HOW HARD CAN IT BE?

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Also by Allison Pearson

I Don't Know How She Does It
I Think I Love You

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ALLISON PEARSON



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For Awen and Evie,
my mother and my daughter

Conceal me what I am, and by my aid
For such disguise as haply shall become
The form of my intent.

William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

Nobody tells you about the balding pudenda.

Whoopi Goldberg

PROLOGUE

Countdown to Invisibility: T minus six months and two days

Funny thing is I never worried about getting older. Youth had not been so kind to me that I minded the loss of it. I thought women who lied about their age were shallow and deluded, but I was not without vanity. I could see the dermatologists were right when they said that a cheap aqueous cream was just as good as those youth elixirs in their fancy packaging, but I bought the expensive moisturiser anyway. Call it insurance. I was a competent woman of substance and I simply wanted to look good for my age, that's all – what that age was didn't really matter. At least that's what I told myself. And then I got older.

Look, I've studied the financial markets half my life. That's my job. I know the deal: my sexual currency was going down and facing total collapse unless I did something to shore it up. The once-proud and not unattractive Kate Reddy Inc was fighting a

hostile takeover of her mojo. To make matters worse, this fact was rubbed in my face every day by the emerging market in the messiest room in the house. My teenage daughter's womanly stock was rising while mine was declining. This was exactly as Mother Nature intended, and I took pride in my gorgeous girl, I really did. But sometimes that loss could be painful – excruciatingly so. Like the morning I locked eyes on the Circle Line with some guy with luxuriant, tousled Roger Federer hair (is there any better kind?) and I swear there was a flicker of something between us, a sizzle of static, a frisson of flirtation right before he offered me his seat. Not his number, his *seat*.

'Totes humil', as Emily would say. The fact he didn't even consider me worthy of interest stung like a slapped cheek. Unfortunately, the impassioned young woman who lives on inside me, who actually thought Roger was flirting with her, still doesn't get it. She sees her former self in the mirror of her mind's eye as she looks out at the world and assumes that's what the world sees when it looks back. She is quite insanely and irrationally hopeful that she might be attractive to Roger (likely age: thirty-one) because she doesn't realise that she/we now have a thickening waist, thinning vaginal walls (who knew?) and are starting to think about spring bulbs and comfortable footwear with considerably more enthusiasm than, say, the latest scratchy thongs from Agent Provocateur. Roger's erotic radar could probably detect the presence of those practical, flesh-coloured pants of mine.

Look, I was doing OK. Really, I was. I got through the oil-spill-on-the-road that is turning forty. Lost a little control, but I drove into the skid just like the driving instructors tell you to and afterwards things were fine again; no, they were better than fine. The holy trinity of midlife – good husband, nice home, great kids – was mine.

Then, in no particular order, my husband lost his job and tuned into his inner Dalai Lama. He would not be earning anything for two years, as he retrained as a counsellor (oh, joy!). The kids entered the twister of adolescence at exactly the same time as their grandparents were taking what might charitably be called a second pass at their own childhood. My mother-in-law bought a chainsaw with a stolen credit card (not as funny as it sounds). After recovering from a heart attack, my own mum lost her footing and broke her hip. I worried I was losing my mind; but it was probably just hiding in the same place as the car keys and the reading glasses and the earring. And those concert tickets.

In March it's my fiftieth. No, I will not be celebrating with a party and yes, I probably am scared to admit I am scared, or apprehensive (I'm not quite sure what I am, but I definitely don't like it.) To be perfectly honest, I'd rather not think about my age at all, but significant birthdays – the kind they helpfully put in huge, embossed numbers on the front of cards to signpost The Road to Death – have a way of forcing the issue. They say that fifty is the new forty, but to the world of work, my kind of work anyway, fifty may as well be sixty or seventy or eighty. As a matter of urgency, I need to get younger, not older. It's a question of survival: to get a job, to hold onto my position in the world, to remain marketable and within my sell-by date. To keep the ship afloat, the show on the road. To meet the needs of those who seem to need me more than ever, I must reverse time, or at least get the bitch to stand still.

With this goal in mind, the build-up to my half-century will be quiet and totally uneventful. I will not show any outward sign of the panic I feel. I will glide towards it serenely, no more sudden swerves or bumps in the road.

Well, that was the plan. Then Emily woke me up.

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Bats in the Belfie

SEPTEMBER

Monday, 1.37 am: Such a weird dream. Emily is crying, she's really upset. Something about a belfry. A boy wants to come round to our house because of her belfry. She keeps saying she's sorry, it was a mistake, she didn't mean to do it. Strange. Most of my nightmares lately feature me on my unmentionable birthday having become totally invisible and talking to people who can't hear me or see me.

'But we haven't got a belfry,' I say, and the moment I speak the words aloud I know that I'm awake.

Emily is by my side of the bed, bent over as if in prayer or protecting a wound. 'Please don't tell Daddy,' she pleads. 'You can't tell him, Mummy.'

