Barbie ice-cream confection. I'm surprised little Nontsikelelo even knows who Barbie is. Luke kicks up a fuss because he doesn't want pink ice-cream. The Kaftan is most unimpressed because she has to rootle around to find little bits of vanilla for him.

"Hurry up and finish your ice-cream, Luke, so we can go," I say out of the corner of my mouth.

"But Momma, I need a party pack."

"I'm sure you'll get one on the way out." But Luke's not leaving anything to chance. He marches up to the Kaftan.

"I need my party pack."

"Don't tell me you're going. We were just about to have a sing-along." Please God, no.

"I'm afraid so. I have to get home to feed my youngest."

"You should've bought him with."

"He's been sick so I didn't want to bring him out."

"I used to take Gaddafi everywhere with me." Like his namesake, Gaddafi is a complete terrorist. Everyone hated the little sod and still does. "Have you read, 'Pouches are not just for Baby Kangaroos'?" I shake my head. "I must lend it to

you. After you've read it you won't ever want to put your baba down." Then I'm definitely not bladdy reading it. I feel guilty enough already whenever I leave Dom. Before she can start rabbiting on about attachment parenting I dive in.

"Sounds fascinating. I'll be sure to order it from Exclusive's. We really must go. Thank you for a lovely party. Luke, what do you say?"

Luke narrows his eyes and hisses, "Where's my bladdy party pack?"

At home Dom is like an addict waiting for his fix and latches on to the boob with gusto. As soon as I've settled down with Dominic, Luke decides he needs a poo. Why, oh why did he not do it while Christina was here, I think to myself. At least then she could've changed his nappy. Yes, my son still poos in nappies. He's been dry at night for the last year, but he will not shit in the toilet. We have pleaded, begged, shouted, left him sitting on the toilet crying for half an hour, made a star chart and tried to bribe him with a new DVD. Nothing has worked. The funny thing is that it didn't even bug me that much until Dom was born. But the contrast between baby poo (specially a breastfed baby) and toddler poo (particularly after he's been eating Oreos) is marked. There's just something obscene (not to mention horrendously smelly) about a four-year-old pooing in a nappy. My therapist doesn't think so and in fact says there's nothing to worry about, one of his clients has a six-year-old who still uses nappies. Of course the thought of Luke keeping this up for another two years just made me feel worse. He already barely fits into the biggest size of nappies. Soon we will have to resort to adult incontinence pants.

"Momma, I'm finished." I grab a handful of wet-wipes, block my nose and get busy. Just as I am finishing up, Nick arrives home. His timing is, as ever, impeccable.

"Daddee, my daddee!" Luke launches himself at his father like a small ground-to-air missile.

From then on it's the usual rat race of dinner, baths, stories and endless breastfeeding and it's quarter to nine before I have a chance to even glance at my script. Reluctantly I haul out my laptop.

"You're not going to work now, are you?"

"I have to. I've still got two scenes to write."

"Hmm." Nick looks pissed off.

"What?"

"Nothing." I wait. "It's just that you always seem to be working. D'you know we've had sex only once in the last eight weeks?"

I think the fact that we've managed to have any sex at all is pretty amazing considering we have a baby, a toddler, and two full-time jobs between us.

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault," he says impatiently.

"It'll get better. It's just difficult now with me breastfeeding and the kids being sick…did you give Dom some Calpol?"

"Yes." I can see he's not impressed that I've changed the subject, but this is really not the time to have a big heart-to-heart about our non-existent sex life. I try to concentrate on the scene I'm writing, but I can't because now I'm also irritated. Perhaps if you earned more money then I wouldn't have to work, I think. It's not as if I wanted to go back to work when Dom was three weeks old. Maybe I'd like to spend a bit more time at home with the kids. Actually scrap that last bit, if I spent any more time with the kids I'd be a certified child-batterer by now.

At 11:40 I finish the script and email it to the editor. It's not the best I've ever done, but I'm too tired to think about it, especially because I know Dom will probably be awake in an hour or so. Nick is snoring by the time I climb into bed, his face slack, his mouth half open. His snoring reminds me of my father. Oh God, what happened to the young, sexy couple we used to be? I lie in bed, mind racing, unable to sleep even though I'm exhausted. The snoring is really starting to irritate me.

