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**I DON'T KNOW  
HOW SHE DOES IT**  
ALLISON PEARSON

# Contents

Cover

About the Author

Also by Allison Pearson

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Part One

1. Home

2. Work

3. Happy Holidays

4. Christmas Day

5. Boxing Day

6. The Court of Motherhood

Part Two

7. Happy New Year

8. Teething Troubles

9. The First Time I Saw Jack

10. Birthday

11. Reason Not the Need

12. Meet Kate's Dad

13. Shopping

14. Half-Term

Part Three

15. The Pigeons

- 16. The Final
- 17. Night and Day
- 18. The Court of Motherhood
- 19. Love, Lies, Bleeding
- 20. The Way We Were
- 21. Sunday
- 22. How Much Does It Cost?
- 23. Easter
- 24. Kate Triumphant
- 25. Back to School
- 26. Death of a Mother
- 27. A Change of Heart
- 28. What the Mother Saw

#### Part Four

- 29. The Supermarket Shop
- 30. The Patter of Tiny Feet
- 31. Nanny Crisis
- 32. I Went Back Too Soon
- 33. The Note
- 34. Home to Mum
- 35. No Answers
- 36. The Sting
- 37. Lunch with Robin
- 38. The Waterfall
- 39. Endgame
- 40. The Court of Motherhood
- 41. Baby, It's You

#### Epilogue

#### Author's Note

#### Acknowledgements

#### Credits

#### Copyright

# About the Author

Allison Pearson, an award-winning journalist and author, is a columnist and chief interviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*. Her first novel, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, became an international bestseller and was translated into thirty-two languages. It is now a major motion picture, adapted by Aline Brosh McKenna and starring Sarah Jessica Parker. Her most recent novel, *I Think I Love You*, is set to become a stage musical. Allison has given inspirational speeches around the world on women's issues and she can be contacted via her website [www.allisonpearson.co.uk](http://www.allisonpearson.co.uk). She is a patron of Camfed, a charity that supports the education of more than a million African girls ([www.camfed.org](http://www.camfed.org)). Allison lives in Cambridge with her husband and their two children.

ALSO BY ALLISON PEARSON

*I Think I Love You*

FOR EVIE,  
WITH LOVE

ALLISON PEARSON

# I Don't Know How She Does It

A Comedy about Failure,  
a Tragedy about Success

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

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

Concise Oxford Dictionary

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

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

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

Trad.

# *Part One*

# 1

## *Home*

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

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

All this trouble because of a letter Emily brought back from school ten days ago, now stuck on the fridge with a Tinky Winky magnet, asking if 'parents could please make a voluntary contribution of appropriate festive refreshments'

for the Christmas party they always put on after the carols. The note is printed in berry red and at the bottom, next to Miss Empson's signature, there is a snowman wearing a mortar board and a shy grin. But do not be deceived by the strenuous tone of informality or the outbreak of chummy exclamation marks!!! Oh, no. Notes from school are written in code, a code buried so cunningly in the text that it could only be deciphered at Bletchley Park or by guilty women in the advanced stages of sleep deprivation.

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

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

'You see, Katharine,' Mrs Davies explained later, doing that disapproving upsneeze thing with her sinuses over teacakes, 'there are mothers who make an effort like your

mum and me. And then you get the type of person who' - prolonged sniff - 'doesn't make the effort.'

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

So, you see, before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the twin-tub, and there were the other sort. At the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of 13th December, hitting mince pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother made. Women used to have time to make mince pies and had to fake orgasms. Now we can manage the orgasms, but we have to fake the mince pies. And they call this progress.

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

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

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

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

'Centrifugal force.'

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

'No idea. Wall of Death?'

'Exactly.'

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

'Kate? Hello?'

'I need the sieve, Richard.'

'What for?'

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

'Why?'

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

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

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

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

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

‘No, it lives right here in this cupboard.’