'What? Tell him what?'

I fumble blindly on the bedside table and my baffled hand finds reading glasses, distance glasses, a pot of moisturiser and three foil sheets of pills before I locate my phone. Its small

window of milky, metallic light reveals that my daughter is dressed in the Victoria's Secret candy-pink shorty shorts and camisole I foolishly agreed to buy her after one of our horrible rows.

'What is it, Em? Don't tell Daddy what?'

No need to look over to check that Richard's still asleep. I can hear that he's asleep. With every year of our marriage, my husband's snoring has got louder. What began as piglet snuffflings twenty years ago is now a nightly Hog Symphony, complete with wind section. Sometimes, at the snore's crescendo, it gets so loud that Rich wakes himself up with a start, rolls over and starts the symphony's first movement again. Otherwise, he is harder to wake than a saint on a tomb.

Richard had the same talent for Selective Nocturnal Deafness when Emily was a baby, so it was me who got up two or three times in the night to respond to her cries, locate her blankie, change her nappy, soothe and settle her, only for that penitential playlet to begin all over again. Maternal sonar doesn't come with an off-switch, worse luck.

'Mum,' Emily pleads, clutching my wrist.

I feel drugged. I am drugged. I took an antihistamine before bed because I've been waking up most nights between two and three, bathed in sweat, and it helps me sleep through. The pill did its work all too well, and now a thought, any thought at all, struggles to break the surface of dense, clotted sleep. No part of me wants to move. I feel like my limbs are being pressed down on the bed by weights.

'Muuuu-uuuumm, please.'

God, I am too old for this.

'Sorry, give me a minute, love. Just coming.'

I get out of bed onto stiff, protesting feet and put one hand around my daughter's slender frame. With the other, I check

her forehead. No temperature, but her face is damp with tears. So many tears that they have dripped onto her camisole. I feel its humid wetness – a mix of warm skin and sadness – through my cotton nightie and I flinch. In the darkness, I plant a kiss on Em's forehead and get her nose instead. Emily is taller than me now. Each time I see her it takes a few seconds to adjust to this incredible fact. I want her to be taller than me, because in the world of woman, tall is good, leggy is good, but I also want her to be four years old and really small so I can pick her up and make a safe world for her in my arms.

'Is it your period, darling?'

She shakes her head and I smell my conditioner on her hair, the expensive one I specifically told her not to use.

'No, I did something really ba-aa-aa-aad. He says he's coming here.' Emily starts crying again.

'Don't worry, sweetheart. It's OK,' I say, manoeuvring us both awkwardly towards the door, guided by the chink of light from the landing. 'Whatever it is, we can fix it, I promise. It'll be fine.'

And, you know, I really thought it would be fine, because what could be so bad in the life of a teenage girl that her mother couldn't make it better?

2.11 am: 'You sent. A picture. Of your naked bottom. To a boy. Or boys. You've never met?'

Emily nods miserably. She sits in her place at the kitchen table, clutching her phone in one hand and a *Simpsons* D'oh mug of hot milk in the other, while I inhale green tea and wish it were Scotch. Or cyanide. *Think, Kate, THINK.*

The problem is I don't even understand what it is I don't understand. Emily may as well be talking in a foreign language. I mean, I'm on Facebook, I'm in a family group on WhatsApp

that the kids set up for us and I've tweeted all of eight times (once, embarrassingly, about Pasha on *Strictly Come Dancing* after a couple of glasses of wine), but the rest of social media has passed me by. Until now, my ignorance has been funny – a family joke, something the kids could tease me about. 'Are you from the past?' That was the punchline Emily and Ben would chorus in a sing-song Irish lilt; they had learned it from a favourite sitcom. 'Are you from the past, Mum?'

They simply could not believe it when, for years, I remained stubbornly loyal to my first mobile: a small, greyish-green object that shuddered in my pocket like a baby gerbil. It could barely send a text message – not that I ever imagined I would be sending those on an hourly basis – and you had to hold down a number to get a letter to appear. Three letters allocated to each number. It took twenty minutes to type 'Hello'. The screen was the size of a thumbnail and you only needed to charge it once a week. Mum's Flintstone Phone, that's what the kids called it. I was happy to collude with their mockery; it made me feel momentarily light-hearted, like the relaxed, laid-back parent I knew I never really could be. I suppose I was proud that these beings I had given life to, recently so small and helpless, had become so enviably proficient, such experts in this new tongue that was Mandarin to me. I probably thought it was a harmless way for Emily and Ben to feel superior to their control-freak(ish) mother, who was still boss when it came to all the important things like safety and decency, right?

Wrong. Boy, did I get that wrong. In the half hour we have been sitting at the kitchen table, Emily, through hiccups of shock, has managed to tell me that she sent a picture of her bare backside to her friend Lizzy Knowles on Snapchat because Lizzy told Em that the girls in their group were all going to compare tan-lines after the summer holidays.