"Nick," I hiss, "you're snoring." It reaches a crescendo. "NICK, YOU'RE SNORING!"

"Whaaa, what's the matter?"

"You're snoring."

"Sorry." He turns over and goes back to sleep.

Wistfully I remember the days when I used to fall asleep on his chest. Now we never even seem to touch each other. I close my eyes and try to sleep.

2.3.2 Chapter Two

"Roll your pelvis and suck your stomach into the floor. Stretch one leg out. Then the other. And breathe." She actually wants me to lift both my legs off the floor. I obviously look horrified because she comes over and says kindly, "No-one manages it the first time. Just keep trying and you'll get there."

With a supreme effort I heave both legs off the floor. I go bright red and can feel a large vein pulsing ominously in my temple region. Am pretty sure I'm about to have a stroke. Fucking hell, but it hurts. I concentrate on the rolls of fat on my stomach to give me inspiration. "You only had a baby six months ago" I say to myself in a soothing swami/guru type voice. This is called positive affirmation as outlined in Dr Dick Wright's book called "I love me. You love me." Unfortunately the other less easily convinced voice in my head says "So what? Kate Hudson put on twenty-five kilograms when she was knocked up and she got into shape like two days after the birth." No, no, no. Must not think like that. I exhale to rid myself of all negative thoughts. Something's ringing. Oh shit, it's me.

"Sorry," I flash an apologetic look at the Pilates instructor who looks somewhat put out at the interruption, and slink off to answer the phone.

"Hello, Jo speaking," I whisper.

"Hello darling. Have you got a cold?" It's Loretta. My heart sinks. Loretta edits our scripts. She wears lots of chunky gold jewelry, speaks through her nose and only phones when she's not happy. I try to find a quiet corner in the gym.

"No, no, no. I'm just in the middle of…" I always feel guilty to say I'm at the gym so I change the subject, "how are you?"

"Not so good, Jo-Jo." All this repetition of first names would not make for good dialogue, I think irrelevantly.

"What's up?" I cut to the chase.

"Your last script was a bit of a disaster, doll."

"Oh? What was wrong with it?" I try to sound cool, like I can take criticism, even though I'm practically on the verge of a full-scale anxiety attack.

"What wasn't wrong with it, sweetie. I just about had to rewrite the whole Thing." I abruptly sit down on a black padded bench type apparatus. "I've sent you some notes. Please read through them. And make sure the next one has some dialogue I can actually use."

"Will do. Sorry about that. And thanks for the feedback." Thanks my arse, but what can I say? "Actually Loretta the acting is so bad it wouldn't really matter if I wrote in Mandarin Chinese."

"Okay darling and before I forget," she utters the fatal words, "Bee Bee wants to see you."

"When?" I squeak.

"She'll call you." Oh no, this can only mean one thing. A "no credit". When the producer wants to see you it's usually to give you a major bollocking and to tell you that your name will not be appearing in the credits for that particular episode. This is acceptable if you're a rookie, but for it to happen to an established writer is a Milli Vanilli size humiliation.

"Excuse me." I look up into the very green eyes of a slightly sweaty but incredibly delicious man. My heart lifts for a second. "I need to use the bench."

"Oh sorry." I hastily get up. Luckily I'm so red already that he can't see that I'm blushing. I'm too depressed to go back into the class so I grab my bag and head off home.

I leopard crawl into the house to avoid Dom catching sight of me. I feel faintly ridiculous peering around a large delicious monster plant to check if my baby son is anywhere in the vicinity. Once in my room I tear off all my clothes and jump in the shower. I try to avoid looking in the mirror, but my postpartum body has all the allure of a horror film on TV when you're home alone. My breasts are crisscrossed with blue veins and stretch marks. My nipples are enormous and the unwelcome image of my mother's breasts flashes through my mind. My stomach hangs like an empty kangaroo pouch, the skin has an unpleasant texture like elastic that has been stretched once too often. "You have just had a baby!" I repeat sternly into the mirror

and try to suck my stomach in. Hmm. Doesn't make much difference. I lift my breasts up. God talk about failing the pencil test. I think I'd fail the pencil case test at this point. I try to remember which tribe it is which values long skinny breasts over small perky ones. Doesn't really matter when you live in a society that likes large plastic tits above all else. I look at the time. It's 11 o'clock and I haven't even done any work yet. I throw on some clothes and dash to the office.

