

mums on strike

It's time to
take a stand -
and put
your feet up!



LAURA
KEMP

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About the Book

It was just a squashed grape on the kitchen floor. Hardly a reason to get upset, right?

But six years of motherhood has left Lisa Stratton feeling like a skivvy.

Every morning before she's opened her eyes, she starts her mental inventory of jobs to do. And just like yesterday, the day before and every day since she became a mum, she's woken up knackered.

So when her husband deliberately steps over the grape because it's 'her responsibility' to run the house, it tips her over the edge.

He wasn't always like this - they used to share everything.

Then the kids came along and he saw it as an excuse to sit back.

But this time things are going to change. Lisa has made a decision. She's going on strike...

About the Author

Laura Kemp started writing to get out of doing a real job. A journalist for fifteen years, she turned freelance after having a baby because she couldn't get out of the house, washed and dressed, until lunchtime at the earliest.

A columnist and contributor, she writes for national newspapers and magazines, and spends too much time on Twitter ([@laurajane Kemp](https://twitter.com/laurajane Kemp)).

Married with a son and a neurotic cat, Laura lives in suburbia, where she starts every day vowing she's definitely not going to drink tonight.

To find out more visit her website at www.laura-kemp.com or join her on Facebook at Laura Kemp Books

Also by Laura Kemp

Mums Like Us

Mums on Strike

Laura Kemp



arrow books

To my husband, who is amazing in every way apart from
when it comes to housework

Acknowledgements

Twenty-five years ago, my mum took a stand.

Working as well as running the house, she decided enough was enough - she would no longer make my dad's sandwiches for him to take to the office for lunch.

It was a small act of protest and it has never left me.

Neither has the memory of the day when my friend came to school and told me she'd had oven chips for tea five nights in a row because her mum was fed up with cooking.

This book was written because of them - and for those of us who have ever thought 'that's it, I'm sick of this, I'm going on strike'. Then gone back to the ironing because of fear, guilt, love and 'it's easier if I do it'.

Of course, there are men out there doing half, the majority or all of the housework. But statistics show, in the main, women are still doing the lioness' share on top of motherhood, and in many cases, a job outside of the home too.

Just because we've traditionally done it and just because we have women's bits doesn't mean we should be the only adult in the house to clean the loo.

By the time my son grows up, I hope we'll have redressed the balance: imagine if our daughters' husbands change the sheets without being asked or expecting a round of applause.

Huge thanks go to my wonderful agent Lizzy Kremer, gorgeous editor Georgina Hawtrey-Woore and everyone at Arrow for sharing the dream. I'm very grateful to Professor Teresa Rees for talking me through the sociology of housework. And finally to my family for putting up with me

when I became the book and banged on about the injustice of it all.

See you on the picket line.

'War is women's work!'

Lysistrata, Aristophanes

EIGHT YEARS AGO

Sunday, 1 June

2.37p.m., Tenerife time

IT TOOK A few seconds to realise she was, in fact, Mrs Stratton.

At first, she smiled at the coincidence. How funny, she thought, that's Adam's surname, what are the chances of that? The drone of the aeroplane lulled her back to 'Keep Glowing: How To Make Your Tan Last Longer' in the mag on her lap.

Then, sensing someone standing by her seat, she looked out of the corner of her eyes and saw that the air stewardess was talking to her.

'Oh, that's me!' Lisa said, beaming as she received a bottle of champagne with the compliments of the airline. 'Sorry, still getting used to it!'

Little more than twenty-four hours ago, she'd walked up the aisle a Watson, something she'd been trying to escape for twenty-eight years. Now as a Stratton, she saw herself in slow motion, shaking a sleek, salon-styled head of hair as if she was starring in a cheesy advert.

She turned to take him in. Sandy-haired, strong-jawed, slightly stubbly and utterly gorgeous, Adam's head was leaning against the window. His eyes were closed as he caught up on some sleep after the best day of their lives. Lisa's heart fluttered as she saw his hands twitch on his chunky thighs in khaki combat shorts.

What was he dreaming about? she wondered, as she sipped bubbles. Probably about yesterday. She knew him back to front yet she yearned to know his thoughts, his unconscious, his everything.

This is what she'd waited for – true love. Forever.