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

Seeing Richard go upstairs, I long to follow him, but I can’t leave the kitchen in this state. I just can’t. The room bears signs of heavy fighting; there is Lego shrapnel over a wide area and a couple of mutilated Barbies – one legless, one headless – are having some kind of picnic on our tartan travel rug, which is still matted with grass from its last outing on Primrose Hill in August. Over by the vegetable rack, on the floor, there is a heap of raisins which I’m sure was there the morning I left for the airport. Some things have altered in my absence: half a dozen apples have been added to the big glass bowl on the pine table that sits next to the doors leading out to the garden, but no one has thought to discard the old fruit beneath and the pears at the bottom have started weeping a sticky amber resin. As I throw each pear in the bin, I shudder a little at the touch of

rotten flesh. After washing and drying the bowl, I carefully wipe any stray amber goo off the apples and put them back. The whole operation takes maybe seven minutes. Next, I start to swab the drifts of icing sugar off the stainless steel worktop, but the act of scouring releases an evil odour. I sniff the dishcloth. Slimy with bacteria, it has the sweet sickening stench of dead-flower water. Exactly how rancid would a dishcloth have to be before someone else in this house thought to throw it away?

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

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

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

\*

I TAKE MY time brushing my teeth. A count of twenty for each molar. If I stay in the bathroom long enough Richard will fall asleep and will not try to have sex with me. If we don't

have sex, I can skip a bath in the morning. If I skip the bath, I will have time to start on the e-mails that have built up while I've been away and maybe even get some presents bought on the way to work. Only ten shopping days to Christmas, and I am in possession of precisely nine gifts, which leaves twelve to get plus stocking fillers for the children. And still no delivery from KwikToy, the rapid online present service.

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

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

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

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

When I can't sleep and, believe me, I would dream of sleep if my mind weren't too full of other stuff for dreams, I like to creep into Ben's room and sit on the blue chair and just watch him. My baby looks as though he has hurled himself at unconsciousness, like a very small man trying to leap aboard an accelerating bus. Tonight, he's sprawled the length of the cot on his front, arms extended, tiny fingers curled round an invisible pole. Nestled to his cheek is the disgusting kangaroo that he worships; a shelf full of the finest stuffed animals an anxious parent can buy and what does he choose to love? A cross-eyed marsupial from the Woolies remainder bin. Ben can't tell us when he's tired yet, so he simply says Roo instead. He can't sleep without Roo because Roo to him means sleep.

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

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

'Actually, Paula reads me that story.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Must Remember*

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

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

## 2

### *Work*

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

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

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

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

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

You see, what you can buy from a five-year-old when you get back from a client visit is, if not love or even forgiveness, then an amnesty of sorts. Entire minutes when the need to blame is briefly overcome by the need to rip open a package in a tantrum of glee. (Any working mother who says she doesn't bribe her kids can add Liar to her CV.) Emily now has a gift to mark each occasion of her mother's infidelity - playing away with her career - just as my mum got a new charm for her bracelet every time my father played away with other women. By the time Dad walked out when I was thirteen, Mum could barely lift the golden handcuff on her wrist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And what's that supposed to mean?'

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

*7.15 am:* The change of gear between work and home is so abrupt sometimes that I swear I can hear the crunch of mesh in my brain. It takes a while to get back on to the children's wavelength. Brimming with good intentions, I start off in Julie Andrews mode, all tennis-club enthusiasm and mad, sing-song emphases.

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

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

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

*7.57 am:* And here she comes, flourishing the multiple excuses of the truly unapologetic. The traffic, the rain, the alignment of the stars. You know how it is, Kate. Indeed, I do. I cluck and sigh in the designated sympathy pauses while my nanny makes herself a cup of coffee and flicks without interest through my paper. To point out that in the twenty-six months Paula has been our children's carer she has managed to be late every fourth morning would be to risk a row, and a row would contaminate the air that my

children breathe. So no, there won't be a row. Not today. Three minutes to get to the bus, eight minutes' walk away.

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

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

Being shouted at is embarrassing, but I am beginning to worry that a small, shameful part of me really likes being called Miss in a public place. At the age of thirty-five, with gravity and two small children dragging you down, you have to take your compliments where you can. Besides, I reckon the short cut saves me two and a half minutes.

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

Shoes, matching, two of? Check.

No baby sick on jacket? Check.

Skirt not tucked into knickers? Check.