My heart pounds as I download my messages. There it is. The fatal one from our beloved producer, Bee Bee Hall, otherwise known as the Bitch from Hell. And she wrote it at 4:30 this morning. Ohmigod, is the woman actually even human? I steel myself to open it.

Dear Jo,

We need to discuss your last script.

Succinct and straight to the point. That's our Bee Bee.

Please meet me at the office tomorrow at12.

Great. I'm supposed to pick Luke up at 12. But I daren't use that as an excuse. All the women at the office are of the ballbreaker variety who regard child rearing as something one does very much in that half an hour after the au pair leaves and before the children go to bed. I'd better phone Nick. He won't be impressed either, but I can't ask one of the other mothers. Ever since Dom was born Luke refuses to go home with anyone else. I think he's scared we might never pick him up again which, going on his behaviour lately, is not entirely out of the question.

"Catalyst Inc.How can we promote you?" Ridiculous, I know, but that's what Nick's company does. It promotes people and products through advertising, guerilla marketing, industrial theatre, below the line, above the line (never have worked out what that means), basically whatever it takes.

"Hi Arlene. Please may I speak to Nick?"

"You're going through."

"Hello, Susie speaking." What the hell is schmoozy Susie doing in his office?!

"Hi Susie. Is Nick there?"

"Jo! How are you?"

"Fine thanks." I really don't want to have to talk to her any more than is necessary.

"And how's the baby? I believe he's the image of Nick?"

"Mini-me or rather mini-Nick. Is he around?"

"He's a bit tied up at the moment…" She giggles. I try to quash a mental image of Nick wearing S&M gear and chained to his desk. "Nick," she calls, "It's Jo."

"Tell her I'll call her back." My blood pressure starts to rise.

"Sorry Jo, we're kind of in the middle of something."

"Fine," I say breezily as if I'm totally unconcerned. "Just tell him it's quite urgent please."

"Will do. Bye."

"Stupid prick!" I slam the phone down. For some reason I want to cry.

You're just being hormonal, I say to myself sternly, but I can't get rid of this horrible anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach. I can't sit still, I need to do something. It's quarter to 12. I may as well go and pick up Luke. I dash over to the school which takes all of about three minutes and then have to hang around outside with the Mommy Mafia. I smile vaguely at some of the moms and stand a bit to one side so I don't have to speak to anyone.

"I'm sure they're going to ask me to open my garden to the public again. I really don't feel like it." Ja, sure. " But it's for charity blah, blah, blah, yadda, yadda, yadda…" Why do I feel like I'm in the wrong movie here?

My phone rings. I don't know how to set up the caller ID function so I always answer it just in case it's something about one of the kids.

"Hello, Jo speaking."

"Hi." It's Nick. "Susie said you needed to speak to me."

Don't mention that trollop's name in my presence, I want to yell. But don't.

"I need you to pick up Luke from school tomorrow." He groans.

"Do I have to? I've got the day from hell."

"So've I. I've got a meeting with Bee Bee and I can't cancel it." I don't mention the fact that I was too much of a wuss to phone her and change the time.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do." He sighs heavily like I've just asked him to donate one of his kidneys or something. He doesn't even ask me why Bee Bee wants to see me.

I feel even more depressed. I need to see Jake. I quickly SMS him. Trubl @ wrk. Cn I c u 2 day? Just then they open the gates. Luke comes running out.

"Momma, Momma, Momma." His face lights up as he sees me and he flings his arms around my waist and gives me a bear hug. A lump forms in my throat as I stroke his hair. At least my children love me, I think sentimentally. Of course this Walton family togetherness only lasts until we get home and Luke sees that Christina has made him spaghetti on toast for lunch.

"Don't like 'pagetti."

"I don't care. You're going to eat it whether you like it or not."

"Don't want to."

I really don't have the energy for this. "Fine. Then you can just be hungry."

He looks at me suspiciously. Clearly he was expecting an explosion.

"Christina!"

"Ma?" She comes through carrying Dom who almost does a backflip in his efforts to get to me.

"Hello my little frog." I take him from her. "Time for boobie. Boob-a-loobie galloobie."