'What's a Snapchat?'

'Mum, it's like a photo that disappears after like ten seconds.'

'Great, it's gone. So what's the problem?'

'Lizzy took a screenshot of the Snapchat and she said she meant to put it in our Facebook Group Chat, but she put it on her wall by mistake so now it's there like forever.' She pronounces the word 'forever' so it rhymes with her favourite, 'Whatevah' – lately further abbreviated to the intolerable 'Whatevs'.

'Fu'evah,' Emily says again. At the thought of this unwanted immortality, her mouth collapses into an anguished 'O' – a popped balloon of grief.

It takes a few moments for me to translate what she has said into English. I may be wrong (and I'm hoping I am), but I think it means that my beloved daughter has taken a photo of her own bare bum. Through the magic of social media and the wickedness of another girl, this image has now been disseminated – if that's the word I want, which I'm very much afraid it is – to everyone in the school, the street, the universe. Everyone, in fact, but her own father, who is upstairs snoring for England.

'People think it's like really funny,' Emily says, 'because my back is still a bit burnt from Greece so it's like really red and my bum's like really white so I look like a flag. Lizzy says she tried to delete it, but loads of people have shared it already.'

'Slow down, slow down, sweetheart. When did this happen?'

'It was like seven thirty but I didn't notice for ages. You told me to put my phone away when we were having dinner, remember? My name was at the top of the screenshot so everyone knows it's me. Lizzy says she's tried to take it down but it's gone viral. And Lizzy's like, "Em, I thought it was funny. I'm so sorry." And I don't want to seem like I'm upset about

it because everyone thinks it's really hilarious. But now all these people have got my like Facebook and I'm getting these creepy messages.' All of that comes out in one big sobbing blurt.

I get up and go to the counter to fetch some kitchen roll for Em to blow her nose because I have stopped buying tissues as part of recent family budget cuts. The chill wind of austerity blowing across the country, and specifically through our household, means that fancy pastel boxes of paper softened with aloe vera are off the shopping list. I silently curse Richard's decision to use being made redundant by his architecture firm as 'an opportunity to retrain in something more meaningful' – or 'something more unpaid and self-indulgent' if you were being harsh, which, sorry, but I am at this precise moment because I don't have any Kleenex to soak up our daughter's tears. Only when I make a mess of ripping the kitchen paper along its serrated edge do I notice that my hand is shaking, quite badly actually. I place the trembling right hand in my left hand and interlink the fingers in a way I haven't done for years. 'Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Look inside and see all the people.' Em used to make me do that little rhyme over and over because she loved to see the fingers waggling in the church.

''Gain, Mummy. Do it 'gain.'

What was she then? Three? Four? It seems so near yet, at the same time, impossibly far. My baby. I'm still trying to get my bearings in this strange new country my child has taken me to, but the feelings won't stay still. Disbelief, disgust, a tincture of fear.

'Sharing a picture of your bottom on a phone? Oh, Emily, how could you be so bloody stupid?' (That's the fear flaring into anger right there.)

She trumpets her nose on the kitchen roll, screws up the paper and hands it back to me.

'It's a belfie, Mum.'

'What's a belfie for heaven's sake?'

'It's a selfie of your bum,' Emily says. She talks as though this were a normal part of life, like a loaf of bread or a bar of soap.

'You know, a BELFIE.' She says it louder this time, like an Englishman abroad raising his voice so the dumb foreigner will understand.

Ah, a belfie, not a belfry. In my dream, I thought she said belfry. A selfie I know about. Once, when my phone flipped to selfie mode and I found myself looking at my own face, I recoiled. It was unnatural. I sympathised with that tribe which refused to be photographed for fear the camera would steal their souls. I know girls like Em constantly take selfies. But a *belfie*?

'Rihanna does it. Kim Kardashian. Everyone does it,' Emily says flatly, a familiar note of sullenness creeping into her voice.

This is my daughter's stock response lately. Getting into a nightclub with fake ID? 'Don't be shocked, Mum, everyone does it.' Sleeping over at the house of a 'best friend' I've never met, whose parents seem weirdly unconcerned about their child's nocturnal movements? Perfectly normal behaviour, apparently. Whatever it is I am so preposterously objecting to, I need to chill out, basically, because Everyone Does It. Am I so out of touch that distributing pictures of one's naked arse has become socially acceptable?

'Emily, stop texting, will you? Give me that phone. You're in enough trouble as it is.' I snatch the wretched thing out of her hands and she lunges across the table to grab it back, but not before I see a message from someone called Tyler: 'Ur ass is well fit make me big lol!!! 😂'

Christ, the Village Idiot is talking dirty to my baby. And 'Ur'

instead of 'Your'? The boy is not just lewd but illiterate. My Inner Grammarian clutches her pearls and shudders. *Come off it, Kate. What kind of warped avoidance strategy is this? Some drooling lout is sending your sixteen-year-old daughter pornographic texts and you're worried about his* spelling*?*

'Look, darling, I think I'd better call Lizzy's mum to talk about wha—'

'Noooooooo.' Emily's howl is so piercing that Lenny springs from his basket and starts barking to see off whoever has hurt her.

