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Mothers Have Nine Lives
By Joanna Alexandra Norland

Characters

Louise: Age 27
Gina: Age 20
Margaret: Age 36
Wendy: Age 36
Kim: Age 34
Katherine: Age 40
Mia: Age 40
Marge: Age 30
Anna: Age 45

Act I

Scene 1

(Lights come up on LOUISE)

LOUISE

"Are you sure?" asks my mother.

"What do you think James will say?" asks my best friend.

"Can we finally get married?" asks my boyfriend.

"Isn't it about time you started having children anyway?" asks my mother.

"Shall we plan for a June wedding?" asks my fiancé.

"Do you, James Collinson, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?" asks the vicar.

"Wasn't a honeymoon in Rome a bit much for a girl in your condition?" asks my mother.

"So I guess you won't be up for Kirsty's hen night in Las Vegas, then?" asks my best friend.

"Darling, you're not bothered if I play squash with the boys tonight, are you?" asks my boyf- my husband.

"Why don't we go shopping for your maternity wardrobe this weekend?" asks my mother.

"So when did *you* start eating for two?" asks my best friend.

"Why do you feel you need sleeping pills?" asks the doctor.

"How long a maternity leave will you want?" asks my boss.

"Shall I start getting up to speed on your summer cases?" asks my junior colleague.

"Aren't you glad I was always home for you, dear?" asks my mother.

"When are you going to tell Garth you're leaving?" asks my husband.

"Have you tried to control your mood swings with yoga?" asks the antenatal nurse.

"How can they be sure it's a girl?" asks my mother.

"Next time, why don't you make it a boy to balance things out?" asks my husband.

"Could you brief Tom on Project Omega for the Goldman Sachs pitch?" asks my boss.

"Did I tell you about my promotion?" asks my best friend.

"Why don't I move in for a bit after the baby's born?" asks my mother.

"Have you looked into herbal mood stabilizers?" asks the nurse.

"You mean it could be any time now – like positively any second?" asks my best friend.

"Oh my God! Where are the car keys?" asks my husband.

"Why are all the bloody lights red?" asks my husband.

"Roadworks? This time of year? Why?" asks my husband.

"Name and birthdate please?" asks the receptionist.

"Would Dr. Saunders please report to the delivery room?" asks the intercom.

"Breathe deeply. Are you ready?" asks the midwife.

Am I ready? Am I ready? But no one's ever asked:

Do I want this baby?

Scene 2

GINA

(speaking on a telephone)

Come on. Answer. Answer. Hello? Oh, hello. Is this the Mirror? I've got a story I want you to put in your paper, so this is the place to call, eh? You better believe I got a story, and I'm tellin' you, 'cause I've read how you write stuff about people like me, people on benefits.

People with two babies and no double buggy to take 'em out in — You try luggin' em down the street for a box of KFC and they're making such a racket you can't hear yourself think, so as when you get there, you realise you left your change back home on top of the telly, and you gotta lug 'em right back and start all over again. Then you'd see what I mean.

And that's what I want you to write about in your paper.

(annoyed)

No, not about the diet of low-income children. I mean, about the double buggy. See, my two little girls, one's fourteen months, and one's two months. You should see 'em, the way little Jenny's hair is comin' in all blond and curly. I just know that she's gonna break hearts some day. And you should see Crystal, the way she sucks her thumb in her sleep, you'd think you was lookin' at an angel . . . But anyway, like I was sayin', if I don't get that double buggy soon, I think I'm gonna go crazy.

See, my social worker, she's this real uptight cow. So when I told her I was four months pregnant and Crystal was coming along, at first, it was, "Miss Nolan, would you like to read through this pamphlet on adoption?" As if I'm just gonna chuck my baby out like some used johnny so some other lady can bring her up, and tell her every lie in the book about her fat, lazy, no good mother who didn't want her.

("Soc", below, is pronounced "soch", i.e., an abbreviation for "social worker")

When my soc saw that I wasn't gonna go along with her game, she goes, "Well, with two babies, you're gonna need a double buggy, and you'd better start workin' on it now."