God, my breasts used to sex objects. Now I'm making up rhymes about them. I spirit Dom away to my bedroom and close the door so Luke can't come in. As I feed him I begin to feel sleepy and even nod off for a few minutes. I start having an

incredibly erotic dream which involves a threesome with a guy who looks like my therapist and a girl whose face I don't recognize. She turns around and comes towards me, a large vibrator in her hand. Yuk, it's Schmoozy Susie and she's wielding the vibrator like it's a light sabre and she's Darth Vader. I wake up with a start. There's something vibrating in my pocket. It's my phone. I carefully manoeuvre it out, so that I don't wake up Dom. There's a message.

"Cn u mk 1.30?" You betcha.

"1.30's Gr8. C u then."

Bladdy hell. It's already one o'clock. I'll have to move my arse to get there by half past. I hold my breath and tiptoe through to the nursery. I put Dom down very gingerly and stand there waiting for his eyes to snap open. They don't. Thank God, so I turn tail and almost run to my room where I start slapping on make-up and perfume. Hoping against hope that a bit of paint will make me appear thin, sexy and alluring as opposed to chubby, exhausted and milk-stained which is how I feel.

"I like your dress, Momma. Where are you going?" Luke's eyes narrow suspiciously.

"To the doctor, my darling." Christina raises her eyebrows skeptically.

"Can I come? Please Momma, please."

"No my baby." He starts gearing up for a tantrum. I decide to get out while I can. "Dom's sleeping, Christina. I should be back at three. Bye, sweetie."
He turns his face from me so I kiss the top of his head and get the hell out of there. I sing along (badly) to a Norah Jones CD as I drive. Maybe it's just me, but all her songs seem to be about orgasms. I feel the same sweet sense of anticipation bubbling up in me that I always get when I see Jake, despite the fact that I'm completely terrified of my meeting with Bee Bee.

I love Jake's waiting room. There's an old Crowded House CD playing and loads of nice chick mags to read like Garden and Home and O Magazine. He loves Oprah almost as much as I do and we have long chats about her and Dr Phil which

he's also addicted to. There's a coffee machine in the little kitchenette and I help myself to a cup as I skim through Oprah's interview with Michael J. Fox.

"Jo." I'm so engrossed I forget where I am for a second. "Jo….hello." I look up. Jake smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that George Clooney way that I just lurve. He points to the mag in my hand, "It's a good interview."

"Thank God I don't have Parkinson's." I put the mag down and follow him into his office.

"Ja. It doesn't sound like fun. But he seems to be handling it."

"What else can you do when you've got kids? You can't just lie down and die."

"Is that what you feel like doing?" He's suddenly serious.

"Maybe." He doesn't say anything, just waits for me to speak, "Although death is kinda final. No." I shake my head, "I don't want to die, I just need a break from life. Maybe a little coma would be nice. Imagine all that sleep. With no interruptions."

"I think you've been writing soapies too long."

I do a bad American accent, "You and me both, baby. You and me both."

He doesn't smile. "Tell me about work. What's going on?"

So I tell him and unlike Nick who starts to look glazed after about five minutes of me whingeing about "Is this all there is to life" and "Where am I going" etc…, Jake manages to keep looking interested even though this is familiar ground we're covering. Very familiar ground. My problem is that I could never decide what I wanted to be when I grew up. So I'm a bit of a "Jack of all trades, master of none". I've waitressed (very badly), sold timeshare, worked as a kind of a go-go dancer (when I was younger and thinner), written for a community newspaper, worked as a presenter for a kids' TV programme and now this – the pinnacle of my career – writing for "Jozi Nights". And I still really don't know what I want to be.

It's so frustrating. I wish I were one of those people who knew that they wanted to be a fireman at the age of seven and that's what they've become and they're perfectly happy with it. But I'm never satisfied. To me the grass definitely

seems greener and infinitely more lush on the other side. Plus I constantly feel that I ought to be saving the world in the manner of Mother Teresa instead of working on something as shallow as a soap opera. Nick is a great believer in charity begins at home and gets tired of hearing me declare every second week that I'm going to give up my job and go and work for Oxfam or Save the Children or something similar. I finish my tale of woe.

"So what's the worst that could happen?"

"I could get fired."

"And?"