Bra not visible? Check.

OK, I'm going in. Stride briskly across the marble atrium and flash my pass at Gerald in security. Since the revamp eighteen months ago, the lobby of Edwin Morgan Forster, which used to look like a bank, now resembles one of those zoo enclosures designed by Russian constructivists to

house penguins. Every surface is an eyeball-piercing Arctic white except the back wall, which is painted the exact turquoise of the Yardley gift soap favoured by my Great Aunt Phyllis thirty years ago, but which was described by the lobby's designer as an 'oceangoing colour of vision and futurity'. For this piece of wisdom, a firm which is paid to manage other people's money handed over an unconfirmed \$750,000.

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

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

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

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

Can I risk pretending that I've been in since seven and just slipped out for a cappuccino? A glance across the office tells me that my assistant Guy is already smirking purposefully by the water cooler. Damn. Guy must have spotted me at exactly the same moment because, across

the bowed heads of the traders, phones cradled under their chins, over the secretaries and the European desk and the Global Equities team in their identical purple Lewin's shirts, comes the Calling-All-Superiors voice of my assistant. 'I've put the document from Bengt Bergman on your desk, Katharine,' he announces. 'Sorry to see you've had problems getting in again.'

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

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

'You should have seen the mess at Dalston Junction,' I tell Robin, composing my features into a mask of stoic

urban resignation and, with outstretched arms, indicating a whole vista of car carnage. 'Some maniac in a white van. Traffic lights out of sync. Unbelievable. Must have been stuck there, oh, twenty minutes.'

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

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

'Yes, I was just wondering how—'

'Splendid. Talk later.'

By the time I reach the haven of my desk, I've regained my composure. Here's the thing: I love my job. It may not always sound like it, but I do. I love the blood-rush when the stocks I took a punt on deliver the goods. I get a kick out of being one of the handful of women in the Club Lounge at the airport, and, when I get back, I love sharing my travel horror stories with friends. I love the hotels with room service that appears like a genie and the prairies of white cotton that give me the sleep I crave. (When I was younger I wanted to go to bed with other people; now I have two children my fiercest desire is to go to bed with myself, preferably for twelve hours straight.) Most of all I love the work: the synapse-snapping satisfaction of being good at it, of being in control when the rest of life seems such an awful mess. I love the fact that the numbers do what I say and never ask why.

9.03 am: Switch on my computer and wait for it to connect. The network is so slow this morning it would be quicker to fly to Hong Kong and pick up the Hang bloody Seng in person. Type in my password - Ben Pampers - and go straight into Bloomberg to see what the markets have been up to overnight. The Nikkei is steady, Brazil's Bovespa is doing its usual crazy samba while the Dow Jones looks like the printout on a do-not-resuscitate patient in intensive care. Baby, it's cold outside, and not just on account of the fog nuzzling the office blocks beyond my window.

Next, I check currencies for any dramatic movements, then type in TOP to call up all the big corporate news stories. The main one is about Gayle Fender, a bond trader, or rather an ex-trader. She's suing her firm, Lawrence Herbert, for sex discrimination because male colleagues got far bigger bonuses than she did for less good results. The headline reads: 'Ice Maiden Cools Towards Men'. As far as the media is concerned, City women are all either Elizabeth I or a resting lapdancer. That old virgin and whore thing wrapped up in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Personally, I've always fancied the idea of becoming an Ice Maiden - maybe you can buy the outfit? Trimmed in white fur, stalactite heels with matching pickaxe. Anyway, Gayle Fender's story will end the way those stories always end: with a No Comment as, eyes lowered, she leaves a courtroom by a side door. This City smothers dissent: we have ways of making you not talk. Stuffing people's mouths with £50 notes tends to do the trick.

Click on e-mails. Forty-nine arrivals in my Inbox since I was last in the office. Skim down them, sorting out the junk first.

Free trial of a new investment magazine? Trash.

You are invited to a conference on globalisation on the shores of Lake Geneva catered by the world-famous chef Jean-Louis—. Trash.

Human Resources want to know if I will appear in the new EMF corporate video. Only if I get my own trailer with John Cusack tied to the bed.