She gives me this number for the Family Support Unit, cuz they were supposed to get one for me right off, the double buggy, I mean. I called 'em that day. That was December, do you get me? Last December. "We're sorry, we don't have that item in stock," said the cow who answered the phone. "How about a box of nighttime Pampers?" and she said she would call me when a double buggy came in.

So last week, when my soc goes, "really, Miss Nolan, you should try to take your little ones out to the park two or three times a week for a breath of fresh air," you should have heard me. I just let her have it.

"No problem," I said. "But first I gotta change two babies, all by myself, strap one of 'em into a high chair and balance the other on my knee while I try to get some lunch into 'em, scrounge around for their jackets, yank their shoes out from under the bed, get 'em all zipped up and laced up and buttoned up, dig up their bottles, hoist each of 'em onto a hip, side-step my way out the door, huff and puff down five flights of stairs 'cause the landlord, that bastard, still hasn't fixed the lift and it's been stuck up on the eighth floor since March, carry 'em miles down the street to the park, and hope the school kids are smoking weed somewhere else for a change. Two or three times a week, did you say?"

So maybe somthin' got through to her, 'cause that afternoon, she calls while I'm boilin' up Jenny's alphabet soup. "The Family Support Unit has a double buggy waiting for you," she says. "They've had it for three months. Why didn't you keep calling them like they told you to? Go in with your kids' birth certificates and you can pick it up."

You should have seen me dancin' round my place last night. 'Cause it wasn't just a double buggy. It was like I was gonna get back a little piece of my freedom. Especially when it's blazing hot outside and the flat is baking, and my two girls are wailing to be taken outside. I call my sister to come baby-sit, and I take the bus downtown – It takes me a year to find the Family Support Unit, cuz someone spray painted over all the street signs, but finally, there I am, and there it is, behind the counter, just waiting for me. It's red, and all shiny, with six wheels and red bells and yellow ducks strung across the top.

I show my babies' birth certificates to the snot at the front desk. She looks at them, and dives into the little "Employees Only" room. At first I don't notice how long she's gone, because I'm thinking about how I'm gonna walk down the street with my double buggy, with Jenny and Crystal swattin' at the bells and the ducks, and all of us laughing and not a cloud in the sky. Then she comes back to say, "I'm sorry, Miss Nolan. We only give out double buggies to mothers with twins."

"So what if they're not twins?" I say.

"I'm sorry," she says, "But a policy is a policy."

I told her where she could shove her policy. I told her I was not leaving without that buggy. I said I was just gonna stand there, right at the counter, and tell everyone who came in what a pile of steaming crap the Family Support Unit really is.

She picks up the phone and says, "If you don't leave quietly, Miss Nolan, I'll have to call the police."

Well, I know how to dial too, and I'm callin' you because there has to be somethin' or someone out there to get me that double buggy. I would do anything to get it. I would steal, even. My two girls - You should see them cryin' when it's a sunny day out, and the flat is roasting, and I gotta keep 'em cooped up inside. If I can't put a smile on my babies' faces, how am I ever gonna make 'em love me?

So listen, you're going to write up what I've been tellin' you in your paper, right? Why don't you send someone around to take pictures of my two girls? You should see the way Jenny's hair is c- Why not? You mean you're not a reporter? Well who can I talk to, then?

The social issues who? Away for summer vacation? September? I can't wait until September. Did you hear a friggin' word of what I've been telling you? Hello? Hello?

Scene 3

MARGARET

Oh yes, I was all set to jump into my new role. Would you believe I was going to quit the *Saturday Night Review* and be a traditional, full-time, over-time, all-the-time mum?

But once I realised that a mother's schedule has a lot of windows in it, I got a great idea.

"You know, Margaret," I said to myself, "you joined *Saturday Night* in the first place because you wanted to write opinion columns, and then the editing track sort of swept you up. This is the perfect opportunity to get back into freelancing."

I called my mother and said, "Mum, how would you like to spend some quality time with your brand new granddaughter?" And just like that, it was agreed. Three mornings a week, mum would come over, and I'd escape to the office to practice my vocation.