"And then we'd be broke, and then we'd fight a lot and then I'd start beating the children – more than I do now - and child welfare would take them away from me and Nick would divorce me and run off with a blonde with big boobs and I'd become a heroin addict and get AIDS and I'd die a horrible death." We've played this game before.

"Still thinking positively I see." Jake smiles wryly, "You don't think that maybe you'd get out there and get a job that suits your lifestyle more than your current one does."

"Maybe."

We discuss the meeting with Bee Bee until we've exhausted the topic.

"Enough about you. What's happening with Jack and Zack and the lovely Cat?" I smile. Jake's obsession with "Jozi Nights" is a standing joke between us. I keep telling him it's not appropriate for someone of his intellect – after all he does have a PhD in psychology – to be that interested in a show as bad as ours, but he refuses to be put off. He says it gives him new insight into the workings of the human psyche. I don't see how, unless he's dealing with twins who have both been shagging the same woman who before them was married twice to men who have both since died and who has herself had a brain tumour that made her behave like a nympho. We're actually running out of people for her to shag now.

There again, Jake does have some fairly strange clients.

I study him covertly while he talks about some book he's read about post-natal depression. God, he really is delicious – he has the kind of lean, sinewy build that I can't resist. My eyes are drawn to the fine sprinkling of hair on his forearm. Imagine if I just leaned over and licked his arm. Get a grip, girl! You're a fairly happily married woman with two children, I tell myself sternly. And besides it's such a pathetic cliché to have a crush on your therapist. Especially when you're still five kg overweight and haven't got rid of the lovely moon face and peasant arms that go with being pregnant. Just as well I don't have a stunning body, I think gloomily, because then I'd just run around having affairs left, right and centre. That's obviously why Charlize takes her clothes off in just about every movie she's in. If you're six foot tall, blonde and gorgeous, why not?

"What are you thinking about?" He catches me off-guard.

"If I had a bod like Charlize I'd also drop my kit at every available Opportunity," I blurt out before I can stop myself. He smiles.

"Dare I ask what made you think of that?"

I will myself not to blush. "I caught sight of myself naked in the mirror this morning. It wasn't pretty."

"So you think someone like Charlize is entitled to be naked and you're not."

"Duh! No-one wants to look at stretch marks and cellulite, Jake."

"You'd be surprised."

"Okay, maybe some of the creepy people you hang out with do…" He grins, "but the rest of the world don't."

"The rest of the world being the Western world." I nod. "Because in other parts of the world a woman who has given birth to a child is considered to be more beautiful than one who hasn't."

"Ja, ja, I've also read 'Baby Wisdom'."

"And?"

"And I thought it was a load of hey schwar crappola." This time he does

laugh. I live to make him laugh. It's pretty sad that I pay someone three hundred bucks an hour so I can make them laugh once a week.

"It's just…it's just not how the real world works."

He shakes his head. "We still have a lot of work to do."

I protest, "I don't mean to make out like I'm so fat and ugly that I never had a date in my life. I know I'm reasonably attractive. With make-up. But I'm no supermodel. I never will be. I think you just have to be realistic about these things."

He studies me for a moment. "I think you undervalue yourself."

I have no quick retort and just stare at him. We lock eyes. I feel the colour rising up my chest and flooding my neck. Why do I have to get fucking heat rash now? He clears his throat and looks down at his appointment book.

"Okay. I'll see you next week in the usual slot. Is that okay?" I nod. "And good luck with your meeting tomorrow."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it." I smile grimly.

"If you need to talk, just call me. I'm sure I'll be able to squeeze you in somewhere."

Now that the session's over I feel deflated. The horrible, anxious gnawing feeling in my stomach comes back. I'm scared of the meeting tomorrow. Shit scared.

I wake up at three a.m. and can't get back to sleep. There is nothing more frustrating than being awake in the middle of the night when your children are sleeping. I stare into the soupy darkness wishing I could run away from the thoughts inside my head. As my eyes adjust I start to make out the patterns on the pressed ceiling which looks like a beautifully iced wedding cake. Of course I hate those cakes with the hard white icing and the marzipan. Nick and I had a chocolate cake filled with fresh cream and strawberries at our wedding. Mmm it was…just like the cake Cat and Jack had at their wedding.