'You can't,' she wails. 'Lizzy's my best friend. You can't get her in trouble.'

I look at her swollen face, the bottom lip raw and bloody from chewing. Does she really think Lizzy is her best friend? Manipulative little witch more like. I haven't trusted Lizzy Knowles since the time she announced to Emily that she was allowed to take two friends to see Justin Bieber at the O2 for her birthday. Emily was so excited; then Lizzy broke the news that she was first reserve. I bought Em a ticket for the concert myself, at catastrophic expense, to protect her from that slow haemorrhage of exclusion, that internal bleed of self-confidence which only girls can do to girls. Boys are such amateurs when it comes to spite.

All of this I think, but do not say. For my daughter cannot be expected to deal with public humiliation and private treachery in the same night.

'Lenny, back in your basket, there's a good boy. It's not getting up time yet. Lie down. There, good boy. Good boy.'

I settle and reassure the dog – this feels more manageable than settling and reassuring the girl – and Emily comes across and lies next to him, burying her head in his neck. With a complete lack of self-consciousness, she sticks her bottom in

the air. The pink Victoria's Secret shorts offer no more cover than a thong and I get the double full-moon effect of both bum cheeks – that same pert little posterior which, God help us, is now preserved for posterity in a billion pixels. Emily's body may be that of a young woman, but she has the total trustingness of the child she was not long ago. Still is in so many ways. Here we are, Em and me, safe in our kitchen, warmed by a cranky old Aga, cuddled up to our beloved dog, yet outside these walls forces have been unleashed that are beyond our control. How am I supposed to protect her from things I can't see or hear? Tell me that. Lenny is just delighted that the two girls in his life are up at this late hour; he turns his head and starts to lick Em's ear with his long, startlingly pink tongue.

The puppy, purchase of which was strictly forbidden by Richard, is my proxy third child, also strictly forbidden by Richard. (The two, I admit, are not unrelated.) I brought this jumble of soft limbs and big brown eyes home just after we moved into this ancient, crumbling-down house. A little light incontinence could hardly hurt the place, I reasoned. The carpets we inherited from the previous owners were filthy and sent up smoke signals of dust as you walked across a room. They would have to be replaced, though only after the kitchen and the bathroom and all the other things that needed replacing first. I knew Rich would be pissed off for the reasons above, but I didn't care. The house move had been unsettling for all of us and Ben had been begging for a puppy for so long – he'd sent me birthday cards every single year featuring a sequence of adorable, beseeching hounds. And now that he was old enough not to want his mother to hug him, I figured out that Ben would cuddle the puppy and I would cuddle the puppy, and, somehow, somewhere in the middle, I would get to touch my son.

The strategy was a bit fluffy and not fully formed, rather like the new arrival, but it worked beautifully. Whatever the opposite of a punchbag is, that's Lenny's role in our family. He soaks up all the children's cares. To a teenager, whose daily lot is to discover how unlovable and misshapen they are, the dog's gift is complete and uncomplicated adoration. And I love Lenny too, really love him with such a tender devotion I am embarrassed to admit it. He probably fills some gap in my life I don't even want to think about.

'Lizzy said it was an accident,' says Em, stretching out a hand for me to pull her up. 'The belfie was only supposed to be for the girls in our group, but she like posted it where all of her other friends could see it by mistake. She took it down as soon as she realised, but it was too late 'cos loads of people had already saved it and reposted it.'

'What about that boy you said was coming round? Um, Tyler?' I close and open my eyes quickly to wipe the boy's lewd text.

'He saw it on Facebook. Lizzy tagged my bum #FlagBum and now everyone on Facebook can see it and knows it's like mine, so now everyone thinks I'm like just one of those girls who takes her clothes off for nothing.'

'No they don't, love.' I pull Em into my arms. She lays her head on my shoulder and we stand in the middle of the kitchen, half hugging, half slow-dancing. 'People will talk about it for a day or two then it'll blow over, you'll see.'

I want to believe that, I really do. But it's like an infectious disease, isn't it? Immunologists would have a field day researching the viral spread of compromising photographs on social media. I'd venture that the Spanish flu and Ebola combined couldn't touch the speed of photographic mortification spreading through cyberspace.

Through the virus that is Internet porn, and in the blink of an eye, my little girl's bare backside had found its way from our commuter village forty-seven miles outside London all the way to Elephant and Castle where Tyler, who is what police call 'a known associate' of Lizzy's cousin's mate's brother, was able to see it. All because, according to Em, dear Lizzy had her settings fixed to allow 'friends of friends' to see whatever she posted. Great, why not just send it directly to the paedophile wing of Wormwood Scrubs?