My other vocation, besides motherhood, I mean.

My column was getting a great response, and it was all going even better than

I'd hoped. Then, a month later, Gerald, the senior editor, stopped by to say that the neophyte they'd promoted to my old position was having trouble getting the hang of the scheduling, and would I mind. . .

Before I knew it, I was there every morning trying to sort out his mess.

"I'm just here for an hour," I'd announce as I hung up my coat. But then some crisis would break, or some story would explode, and the neophyte would just shake his head as if to say, "this never came up in my media studies module," and well, that would be that for the rest of the day. Meanwhile, mum was establishing such a strong rapport with Clarissa, it was like magic. To tell you the truth, even if I could get away a bit early, most days I didn't have the heart to disturb them.

(beat, then speaking thoughtfully)

I suppose Mum's just a natural with children.

(brightening)

And the arrangement paid off for everybody because in March, Ian, the publisher, invited me out to lunch. Five star restaurant, flowers ordered special, I knew something was up.

"Margaret," he said, "we're revamping our format for the September issue, and I don't have to tell you what's involved. Let's face it. It's a tough charge and the deadline is fierce. That's why we need a lioness at our helm. That's why we need you."

I thought, this is my big chance to be just the kind of role model Clarissa needs.

We almost ran into a hitch with mum, who said that she needed to go home to cook dinner for my dad every once in a while. Mum can be old fashioned like that. But then Richard saved the day with a great idea. He said, "what if Clarissa boards at Granny's during the week, and comes home to us on weekends?" That seemed to solve all mum's problems.

And how we love having Clarissa over for a visit. I'll admit it. Richard and I just spoil her rotten. The last time she was here, it was all we could do to keep ourselves from smothering her. That was in June — or the end of May, anyway.

Lately, well, you know how it is when you're getting down to the wire. Come Saturday morning, I just don't feel right unless I stop over at the office on my way to pick up Clarissa, just to check the fax machine and clear away the overnight e-mail backlog. Then one thing leads to another, and by six p.m. I feel like the place is going to fall apart unless I pop in on Sunday to wrap things up. And you know Richard, Mr. "I love weekends, because it's the only time to get some proper brainwork done without the endless phone calls and interruptions." As mum would say, "Margaret, did you have to choose a man who resembles your father in everything?"

But next month, the prototype of the new magazine format goes to press, and we're going to celebrate by having Clarissa down for a whole day. I just can't wait to take my baby to the office and start her networking with all my colleagues. I'll make lunch reservations for all of us at the *Pain du Jour*. I can just see us now, the cream of the intellectual press, the ones who count with the ones who count, and all of us gathering 'round to coo at my sweet girl.

But most of all, what a treat it will be to see my Clarissa again. What an amazing thing it is to discover the mother figure inside yourself.

Once you start taking care of another individual's needs, you just never know what wonderful surprises the next moment will hold.

Scene 4

WENDY

What's that, honey?

You're a kitten? You're a little, lost kitten? Well of course I'll take you in to live with us. I will take in the little abandoned kitten, and feed her, and play with her for as long as she wants . . . Of course I will. Now you go back to sleep, okay?

(WENDY mimes kissing a child, walking out of the child's room, and closing the door)

Two or three times a night now, after I read her a bedtime story and turn out the light, Tara mews like a kitten. She mews until I go in to assure her that there is still a home for her here. Then I tuck the covers up around her, and give her a hug and a kiss, and sometimes I sing her a song. This comforts her long enough so that she'll go to sleep, willing to believe that the world will still be a safe place in the morning.

It's been going on for about a week now. You see, every day, on our way to school, we stop by Frank's park bench to give him some change. Then, two weeks ago, Tara asked me, "When are you gonna find a house for Frank?"

I'm an estate agent. I've explained to Tara about how that means I find houses for people, but that sometimes they have to wait for a while. She decided that if Frank needed a house, then I must be looking.