Fuck it, I wish I could stop obsessing about work, but it's impossible. It's hard to believe it now, but just six months ago before Dom was born I was one of the

star writers at “Jozi Nights”. Unfortunately that cuts no ice with Bee Bee, whose mantra is something along the lines of “You’re only as good as your last script”. It’s a jungle out there and they have scant sympathy for weakness or sickness of any kind. Bee Bee took just two weeks off for the birth of her last child. Naturally she didn’t breastfeed and she had a maid, a night nurse and a nanny to help her. I remember how guilty I felt the first time I had to leave Dom and go into the office for a meeting. I feel embarrassed when I think of it now, but I actually burst into tears when one of the other writers asked me how I was doing. Bee Bee saw me blubbing and gave me a big lecture on how guilt is such an unproductive emotion and how important it is for children to be independent. Like a sycophantic idiot I agreed with her, all the while thinking what a crap mother she must be. I wish I could be really brave tomorrow and tell her where to get off, but I know I won’t. Bee Bee has what can only be called a talent for making me feel like a five-year-old who’s been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

She reminds me of my father in a lot of ways. When I was a kid he would come and watch me do a dance recital and afterwards he would always say something like “Your cousin was really good, wasn’t she? It’s a pity you’re not that graceful/can’t point your toes like that/jump as high as she can.” So what if I wasn’t the next Margot Fonteyn. I just really wanted him to lie a little and tell me how wonderful I was. I don’t need a shrink to tell me that’s why nothing will ever be good enough for me. Why I will always feel the need to apologize for everything, why I will always crave approval and be a pathetic people pleaser. It’s like there’s this great big Kimberley-sized hole inside of me that will never be filled. And it’s too late now. He died the day I went into labour with Dom. I’m surprised to feel the tears on my cheeks. I didn’t really cry at my Dad’s funeral and I haven’t cried much since. Suddenly I’m sobbing, taking great big gulping breaths, until my pillow’s damp and my nose is streaming. It’s hard to cry quietly, but I don’t want Nick to wake up and ask me in that kind of long-suffering way what’s wrong with me. Eventually I cry myself to sleep and dream that I’m late for an exam and I can’t find the examination room.

"Momma, Momma, I'm hungee." It feels like only moments later that Luke is prodding me in the back. His nails need to be cut.

"And I'm tired. Go back to sleep, boysie,." I say encouragingly without holding out much hope.

"But I can't."

"Why not?"

"My eyes are open now. See." He sticks his face right next to mine and blinks a few times to convince me.

"Okay, well go watch K-TV then."

"But I'm hungee and thirsty."

"What do you want?"

"Coffeeee,." he yells ecstatically.

"Ssh," I say automatically. "Don't wake your brother up."

"And rusks, Momma, I neeed rusks."

I throw on a really old, hideous flannelette gown and stumble through to the TV lounge. Thank God for kids' TV, that's all I can say. I switch the kettle on and get down Luke's favourite Spiderman mug. Ah the joys of marketing. None of the kids have even seen any of the current Spiderman movies (which are nightmare inducingly violent), but they're all addicted to Spidey. Luke has a Spiderman bag, the mug, Spiderman shoes, a Spiderman vest, a Spiderman hat and the *pièce de résistance* – Spidey underpants. I check the clock (adorned with Madiba's face in a clever kind of retro way) on the wall – it's 6.15. Too late to go back to bed now. I take down a mug for myself and put a couple of heaped spoons of coffee in. I feel a bit bad exposing Dom to all that caffeine and promise myself that I will only drink chamomile for the rest of the day.

The kettle switches itself off. As I'm pouring water into my cup I hear a key in the kitchen door. I swing around, surprised because it's much too early for Christina. But it is her and she's clutching a wet towel to her head which doesn't bode well for me.

"Morning, Christina."

"Ma." She avoids looking at me in that peculiarly respectful African fashion that can be very irritating to Westerners.

Her daughter Brooke peers round the door. "Hello Brooke." Christina says something sharply to her in Zulu, which makes her scuttle back to the cottage where they live at the back of our garden.

"Why're you here so early?" I already know the answer, but I ask anyway.

"I'm sorry Ma, but my head is very bad." And the words I really don't want to hear. "I won't be able to work today."

