

MATERNAL RAGE

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We don't talk about maternal rage. I mean the kind that simmers under the surface of countless women; the kind that makes you dig your nails into your fists in an attempt to stop the fury from entering your hands, because if you don't stop it now, it will turn to something shameful. Mothers dare not speak of it. We are afraid to admit to it, even to ourselves.

Before we enter the world of motherhood, we see only images of pristine kitchens, sleeping babies, the perfect work-life balance. The drudgery that is

the reality of motherhood, the long list of unfinished tasks, the never-ending laundry, and the constant silent scream of the mental load, are kept from us. To some extent we play our own part in this, the pull of biology being so strong that we disregard the bits of motherhood we don't want to see before we ourselves get there. But I'm not sure it is possible to understand fully the highs and lows of motherhood without having experienced them.

Pregnancy and motherhood left me raw, unable to process comment and criticism. I was lucky; I had a group of NCT friends who were all experiencing the same emotional rollercoaster. But I would approach the subject of my children tentatively in front of others, worried about judgement, not wanting to bore them, worrying the work of motherhood wasn't exciting. Discussing the reality of motherhood requires real vulnerability.

'Buggies used to be invisible to me, and now I feel invisible,' a new mum confides as I collect my son on the first day of nursery. Her truth makes me inhale sharply. This level of vulnerability is the norm since I became a mother. Maybe it's because time is short

between wiping noses, holding snacks, and answering questions about God, the universe, and phonics, but relationships develop faster when you have children. Or maybe it is because we are so desperate to be seen that when someone stops and shows interest, we reveal ourselves instantly, in a barrage of oversharing that is met with nodding heads and knowing eyes.

This invisibility is the foundation on which my maternal rage stands. I'm a mother of three. I love family; not just the idea of it, but the messy reality of unconditional love. Yet at the same time, the reality of motherhood has been viscerally brutal to me.

I met my husband in my mid-thirties. He was ten years older, and we both knew time was short. But children didn't happen for us instantly, and after three years we gave up. And then it happened. And it wouldn't stop happening. In our case, babies were like buses: they all seemed to come along at once.

Six years on, three little boys tear around our house. They are loud, like the battling cowboys from a John Wayne western, their energy levels set permanently to high. They drag each other around the room on a blanket, as the baby crawls between them, narrowly

avoiding death. 'Darling, please don't do that,' I say, over and over again, until my head starts to hurt and my own politeness annoys me.

'You wouldn't tolerate this behaviour from anyone else,' says my husband. He's right, I wouldn't. His words echo around my head, mixing with the shouts from the boys and demands for food and toilet trips and toys, until I can't bear it any longer and my volume rises, the sinews in my neck tighten and all I want to do is scream: 'Will you just fucking stop trying to fucking kill each other, motherfuckers!' But I can't say that because I'm the adult. And they are my children and I've seen those ads on TV where kids sit crying in rooms.

I open the fridge and I eat my feelings. I make yet another cup of tea. I vacuum up more crumbs, push my rage further down as I pick up books with newly missing pages. I keep trudging on through the drudgery but the incessant demands keep coming, and then I step barefoot on a rogue piece of Lego and it's game over. I scream.

I scream like a banshee, because it's all I can do. Because I've tried everything to make the fuckers listen. Thinking steps, time out, taking away toys. But

children who are loved discover boundaries by pushing their limits. And so I howl like a wild animal, and they turn and look at me with their big brown eyes, all three of them. The six-year-old with his worried face, the baby who's surprised by the strange noise coming from Mama, and the three-year-old who looks hurt and frightened. And all at once I feel I've failed. I am empty and I am awful.

I scoop them up and onto the sofa. In a huddle and under a blanket, we eat ice-cream and watch CBeebies, and I wonder why we couldn't simply do this before. Why was I trying to hold it together with carrot sticks and educational games?

I can see how the path to maternal rage – spewing into abuse – is incremental.

I am lucky. My husband comes home from work just around the time my cup of rage runneth over. He's a good man. He scoops up our children, asks about their days, and takes them upstairs for bathtime as I stand muttering in a corner or shaking my head at the day I've had. He calms the seas with his warmth and his smile. He files away his day until the boys are in bed. I am aware that not everyone has this. I wonder

how single mothers cope. But I am also aware that he bears the brunt of, and exacerbates, my maternal rage. My position is so precarious that when he forgets my hatred of sweetcorn and adds it to our pizza, it tips me over the edge.

Because it's the numerous times I have to tell my children to put their shoes on in the morning. It's the swimming/PE/games kit, it's the youngest demanding milk, and the middle child doing his best to be disruptive. It's my husband trying to pacify me when he's just waltzed in from taking too long in the shower and is now heading out the door. It's when I ask for help and he responds by requesting specific instructions on how to navigate the kids out of the house.

'You're tired and lonely,' says another mother when I mention the lack of respect afforded to mothers and the complete disregard for the mental load we drag around all day.

She's right, I am tired. I am tired of the patriarchy. Maternal rage is about more than just the difficulty of raising small children. It's a consequence of all the things that women have to endure throughout our lives. That we are expected to slot ourselves into a work

system created for 1950s men; that, despite legislation, women still have to worry about telling employers they are pregnant, still struggle to get by on maternity pay, and then still have to pay extortionate childcare costs in order to go back to work. That, despite nods towards a more equitable arrangement such as shared parental leave, the reality is still that working mothers' careers stall or go backwards while their male partners' prospects might even improve.

And those of us who are stay-at-home mothers have another layer of disrespect heaped on us. Because motherhood is unpaid, and unpaid work is not valued. What is a writer when she's not being paid to write? There are moments when I feel as though all I'm doing is failing.

It's late evening. I'm tired but desperate for time alone. Time where I'm not being pulled and jostled. The children are asleep; the incessant demands are on pause. I'm no longer hypervigilant. Instead, I'm mindlessly scrolling through social media, switching between three apps and BBC News, because at least I'd like to pretend I'm informed.

'How did you get through raising kids?' I ask my friends. 'I drank a lot of wine,' says one. I can't help but

wonder what kind of state we are in if the only way we survive motherhood is self-medication. Surely, if a man needed to drink every night to recover from his work-day, the advice would be to find another job. Something is deeply broken here.

I have to find a better way through this, so I join a HITT class. I need to feel stronger. I need an outlet for my maternal rage. 'Is it with other mums? With buggies?' I'm asked by a relative, and I feel instantly diminished. The rage resurfaces. My award-winning career, the publishing deal, the TV option, none of it means anything since I gave birth. Why wasn't I warned that my worth and brain would fall out of my vagina with my babies? For all the demands on me, I am invisible.