(pause)

I almost told her, "Frank doesn't need a house, sweetie. He's perfectly happy without one." It's not so much that I wanted to spare her painful knowledge. But if Frank needs a home, and I can't get him one, what does that say about me? It says something I didn't want her to know. At least, not quite yet.

But I'm a modern parent, and the experts have handed modern parents our marching orders: "Honesty, always honesty". So I explained that I can only

get houses for some people, people with money and jobs. So now she knows. She knows that I can't do all the things that need to be done, and well, you see how it is.

(beat)

It was easy enough for the psychologist to say, "tell her the truth straight away. Later on she'll be grateful for it." But she wasn't the one who had to explain it all to Tara, before Tara could even pronounce the word "adoption". And maybe Tara is too young to understand, but maybe part of her already knows that even though I'm going to try to give her everything she could need, I couldn't give her my genes or my blood, and I never shared my body space with her.

Of course, that book with those coloured pictures made it all seem so cozy . . . and Tara seemed happy enough at the time about the idea. But if your first mother gave you up, and your second mother can't find homes for people who need them . . . you see how it is. She mews like a kitten two, three times every night.

There are other doubts taking root, and it's only a matter of time until the threads weave themselves into questions. I can give answers, but I can't provide certainty.

Mummy, why did you adopt me, instead of having a baby come out of your stomach?

Because not all women can have babies that way.

Why couldn't you have babies that way?

Because I was ill, sweetheart. They had to take out the part where the baby is supposed to grow.

Is that why you keep going to the hospital?

Yes, sweetheart. They give me tests to make sure I'm still okay.

Tara started school this year. How long will it be until she finds out that you don't always pass every test you take? How long will it be before she asks, "Will you always pass your tests, mummy?"

Do I admit that, "no matter how much I love you, darling, I can't promise to live for as long as you need me?"

(mimes opening a door)

What's that, sweetheart? What could be wrong with my kitten?

Scene 5

KIM

(calling)

Jill, Suzie. Hurry up and get dressed.

(miming morning preparations as she speaks)

You don't want to be late for the school bus again, do you? Here's your scrambled eggs, Jill

. . . Since when are scrambled eggs yucky? You've had them for breakfast every day since September . . . Well if Lindsay Thomas said she hated chocolate cake, would you hate it too? All right, I'll eat your eggs. Will you eat some cereal instead? . . . Chocolate cake is not a breakfast food. Neither is corn-on-the-cob. Fried worms? . . . That isn't funny Jill. It isn't funny at all. Tell you what. You can have a sliver of chocolate cake after you finish your orange juice . . . all right, before you drink it, but you have to promise you'll have a big glass.

Suzie, I can't hem your bride's maid dress now. What for? Maggie's wedding isn't for two . . . You can't wear it to school . . . Why not be a princess in disguise? You can wear anything else. Yes anything . . .

Why should I have made fairy cakes, Jill? School cake sale?? Well, why didn't you tell me? How was I supposed to read a note you folded up in your jacket pocket? When you get a note, you do not crumple it up and leave it in your jacket pocket and hope I find it. What you have to do is . . . I'll tell you what we'll do. How about we buy something at Sainsbury's at the corner, on our way to the bus stop . . . Well maybe Lindsay Thomas gave her mother a bit more notice . . . Oh all right, all right. I may have just enough time to put together some treat bags of nuts and chocolate chips, provided you cooperate . . . What's wrong with treat bags? It's treat bags or nothing at all.

Suzie! You can't wear your tutu to sch—

Jill, I said orange juice, not orange Tango.

Besides there are stains on your tutu.

Orange juice and Tango are not the same thing . . .

At least put a jumper over your tutu, to hide the stains, okay, Suzie?

Jill, orange juice and Tango, half and half. And there's nothing wrong with treat bags . . . Now I just know I had a whole bag of mixed chips and nuts around here . . . Did either of you —

You took them to school, Jill? To swap for smelly stickers? Why didn't you tell me not to make treat bags, then? . . . All right. We'll cut up an Entenmann's cake, and put in a tin. I bet we won't be the only ones, either.