The seatbelt light went on as the captain warned of turbulence ahead. Ha! There'd be none of that in their marriage. Not an angry word had passed between them during two years, not even when they moved in together six months ago. It was so perfect, Lisa had to be careful not to go on about it to her friends. They shared everything: laughter, trust, chemistry, respect and even the housework.

Her brown eyes stared into the blue sky, reliving her wedding day as if she was watching clips from a movie camera. Her beloved bridesmaid, Cal, giving her a 'something borrowed' garter from her very own wedding just three months before. Adam's first sight of her, when he mouthed 'you look beautiful' as she arrived at his side. His hand trembling as he glided the ring along her finger. Her shivers as he unveiled her. Their first kiss as man and wife, a long and soft seal of love met with applause. And their heads covered in confetti as they stepped out into the sunshine as one, her beautiful strapless ivory gown catching paper hearts on its puddle train.

As if looking at her own wedding album, she saw candid shots of faces she adored. Then, their three-tiered chocolate marble cake; her gorgeous bouquet of red roses made by Cal, a florist; an image of herself and Adam gazing into each other's eyes during their first dance to 'God Only Knows' by the Beach Boys.

She spontaneously giggled when she saw Mum leading Dad on the floor while her in-laws held each other at arm's length doing a foxtrot. How different their families were! It was amazing she and Adam had met in the middle, both a product and in spite of their upbringing. A mummy's boy through and through, Adam had proved that in his speech when he promised he'd pick up his own smelly socks! That'll do me, Lisa thought, considering her own unconventional childhood.

The plane began bumping around, bringing Lisa back to the cabin. She watched Adam breathing and wondered what their babies would look like. One day they'd have kids, but not yet; they'd decided she wouldn't come off the pill for a year or so because they wanted to enjoy each other first. And she might as well make the most of this size 10 body she'd worked so hard on. She couldn't wait to surprise him with her Just Married bikini bottoms.

Adam came to as their seats shook. He stretched, his fingertips brushing the overhead buttons. Then he leaned over, tucked a lock of her long, straightened chestnut hair behind her ear and kissed his wife on the neck.

'Ooh, champers, Mrs Stratton. Lovely,' he said as he poured himself a glass. He topped up Lisa's so enthusiastically that a pool of liquid fizzled onto the lap of her emerald halterneck flared jumpsuit, which she'd chosen months ago as her 'travel outfit'.

'Adam!' she said, tutting as she dabbed the wet patch with a tissue from her handbag.

'I know, what a waste!' he said, his aquamarine eyes glinting with mischief.

'What were you dreaming about, then?' she asked, looking up adoringly at him. 'You were twitching like a puppy! The wedding? Tenerife? Me looking gorgeous on the beach?'

He laughed and kissed her again, this time on the lips.

'If only! You know that couple we saw fighting in the check-in queue? Well, we'd morphed into them and we were having a set-to after I'd dropped a wet towel on the hotel room floor. Then our mums appeared and started wrestling,' he grimaced.

Lisa's shudder was short-lived. The seatbelt sign went off and she squeezed Adam's hand, still breathless at the novelty of seeing the platinum band that signposted she was 'taken'.

Then as she got up to go to the loo, she turned to her new husband to reassure him: 'Don't panic, darling, we'll never

end up like that.'

EIGHT YEARS LATER

The Day Before the Strike

5p.m., Tuesday, 13 May

LISA STRATTON SHOUTED 'Tea's ready!' as she dished up home-made spag bol onto four plates.

Silence. Apart from the telly blaring in the lounge.

'Tea's ready!' she called again, slightly louder, spooning out broccoli and peas. Perhaps the kids will eat their veg if they're hypnotised by the sight of their favourite food, she thought. She could but try.

Star Wars knife and fork, a blob of ketchup and apple juice for George. Grown-up cutlery and OJ in her One Direction tumbler for Rosie. Grated Cheddar for George, Parmesan for the rest of them, and garlic bread. The finishing touch was a big sigh.

For once, just once, why couldn't they come when she called them?

'Tea. Is. READY!' she bellowed in a tone which Adam clearly recognised as she's-about-to-blow because it spurred him on to herd them to the table.