4.19 am: Emily is asleep at last. Outside, it's black and cold, the first chill of early autumn. I'm still getting used to night in a village – so different from night in a town, where it's never truly dark. Not like this furry black pelt thrown over everything. Quite close by, somewhere down the bottom of the garden, there is the shriek of something killing or being killed. When we first moved here, I mistook these noises for a human in pain and I wanted to call the police. Now I just assume it's the fox again.

I promised Em I would stay by her bed in case Tyler or any other belfie hounds try to drop in. That's why I'm sitting here in her little chair with the teddy bear upholstery, my own mottled, forty-something backside struggling to squidge between its narrow, scratched wooden arms. I think of all the times I've kept vigil on this chair. Praying she would go to sleep (pretty much every single night, 1998–2000). Praying she would wake up (suspected concussion after falling off bouncy castle, 2004). And now here I am thinking of her bottom, the one that I trapped expertly in Pampers and which is now bouncing around the worldwide web all by itself, no doubt inflaming the loins of hordes of deviant Tylers. *Uch.*

I feel ashamed that my daughter has no sense of modesty

because whose fault is that? Her mother's, obviously. Mine – Emily's Grandma Jean – instilled in me an almost Victorian dread of nakedness that came from her own strict Baptist upbringing. Ours was the only family on the beach that got changed into swimwear inside a kind of towelling burqa, with a drawstring neck my mum had fashioned from curtain flex. To this day, I hardly glance at my own backside, let alone offer it up to public view. How in the name of God did our family go, in just two generations, from prudery to porn?

I desperately need to talk to someone, but who? I can't tell Richard because the thought of his princess being defiled would kill him. I flick through my mental Rolodex of friends, pausing at certain names, trying to weigh up who would judge harshly, who would sympathise effusively then spread the gossip anyway – in a spirit of deep concern, naturally. ('Poor Kate, you won't *believe* what her daughter did.') It's not like laughing with other mums about something embarrassing Emily did when she was little, like that Nativity play when she broke Arabella's halo because she was so cross about getting the part of the innkeeper's wife. (A dowdy, non-speaking role with no tinsel; I saw her point.) I can't expose Em to the sanctimony of the Muffia, that organised gang of mothers superior. So, who on earth can I trust with this thing so distressing and surreal that I actually feel sick? I go to my Inbox, find a name that spells 'unshockability' and begin to type.

From: Kate Reddy
To: Candy Stratton
Subject: Help!
Hi hon, you still up? Can't remember the time difference. It's been quite a night here. Emily was lured by a 'friend' into posting a photo of her naked derrière on Snapchat

which has now been circulated to the entire Internet. This is called a 'belfie', which I'm old enough to think might be short for Harry Belafonte. Worried that heavy-breathing stalkers are about to form a queue outside our house. Seriously, I feel Jurassic when she talks to me. I don't understand any of the tech stuff, but I do know it's really bad. I want to murder the little idiot and I want to protect her so badly.

I thought this parenting lark was supposed to get easier. What do I do? Ban her from social media? Get her to a nunnery?

Yours in a sobbing heap,

Kx

A Technicolor image pings into my head of Candy at Edwin Morgan Forster, the international investment company where we both worked, must be eight or nine years ago. She was wearing a red dress so tight you could watch the sashimi she ate for lunch progressing down her oesophagus. 'Whad you lookin' at, kid?' she would jeer at any male colleague foolish enough to comment on her Jessica Rabbit silhouette. Candace Marlene Stratton: proud, foul-mouthed export of New Jersey, Internet whizz, and my bosom buddy in an office where sexism was the air that we breathed. I read about a discrimination case in the paper the other day, some junior accountant complaining that her boss hadn't been respectful enough in his use of language. I thought: Seriously? You don't know you're born, sweetie. At EMF, if a woman so much as raised her voice, the traders would yell across the floor, 'On the rag are you, darling?' Nothing was off limits, not even menstruation. They loved to tease female staff about their time of the month. Complaining would only have confirmed the sniggerers' view that we couldn't

hack it, so we never bothered. Candy, who subsisted on coke back then – the kind you gulped from a can *and* the kind you snorted up your nose – sat about fifteen feet away from me for three years, yet we hardly spoke. Two women talking in the office was 'gossiping'; two men doing exactly the same was 'a briefing'. We knew the rules. But Candy and I emailed the whole time, in and out of each other's minds, venting and joking: members of the Resistance in a country of men.

I never thought I would look back on that time with affection, let alone longing, only suddenly I think how exciting it was. It tested me in a way that nagging kids to do their homework, cooking nine meals a week and getting a man in to do the gutters – the wearisome warp and weft of life – never does. Can you be a success as a mother? People only notice when you're not doing it right.