Will I sign a card for some poor bugger in Treasury who's been made redundant? (Jeff Brooks is going voluntarily, they say, but the compulsories will start soon.) Yes.

The message at the very top of the Inbox is from Celia Harmsworth, Head of Human Resources. It says that my boss Rod Task has had to pull out of the induction talk for EMF's trainees this lunchtime and could I please step in? 'We would be very glad to see you in the thirteenth-floor conference room from 1 pm!'

No, no, no. I have nine fund reports to write by Friday. Plus I have a very important nativity play to attend at 2.30 this afternoon.

With work memos out of the way, I can get to the real e-mails, the ones that matter: messages from friends, jokes and stories handed around the world like sweets. If it's really true what they say, that mine is the time-famished generation, then e-mail is our guilty snack, our comfort food. It would be hard to explain how much sustenance I get from my regular correspondents. There's Debra, my best friend from college, now mother of two and a lawyer with Addison Pope, just across the way from the Bank of England and about ten minutes' walk from Edwin Morgan Forster. Not that I ever get down there to see her. Might as well work on Pluto. And then there's Candy. Foul-mouthed fellow fund manager, World Wide Web whiz and proud export of Rockaway, New Jersey, Candace Marlene Stratton. My sister-in-arms and a woman in the vanguard of the latest developments in world corsetry. My favourite character in literature is Rosalind in *As You Like It*; Candy's favourite character in literature is the guy in Elmore Leonard who wears a T-shirt that says, 'You've Obviously Mistaken Me For Someone Who Gives A Shit.'

Candy sits right over there, next to the pillar, fifteen feet away from me, and yet we scarcely exchange more than a few words out loud during an average day. On screen, though, we're in and out of each other's minds like old-fashioned neighbours.

**From: Candy Stratton, EMF**

**To: Kate Reddy, EMF**

**K8,**

**Q: Why are married women heavier than single women?**

**A: Single women come home, see what's in the fridge and go to bed. Married women come home, see what's in bed and go to the fridge.**

**How U? Me: Cystitis. Too much SX**

**xxxx**

**From: Debra Richardson, Addison Pope**

**To: Kate Reddy, EMF**

**Morning,**

**How was Swdn & NYC? Poor you. Felix fell off table and broke his arm in 4 places (didn't think there were 4 places to break). Nightmare. Spent six hours in Casualty. Good old NHS! Ruby announced ystdy that she loves her nanny, her daddy, her rabbit, her brother, all the Teletubbies and her mummy in that order. Nice to know it's all worthwhile, no?**

**Rmbr LUNCH on Friday? Tell me yr not cancelling.**

**Deb xxxx**

**From: Kate Reddy**

**To: Candy Stratton**

**Another relaxing few days. Stockholm, New York, Hackney. Up till dawn forging mince pies**

**for Emily's carol concert - don't even ask.  
Plus Pol Pot has given Ben a hideous Nazi haircut and I daren't complain because I was away and being away means you surrender all rights to maternal authority. Plus, I have to remind Rod 'Task' Master that I need to leave early today for the concert.**

**Any suggestions how to do this without mentioning the words**

**a/ child or**

**b/ leave?**

**Love K8 xxxxx**

**PS: What is SX? Rings vague bell.**

**From: Candy Stratton**

**To: Kate Reddy**

**hon, U gotta cut domstic goddss crap. look other moms in the eye & say, I'm Busy & I'm Proud or U will be ded.**

**tell rod task U have major mens2ruashn si2ashn. Ozzies even more freakd by womens trouble than Brits.**

**CUL8R xxxxxxx**

I glance across the office and see Candy swigging from a can which she hoists aloft in a cheery toast to me. Until recently, Candy's diet was confined to coke - the Diet kind and the other kind - which left her pencil-thin with prominent breasts: this got her plenty of lovers, but not a lot of love. A year older than me, at thirty-six Candy is congenitally single and sometimes I envy her ability to do the most fantastic things, like going to have a drink after work or visiting the bathroom at weekends unaccompanied by a curious five-year-old or coming into work hollow-eyed after being up all night having sex instead of coming into work hollow-eyed after being up all night with the wailing