Five-year-old George wailed because he hated ketchup now. Rosie, almost seven, moaned because she had *sooo* wanted pizza. Adam, forty going on fourteen, teased his wife by asking if his portion was really enough for a strapping man who'd worked his fingers to the bone in the rain today?

Wearily on autopilot, because this scene had happened every teatime since the children had learned to talk, Lisa answered: 'Hilarious, Adam. George, just eat your tea, please, and Rosie, you know we have pizza on Saturdays.'

Once they'd finished their afters of ice cream – chocolate sauce for George, raspberry for Rosie – the kids ran back into the lounge. Rambling on about his latest landscape gardening job, Adam stayed seated as Lisa cleared the table, stacked the dishwasher, wiped the surfaces, added Coco Pops to the online shopping delivery and emptied the washing machine.

'There's something I want to watch tonight,' she said, noting she needed a haircut as she pulled her unruly wavy tangles into a ponytail in preparation for her next task: 'that period drama thing on BBC2. I've been looking forward to it all day. That and a big glass of white wine and—'

Adam interrupted: 'You'll have to record it. There's football on. Big game. Big, big game.'

She swallowed her disappointment; there was no point arguing.

She was too knackered. She could predict the chain of events. If she insisted on her programme, he'd go down the pub and come home pissed and she'd only just changed the bed and she didn't want him sweating booze all over the clean sheets. She had enough washing to do already. She still had mountains of it in the laundry basket even though she'd spent yesterday, her day off, pulling out twisted wet clothes from the depths of the Hotpoint like a midwife. Every Monday was the same, a post-weekend blitz. Not to mention scaling the Everest ironing pile only to reach base camp, working out who needed what for school this week, topping up the fridge and cooking batches of food she could serve up in the week.

'Can you Sky Plus it for me, then?' she asked, pulling the ironing board out from the cupboard with one hand while pushing back escaping toilet rolls and a broom with the other. 'And can you start running the kids' bath for me?'

'Yes, boss,' Adam replied, treading on a runaway grape on the floor and making a 'yuck' face as he went.

Why hadn't he cleared it up? Lisa wondered as she started ironing the school uniform. Because he knows I'll do it, she reflected, not with anger, not yet, just tired acceptance.

Later, once she'd done bathtime, bedtime, swept the floor, cleared away the toys, laid out the uniform, reminded herself to sort out what they were having for tea tomorrow night and scrubbed congealed Whiskas off Mickey the cat's bowl, she finally sank into the sofa with a glass of wine.

'Adam, did you remember to record that programme?' she asked. 'It's on now and I can't see the red light on the Sky box thingy.'

'Oh, bollocks, sorry, Lees. REFEREE! You'll have to iPlayer it,' he told her, his blue eyes stuck to the football like a great big man-boy.

'Thanks, Adam. Thanks a lot. Sometimes I wonder if anyone listens to me.'

'Course we do, Lees. It's not a biggie, is it? I've said sorry.'

Was she being touchy? She wasn't sure. Was it worth arguing over? She decided not to chance it, she was too shattered, and announced she was going to bed to read. Adam touched her knee, still staring at the game, scratched his nuts with the other hand, and said: 'OK, love, be up in a bit. Love you.'

After she'd rinsed her wine glass, fed the cat and made a cup of tea to take to bed, she saw the disembowelled grape, its guts smeared across the tiles.

She reached for a piece of kitchen roll and got down on her knees, feeling her back protesting as her hand was poised to scoop up its slimy innards.

Hysterical sobbing. George was shouting for her. He was having one of his night terrors again, when his beautiful curly brown hair stuck to his forehead and his eyes were wide open, trance-like.

Instantly she jumped up and took the stairs two at a time - which needed a Hoover, she noticed - remarking to herself

that at least she didn't have to get a tissue for his tears now
that she had a piece of kitchen roll in her hand.

Day Zero

5p.m., Wednesday, 14 May

LISA SHOUTED 'TEA'S ready!' as she slid fish fingers off the baking tray onto four plates.

Silence. Apart from the telly blaring in the lounge.

'Tea's ready!' she called again, slightly louder, spooning out green beans and sweetcorn, hoping the kids would eat them without complaining because they'd be hypnotised by the sight of chips. Yeah, right.