Back then, I had targets I could hit and I knew that I was good, really good at my work. Camaraderie under pressure; you don't realise what a deep pleasure that is until it's gone. And Candy, she always had my back. Not long after she gave birth to Seymour, she headed home to the States to be near her mom, who longed to babysit her first grandchild. It allowed Candy to start an upmarket sex-toy business. *Orgazma: for the woman who's too busy going to come* (or maybe the other way around). I've only seen Candy once in the years since we both left EMF, although, forged in the heat of adversity, ours are the ties that bind. I really wish she was here now. I'm not sure I can do this by myself.

From: Candy Stratton
To: Kate Reddy
Subject: Help!
Hey Sobbing Heap, this is the Westchester County

24-Hour Counselling Service. Calm down, OK. What Emily did is perfectly normal teen behaviour. Think of it as the 21st century equivalent of love letters tied with a red ribbon in a scented drawer . . . only now it's her drawers.

Count yourself lucky it's just a picture of her ass. A girl in Seymour's class shared a picture of her lady garden because the captain of the football team asked to see it. These kids have NO sense of privacy. They think because they're on the phone or computer in their own home it's safe.

Emily doesn't realise she's walking butt-naked down the information superhighway looking like she's got her thumb out and she's trying to hitch a ride. Your job is to point that out to her. With force if necessary. I suggest hiring some friendly nerd to see how much he can track down online and destroy. You can ask Facebook to take obscene stuff down I'm pretty sure. And restrict her privileges – no Internet access for a few weeks until she's learned her lesson.

You should get some sleep, hon, must be crazy late there?

Am here for you always,

XXO C

5.35 am: It's now so late that it's early. I decide to unload the dishwasher rather than go back to bed for a futile hour staring at the ceiling. This perimenopause thing is playing havoc with my sleep. You won't believe it, but when the doctor mentioned that word to me a few months ago the first thing that popped into my head was a Sixties band with moptop hair: Perry and the Menopauses. Dooby-dooby-doo. Perry was smiling,

unthreatening, and almost certainly wearing a hand-knitted Christmas jumper. I know, I know, but I'd never heard of it before and I was relieved to finally have a name for a condition that was giving me broken nights then plunging me down a mineshaft of tiredness straight after lunch. (I'd vaguely wondered if I had some fatal illness and had already moved on to touching scenes by the graveside where both kids cried and said if only they'd appreciated me while I was still alive.) If you have a name for what's making you scared you can try to befriend it, can't you? So Perry and I, we would be friends.

'I can't afford to take an afternoon nap,' I explained to the doctor. 'I'd just like to feel like my old self again.'

'That's not uncommon,' she said, typing busily into my notes on the screen. 'Classic textbook symptoms for your age.'

I was relieved to have classic symptoms; there was safety in numbers. Out there were thousands, no, millions of women who also walked around feeling like they were strapped to a dying animal. All we wanted was our old self back, and if we waited patiently for her she would come. Meanwhile, we could make lists to combat another of Perry's delightful symptoms. Forgetfulness.

What did Candy say in her email? Find some nerdy guy who can track down Emily's belfie and wipe it? 'Perfectly normal teen behaviour.' Maybe it's not so bad after all. I take a seat in the chair next to the Aga, the one I bought on eBay for £95 (absolute bargain, it only needs new springs, new feet and new upholstery) and start to make a list of all the things I mustn't forget. The last thing I remember is a dog with no sense of his own size jumping onto my lap, his tail beating against my arm, silky head resting on my shoulder.

7.01 am: The moment I wake I check my phone. Two missed calls from Julie. My sister likes to keep me up to date on

our mother's latest adventure, just to make it clear that, living three streets away in our Northern home town, it's she who has to be on call for Mum, who has so far refused to adopt any behaviour which might be called 'age appropriate'. Every Wednesday morning, Mum prepares all the vegetables for Luncheon Club, where some of the diners who she calls 'the old people' are fifteen years her junior. This fills me with a mixture of pride (look at her spirit!) and exasperation (stop being so bloody independent, will you?). When is my mother going to accept that she too is old?

Since I decided to 'swan off' as my sister calls it – aka taking the difficult decision to move the family back down South so I could be near London, the place most likely to give me a well-paid job – Julie has become one of the great English martyrs, giving off a noxious whiff of bonfire and sanctimony. Never misses a chance to point out I'm not pulling my weight. Even though, when I speak to Mum, as I do most days, she tells me that she hasn't seen my younger sister for ages. I think it's terrible Julie doesn't drop in to check on Mum, seeing how near she is, but I can't say so because, in the casting for the play of our family, I am the Bad Daughter Who Buggered Off and Julie is the Unappreciated Good Daughter Who Stayed Put. I do my best to change the script; I bought Mum a computer for her birthday and told her it was from both of us, Julie and me. But making me feel guilty is one of the few bits of power my twice-divorced, vodka-chugging sister gets to wield in her hard and helpless life. I get that. Rationally, I do, and I try to be understanding, but since when could the power of reason unpick the knots of sibling rivalry? I should call Julie back, and I will, but I need to get Emily sorted out. Emily first, then Mum, then prepare for my interview with the

headhunter this afternoon. Anyway, I don't need Julie's help to make me feel guilty about getting my priorities wrong. Guilt is where I live.