Christina suffers from migraines, which make it necessary for her to take to her bed for at least two days at a time. Headache pills have ceased to have any effect on them because not only does she swig Stopayne out of the bottle at every opportunity, but she also pops Panados like Smarties whenever she can sneak them out of my drawer.

"Fine." I snap. "But you've taken so much sick leave, Christina, you might have to take this as part of your holiday leave."

"Ma." She whispers in martyred tones and shuffles out looking pathetic.

Bloody shit fuck. I really don't need this. I take some tea through to Nick and explain the situation to him.

"So give her a couple of Myprodol. That should do the trick."

"They don't work Nick. You know she's addicted to codeine." He snorts grumpily in response.

"So what're you going to do?"

"I was kind of hoping that you could look after Dom while I see Bee Bee."

"I can't. I've got a meeting at one."

"What about Luke?"

"I was hoping to bring him home and rush back to the office."

"You'll just have to take him with you."

"But the meeting's with clients."

"Well what would you like me to do Nick? I can't cancel this meeting with Bee Bee, well . . . unless I want to get fired." Stress is making me snippy.

"I know. I know. Just let me think."

"What's there to think about? Just take Luke to the office and put a video on for him. He'll be fine."

"Let's hope so," he mutters, looking thoroughly put out. What I'm going to do with Dom while I meet with Bee Bee is clearly of no concern to him.

I decide to phone Nick's sister-in-law to see if she can babysit for me. Angela is married to his older brother, Andrew, and she's pretty much perfect in every way – the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect everything. She'd be completely irritating if she weren't so goddamn nice. My kids love her and she's usually more than willing to help out.

"I'm so sorry, Jo." She sounds genuinely concerned, "I would, but I'm taking Ash in to have his grommets redone."

"Oh no, is he okay?"

"Mmm, it's just the usual story with his ears and this awful Joburg winter." She sounds remarkably calm for someone who's taking their five-year-old child in to be operated on later that morning, but I suppose once you get to number four you don't have the energy to get stressed out. Also she's a stay-at-home mom and Andrew (Nick's brother) earns a shitload of cash, which helps.

"What're you going to do?" I can see she's on the verge of offering to take Dom with her to the hospital so I try to make it sound like it's really not a big issue at all.

"Don't worry, I'll think of something." Which roughly translated means "Bladdy hell, I'll just have to take him with me." But she doesn't need to know that. "So what else is news in your neck of the woods?"

"Not much. Andrew's still working like a Trojan. Poor thing." Poor thing my arse. Nick's brother is an advocate, a complete workaholic who tries to spend as much time in Cape Town –away from Angie and the kids - as he can. She happily prattles on about her other three children – Aston, aged 14, who's a whiz at waterpolo, Aja (12), who's just got her first bra and wants to have her ears pierced

and Anka, who has middle-child syndrome and has told her teacher at school that she's adopted. Yes, all their names begin with the letter "A" which would be considered incredibly twee in the circles I move in unless it was done with the utmost irony, but is considered quite cute at their very expensive Northern suburbs private schools. She suddenly sounds anxious, "I hope I'm not keeping you from your work. I know you're always so busy. How *is* the writing going?"

"Fine…just fine," I lie and manage to get off the phone, but not before I've promised that we'll see them over the weekend.

The morning ticks by agonizingly slowly. I've resigned myself to the fact that I will just have to take Dom with me to the office although I do realize what a career limiting move this might be. Controlling a wriggly six-month-old while the boss is trying to bawl me out is not up there on my list of ten favourite things to do. Try as I might I can't help but picture him screaming blue murder throughout the entire meeting or vomiting on one of Bee Bee's precious kelims. I break out in a cold sweat just thinking about it.

I throw myself into some housework to take my mind off work. I stack the dishwasher, do a very superficial tidy up and put a load of washing on. It's not that easy with Dom clamoring for my attention and I start to have a lot of sympathy for Christina. Which makes me think of Carrie. Poor Car won't even have someone like Christina to help her. She'll probably have some 19-year-old au pair from Finland who doesn't speak English and who shags her boyfriend when she's supposed to be looking after the baby. If I think of myself at that age I couldn't have looked after a hamster (mainly 'cause I was pissed a lot of the time) never mind a baby. It always amuses me when expats come here and say that they could never leave the children with the maid who's probably fifty and has raised five children of her own. Much rather the maid than some Louise Woodward shake-the-baby clone.