Star Wars knife and fork, absolutely no ketchup and apple juice for George. Grown-up cutlery and OJ in her One Direction tumbler for Rosie.

Mayo, salt and vinegar. Another big sigh.

'Tea. Is. READY!'

They trooped in and sat down. Every one of them carefully stepping over the squashed grape.

Lisa felt something in her throat. It was similar to anger but worse.

Rosie, completely oblivious, asked: 'Mummy, you said this morning we were having sausage and mash, that's our second favourite. Why aren't we having sausage and mash?'

George chimed in: 'Silly Mummy!'

Lisa considered explaining that the sausages had been in the online shop and they had arrived only ten minutes ago, later than the slot she'd booked so their tea would've been late and she couldn't face them being grumpy and hungry for the sake of sausages and she'd had a hard day at work

and her lunch hour had been spent not sat on her bum but rushing around for the good of the household.

Instead, she hissed: 'Because I am not Nigella bloody Lawson.'

Confused, Adam looked up at his wife, wondering what was going on. She never swore in front of the kids.

'Everything all right, Lees? Time of the month?' he asked over-brightly, probably remembering something someone had told him down the pub about women needing to communicate.

She stopped dead, her fork frozen in mid-air. She had an urge to poke him in the eyeballs.

Knackered, harassed, on the edge, she weighed it up.

Did she smooth it over and deny, deny, deny as she always did? Or did she let rip?

'What have I done, Lees?'

Yes, quite, she thought, what has he done?

In a split second she considered the evidence as he sat before her in the dock. Two nuclear mushroom farts every morning without fail for the last ten years and yet he'd never changed the bedding. One of two adults who used the loo in the house but he'd never cleaned the bathroom. Scoffing food she'd prepared from scratch at blimbling breakfast time - having got up at midnight in a panic to get some mince out of the freezer - yet he'd never offered to cook the family tea. Getting himself and only himself ready every morning so he could go for a bacon sandwich at the greasy spoon with his best mate Ginger Steve. Together they ran a landscaping company called Adam & Steve's Garden of Eden, while she rushed around sorting out the kids.

And then squelching that grape, assuming she would mop up the mess.

'I have a pair of boobs. Therefore I do everything round here,' Lisa exploded, throwing her chair back and her fork down, adrenalin pumping, horrified she'd lost it in front of

the children, hoping they wouldn't be scarred by this in years to come, but she was seriously at the end of her tether. 'You couldn't even pick up that grape. That's it. I've had enough, you lot can sort yourselves out from now on.'

George asked for ketchup because he liked it again. Rosie started crying because she'd knocked her juice over.

Adam stood up, reaching for his wife, then sat down, waving his hands, patting the air around his kids' heads as if that would erase the memory of Mummy going mental.

It was one of his first ever attempts at multitasking, Lisa narrated in her head as though she was David Attenborough voicing a documentary explaining human behaviour to animals.

About bloody time. She walked out of the kitchen, grabbed her handbag off the cabinet in the hall, opened the door of their three-bed terrace and slammed it behind her. Looking down, feeling furious, she realised she was in her slippers. Pink fluffy bunny rabbit ones, with ears which popped up at every crunchy step she took down the soggy gravel path.

She knew she looked ridiculous, aged thirty-six, marching towards the car in comedy footwear but she was past caring.

5.12p.m.

Lisa sped off into the spring evening, not knowing where she was going, her heart racing. She felt taken for granted and unappreciated - no one ever said thank you for anything she did, no one asked her how she was feeling.

Jesus Christ, she'd been driving their battered silver Ford Focus for a few minutes and only just realised she was listening to one of the kids' *Glee* CDs. 'I Think I Wanna Marry You'. What a joke. She smacked the 'off' button.

And then the tears came. Hot, angry, resentful blobs which she imagined were burning holes like lava into her comfy clothes, the grey hoodie and joggers she always

changed into when she got in from her job at the gift shop and café.

She put the windscreen wipers on but as soon as she did she knew the blurry vision wasn't from any rain - a shower earlier had given way to a cloudless sky. Oh God, am I losing my marbles?

Out of habit, her internal sat-nav had taken her to the supermarket so she pulled into a space in the car park. She tilted the rear-view mirror and saw her blotchy face, bruised with hurt, the whites of her swollen brown eyes streaked with red.