7.11 am: At breakfast, I tell Richard that Emily is sleeping in because she had a bad night. This has the virtue of being a lie that is perfectly true. It was certainly bad, right up there with the worst nights ever. Completely drained, I move through my morning tasks like a rusty, scrapyard android. Even bending over to pick up Lenny's water bowl is such an effort I actually make encouraging sounds to get myself to straighten up. ('Come on, *ooff*, you can do it!') Am making porridge when Ben descends from his lair looking like a wildebeest tethered to three kinds of electronic device. When he turned fourteen, my lovely boy's shoulders slumped overnight and he lost the power of speech, communicating his needs in occasional grunts and snide put-downs. This morning, however, he seems weirdly animated – talkative even.

'Mum, guess what? I saw this picture of Emily on Facebook. Crack-ing photo.'

'Ben.'

'Seriously, the bottom line is she got thousands of Likes for this picture of her . . .'

'BENJAMIN!'

'Well, well, young man,' says Richard, looking up briefly from his frogspawn yogurt, or whatever it is he's eating these days, 'it's good to hear you saying something positive about your sister for a change. Isn't it, Kate?'

I shoot Ben my best Medusa death-ray stare and mouth, '*Tell Dad and you're dead.*'

Richard doesn't notice this frantic semaphore between mother and son because he is absorbed in an article on a cycling

website. I can read the headline over his shoulder. '15 Gadgets You Never Knew You Needed.'

The number of gadgets cyclists don't know that they need is very extensive, as our small utility room can testify. Getting to the washing machine these days is like competing in the hurdles because Rich's bike gear occupies every inch of floor. There are several kinds of helmet: a helmet that plays music, a helmet with a miner's lamp clipped to the front, even a helmet with its own indicator. From my drying rack hang two heavy, metal locks that look more like implements used during the torture of a Tudor nobleman than something to fasten a bike to a railing. When I went in there yesterday to empty the dryer, I found Rich's latest purchase. A worryingly phallic object, still in its box, it claimed to be 'an automatic lube dispenser'. Is that for the bike or for my husband's chafed backside, which has lost its cushion of fat since he became a mountain goat? It sure as hell isn't for our sex life.

'I'll be late tonight. Andy and I are riding to Outer Mongolia,' (at least that's what I think he said). 'OK with you?'

It's a statement not a question. Richard doesn't look up from his laptop, not even when I put a bowl of porridge in front of him. 'Darling, you know I'm not eating gluten,' he mutters.

'I thought oats were OK? Slow release, low GI aren't they?' He doesn't respond.

Same goes for Ben who I can see is scrolling through Facebook, smirking and communing with that invisible world where he spends so much of his time. Probably charting the global adventures of his sister's bottom. With a pang, I think of Emily asleep upstairs. I told her everything would seem better in the morning and now it is the morning I need to think how to make it better. First, I have to get her father out of the house.

Over by the back door, Richard starts to put on his cycling gear, a process fraught with zips and studs and flaps. Picture, if you will, a knight getting ready for the Battle of Agincourt with a £2,300 carbon fibre bike taking the part of the horse. When my husband took up cycling three years ago, I was totally in favour. Exercise, fresh air, anything so I could be left in peace on eBay picking up 'more junk we don't need to clutter up this ruin', as Richard calls it. Or 'incredible bargains that will find a place in our magical old house', which I prefer.

That was before it became clear that Rich wasn't just cycling for fun. Seriously, fun did not come into it. Before my unsuspecting eyes, he morphed into one of those MAMILs you read about in the Lifestyle section of the papers, a Middle-Aged Man in Lycra who did a minimum of ten hours in the saddle every week. On his new regime, Rich rapidly lost two stone. I found it hard to be delighted about this because my own extra pounds were clinging to me with greater tenacity every year. Unlike Richard's saddlebags, mine were no longer removable (if only you could unhook the panniers of spare flesh!). Until my late thirties, I swear all it took was four days of eating only cottage cheese and Ryvita and I could feel my ribs again. That trick doesn't work any more.

Rich had never been fat, but he was always cuddly in a rumpled, Jeff Bridges kind of way, and there was something about the soft ampleness of his body that matched his good nature. He looked like what he was: an amiable and generous man. This angular stranger he studies in the mirror with intense interest has a taut, toned body and a heavily lined face – we have both reached that age where being too thin makes you look gaunt instead of youthful. The new Richard attracts lots of admiring comments from our friends and I know I should find him attractive, but any lustful thoughts are punctured

instantly by the cycling gear. What Rich most resembles when he wears his neck-to-knee stretchwear is a giant turquoise condom. Horribly visible, his penis and testicles dangle like low-hanging fruit.