I start getting ready to go at 11.30, even though the production house is a few minutes up the road. It takes me that long just to pack a bag for Dom and make sure I have sufficient nappies, nappy cream, nappy bags, a changing mat, a change of

clothes for him, some toys, a rusk or two, a blanket, his pram and finally the large foam rubber doughnut-shaped cushion for him to sit on. I'm exhausted by the time the car is packed and I have a definite "I'm going to the dentist feeling" in my stomach. When I get to the office the buzzer's not working so I have to hoot about five times before they open the gate, which brings the exec prod out of his office. He peers down from the balcony, frowning and looking pissed off until he realizes it's me. He waves dismissively before heading back through the French doors, probably to immerse himself once more in the crossword which is all he ever seems to do.

I struggle out of the car with all my paraphernalia and arrive at the reception desk red-faced and sweating with bags falling off each shoulder and Dom slung somewhat precariously under my arm. Luckily he seems to think this is a wonderful game and chirrups good-naturedly. The receptionist takes pity on me.

"Come let me help you." She grabs the doughnut and the nappy bag. "Is this your baba?"

No, he's an accessory. "Yes. This is Dominic."

"Hi Dominic. Hello, big boy. You're gorgeous aren't you?" He giggles obligingly. She puts the bags down and holds out her hands, "Can I hold him?"

"I don't think he'll…" I start doubtfully but he's already doing his little blackflip to get to her. I hand him over, "I think he likes you."

"All babies do," she says smugly. "Do you want me to hold him while you speak to her royal highness?" She jerks her head in the direction of Bee Bee's office.

Relief floods through me, "If you don't mind, that'd be great. Thanks." The phone buzzes. My heart jumps in my chest.

"Tarryn, hello. Yip, she's here. Right, I'll send her in." She puts down the phone and makes a face, "Madam's ready to see you if you want to go through. Good luck."

"Thanks." I sneak a look at Dom, but he's busy playing with the sequins on Tarryn's neon pink cardigan. I take a deep breath and open the door.

Bee Bee looks up. "Jo. Come in. Take a seat." She puts a line through the page she's reading and writes "very disappointing" and underlines the "very" twice. I hope to God it's not one of mine. I sit in silence until she finishes. As usual I'm in awe of how beautiful she is. She's probably nearly six feet tall with long, lustrous blonde hair swept into a French pleat and the most piercing green eyes you've ever seen.

"Right. Jo." She puts her pencil down and pulls out a pile of scripts. "Your last four scripts have not been up to scratch."

I don't know what to say. My voice sounds odd when I do manage to get the words out. "Oh? I thought it was just my last one."

"No." She shakes her head, "Loretta's practically had to do rewrites on all of these." She taps the pile, "and I'm sure you'll agree that's just not fair, Jo."
I nod my head mutely.

"Now I know you've been busy with the baby," she says a touch disdainfully as if Dom was some strange kind of hobby, "but that's no excuse. After all I went back to work two weeks after Christopher was born…" and she rabbits on telling me stuff I've already heard a million times before about how hard it was for her with three kids, but how she never missed a deadline or let the standard of her work slip because she's so dedicated and generally so wonderful. "You won't be getting a credit for your last script and we're going to have to get one of the new writers to shadow you."

Oh God. Double humiliation. What that basically means is that some little whippersnapper just out of film school will be given the same script to write and if they prefer his/her dialogue then they'll use it instead of mine. I just stare at her unable to move. She seems surprised I'm still here.

"Okay then." She gets up, not out of courtesy but to signal that the meeting is over, "Just get the standards of those scripts up, Jo. I would hate to have to let you go."

And with those words of encouragement still ringing in my ears, she ushers me out of her office and shuts the door. Tarryn's playing with Dom on the floor and looks up as I come through.

"How did it go?"

"A no credit and I'm going to be shadowed by a new writer." I shrug nonchalantly as if I couldn't really give a toss. Tarryn's not fooled.

"The old witch. May the fleas of a thousand camels infest her pubic hair." I fake a laugh which sounds more like I'm about to be sick, gather up my son and all his gear and head for the car.

I drive home on auto pilot, accompanied by the merry sounds of the Teletubbies.