What a day. That morning, like every morning since she'd had children, had started with a mental inventory of jobs to do.

6.31a.m., before she'd even come to, she'd started a list. Lunch boxes, school bags, gym kits for after-school club, recycling bags to go out, stick a wash on, unload the dishwasher.

In the shower, while she was waiting for the conditioner to do its thing, she'd wiped at the grimy bathwater marks with her big toe and made a note to self in an Anthea Turner voice to 'simply apply bleach to an old toothbrush to bring the sparkle back to your grouting'. A flash of George's ankle when he got up meant he needed new pyjamas.

At lunchtime, she'd had to ring the vet, send a birthday card to one of Adam's relatives and sort the gas bill.

After pick-up, she'd refereed the kids, supervised homework, wiped someone's wee off the seat of the loo, thwacked at some cobwebs with a wet towel and started a shopping list for things she'd forgotten in the delivery.

Each task was inconsequential and not worth getting upset about but together, stacked on top of one another, teetering precariously, they weighed a ton because they mattered, they were a proof of her love.

The camel's back was broken not by a straw but by that squashed grape.

She'd seen her husband deliberately step over it on his way to the table. He'd seen it but he'd just ignored it. The message was clear: that was her job.

So taken aback by his indifference, so frazzled by the expectation to do and be everything, so cross with his apathy, so upset by his insensitivity, that was when she'd snapped.

In the car she could feel streaks of mascara drying like mud on her cheeks. She could see mums steering wonky trolleys with one hand while holding on to a fractious child with the other, directing another to hold on to her coat, the women's heads turning wildly from left to right, checking for traffic or other threats to their offspring.

Her rage had subsided but her resolve hadn't. Her head swimming with evidence, she recalled the time she'd had flu last year and any rest she'd tried to get was interrupted by him asking where everything was - clingfilm, loo rolls, washing-up liquid and batteries. Even though she was weak and running a temperature, she'd still got out of bed to make tea because otherwise the kids would've had chips every night. After she'd spent three days in bed, Adam had asked if she'd had a nice holiday. Too rough to answer back, she'd simply sobbed at the sight of the bomb site he'd created.

In the car, her phone buzzed, a text from Adam. 'R U OK? Come home, we're worried xxx'.

She started the engine, performed a U-turn and drove home, determined things were going to change.

Lisa had gone mad on a few occasions before, striding off in a huff over something or other. But then the sight of her 6-foot 3-inch husband with little boy sticky-up blond hair and bulging biceps the kids used as monkey bars had made her think how vulnerable and helpless he was, bless him.

This time, her eyes were harder. She felt steely, like the Terminator. Apart from the bunny slippers.

As she approached the front door, she heard Adam's voice telling the kids to hurry up and get their shoes on because they were going to look for Mummy. Her key turned in the lock and there in front of her was her family: Rosie was wearing a cardie over her tutu, George was trying to put his wellies on the wrong feet and Adam was scrabbling round the hall looking for his keys.

They cheered when they saw her.

'Mummy! Mummy's back!' the kids chanted, jumping up at her like puppies.

Adam started fussing round her, telling her to come in, sit down, not to worry because he'd pick up the grape and how sorry they were for whatever it was they'd done.

Lisa surveyed the mess of shoes and school bags and toys and leaves and size 11 workmen's boots scattered over the hallway. He'd said he'd sort the grape - that meant it was still there! Why hadn't he done it already?

She was sick to the back teeth of it all: dishing up, clearing away, wiping surfaces, picking up abandoned clothes, knowing where everything was, being the first port of call even if she was upstairs when the kids were sat next to their dad. She was full of sorrow that it had come to this - she didn't want to do what she was about to do to the people she worshipped most in the world. But she would, because she felt unloved and it cut her to the core. She tried so hard every day to give them the very best - healthy food, cuddles, whatever. She wanted to be a role model for her kids, to give them stability, to be calm, to give them boundaries but still be capable of having fun.

Her chest tightened as she struggled to contain her sense of injustice. Just because she was a mum, a wife, a woman, she was expected to hold the fort all the time.

Well not any more. Not. Any. More.

Her spine straightened, her shoulders went back and her chin lifted.