The old Rich would have appreciated how ridiculous he looks and enjoyed sharing the joke. This new one doesn't smile much, or maybe I don't give him much to smile about. He is permanently in a grump about the house or 'Your Money Pit' as he calls it, never missing an opportunity to get in a dig at the lovely builder who is skilfully helping me coax the sad old place back to life.

As he fastens his helmet, he says: 'Kate, can you get Piotr to take a look at the bathroom tap? I think the washer he used was another of his post-war Polish cast-offs.'

See what I mean? Another sideswipe at poor Piotr. I would say something sarcastic back, like how I'm amazed that Richard even noticed something about our house when his mind is on much higher things, but suddenly feel really bad that I haven't told him about Emily and the belfie. Instead of snapping, I go over and give him a guilty goodbye hug, whereupon my dressing gown gets snagged on a Velcro pocket flap. There are an awkward few seconds when we are stuck together. It's the closest we've been for a while. Perhaps I should tell him about last night? The temptation to blurt it all out, to share the burden, is almost overwhelming, but I promised Emily that I wouldn't tell Daddy, so I don't.

7.54 am: With Richard and Ben safely out of the house, I go upstairs to check on Em, bearing a mug of brick-red tea with one sugar. Since she started her juicing regime, she won't allow any sugar to pass her lips, but surely sweet tea counts as medicine in an emergency? I can only push her door so far before

it jams on a pile of clothes and shoes. I squeeze through the gap and find myself in what looks like a room vacated in a hurry after an air raid. Debris is spread over a wide area and on the bedside table teeters an art installation made of Diet Coke cans.

The state of a teenager's bedroom is such a time-honoured source of mother–daughter conflict that I guess I should have been prepared for it, but our fights over this disputed territory are never less than bruising. The latest, after school on Friday, when I insisted that her room be tidied *right now*, ended in furious stalemate:

Emily: 'But it's *my room*.'

Me: 'But it's *my house*.'

Neither of us was prepared to back down.

'She's so stubborn,' I complained later to Richard.

'Who does that remind you of?' he said.

Emily is sprawled diagonally across the bed, duvet twisted about her like a chrysalis. She has always been a very active sleeper, moving around her mattress like the hands of a clock. When she's asleep, as she is now, she looks exactly like the toddler I remember in her cot – that determined jut to her chin, the flaxen hair which forms damp curls on the pillow when she's hot. She was born with these enormous eyes whose colour didn't settle for a long while, as if they were still making up their mind. When I lifted her out of the cot each morning, I used to chant, 'What colour are your eyes today? Browny bluey greeny grey?'

They ended up hazel like mine and I was secretly disappointed she didn't get Richard's perfect shade of Paul Newman blue, though she carries the gene for those so they may yet come out in her own kids. Unbelievably, my mind has already started straying to grandchildren. (I knew you could be

broody for a baby, but broody for your baby's baby? Is that a thing?)

I can tell Emily is dreaming. There's a movie running behind those busy, fluttering eyelids; hope it's not a horror film. Lying on the pillow next to her head are Baa-Sheep, her first toy, and the damn phone, its screen lit up with overnight activity. '37 unread messages,' it says. I shudder to think what they contain. Candy told me I should confiscate Emily's mobile, but when I reach out to take it her legs twitch in protest like a laboratory frog's. Sleeping Beauty ain't going to give up her online life without a struggle.

'Emily, sweetheart, you need to wake up. Time to get ready for school.'

As she groans and turns over, burrowing deeper into her chrysalis, the phone dings once, then again and again. It's like a lift door opening every few seconds.

'Em, love, please wake up. I've brought you some tea.'

Ding. Ding. Ding. Hateful sound. Emily's innocent mistake started this and who knows where it will end. I snatch the phone and put it in my pocket before she can see. *Ding. Ding.*

On the way downstairs, I pause on the landing. *Ding.* Looking through the ancient mullioned window onto a still-misty garden a line of poetry comes, absurdly, alarmingly, into my head. 'Send not to know for whom the belfie tolls. It tolls for thee.'

8.19 am: In the kitchen, or what passes for one while Piotr is building an actual kitchen, I quickly post the breakfast stuff into the dishwasher and open a tin for Lenny before checking my emails. The first one I see is from a name that has never previously bothered my Inbox. Oh, hell.

From: Jean Reddy
To: Kate Reddy
Subject: Surprise!
Dear Kath,

It's Mum here. My first email ever! Thank you so much for clubbing together with Julie to buy me a laptop computer. You girls do spoil me. I've started a computing class at the library.

The Internet seems very interesting so far. Lots of funny cat pictures. Am really looking forward to keeping up with all the grandchildren. Emily told me she is on a thing called Facebook. Please can you give me her address?

Love Mum xxxx