Yes, Suzie, I suppose that if Jill can have orange Tango mixed in with her orange juice, you can too. How about you let me pour it though, okay? Just a second — I really think you should — Suzie! Ohhh . . . Now you'll just have to go up and change again . . . how about a jumper and a skirt this time?

Are you all done with breakfast Jill? You want scrambled eggs?

Your majorette costume, Suzie? I can't go hunting for your baton now. Use this spatula instead.

Come on now, you two. Coats and boots. . . And even majorettes wear them.

Jill, I will be signing you up for swimming lessons today, so for the last time, are you sure the instructor said you should be in the dolphin group? And yes, I'll look for some books about dolphins at the libr. . . and I'll try to get Suzie some leg warmers at the mall — Neon pink? With gold sparkles? Right. And I'll be there right after school to take you girls to your piano lessons, so don't forget and take the bus home like last —

What's that, Jill?

Why don't I have a proper job like Lindsay Thomas's mother?

Scene 6

KATHERINE

Maths is one of her strongest talents.

She's gifted in all areas, really. She is a thoroughly exceptional girl. She really does have what it takes for the Exceptional and Talented Students Class. I mean, honestly, Mrs. Reynolds, she'll be bored stiff next year if you lump her in with the main stream primary fours. I'm not sure exactly what kind of misunderstanding has occurred with those standardized tests of yours, but the truth is, Mrs. Reynolds, Leslie would just flourish, in your program, if you gave her the chance.

You see, Mrs. Reynolds, Leslie is one of those rare children who thrives on learning. She just can't get enough. First thing each morning, she brushes her teeth while listening to her German lessons on cassette. During breakfast, I read out loud to her from the classics of the British literary canon. In the car, on her way to school, Kevin quizzes her on spelling words. While the other children fritter away their lunch hours, Leslie practices her violin. Then, after school, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, she attends her Just-for-Kids anatomy lab, while Tuesdays and Thursdays are for her speed learning drill. After dinner it's her turn to read out loud, while I coach her on her diction. And then she falls asleep to subliminal Latin lessons on CD.

You see, when we got the good word that I was finally pregnant, after all those years of trying, Kevin and I sat down and said, "What can we do to spare our child all the struggles we've had?" And I'm sure I don't have to convince you, Mrs. Reynolds, that education is the key.

So we launched Leslie's education while she was still in utero, reading out loud to her every night so that the words of Darwin, Euclid and Homer would be in her blood.

We lined the sides of her cot with multiplication tables in primary colors, and strung a mobile with pictures of major historical figures over her change table, so that she could start getting up to speed from the moment she opened her eyes.

Demanding, yes. But this regimen has yielded results. Just look at this recommendation from her speed learning coach. And this one from her supervisor at the anatomy lab. He says that he's never seen a child of her age fill out a lab chart with such precision and discipline. Mrs. Reynolds, we deserve — she deserves a place in the Exceptional and Talented Students Class.

Now, what we need to establish is, where did your standardized tests go wrong? First of all, can she retake the test? . . . Why don't you think that would be a good idea? Testing made Leslie anxious? Tears? That doesn't sound like my Leslie. She thrives on challenges . . . You what? What? . . . Oh, I see . . . Now I understand everything. I understand everything perfectly, I assure you. Well of course she became upset. What did you think would happen if you asked her to "just draw anything"?

(incredulous)

"Draw anything"?

How could she have known what you expected of her? No wonder she burst into tears. You should have said, "Leslie, I would like you to draw a diagram of a Boeing 747 engine to scale," or, "Leslie, would you please sketch and label all the organs of the cardio-vascular system?" Then you would have seen just how talented my Leslie is. She would have followed your instructions to the letter. I've said it before, Mrs. Reynolds, and I will say it again. My Leslie is a thoroughly exceptional girl.

Scene 7

MIA

(MIA addresses an invisible woman)

Excuse me?

Is this Mrs. Patrie's room?

What a crowd. I've never seen such a turn-out for parent-teacher interviews. You'd think they were giving something away. I guess they are. A glimpse of your child. And when it comes to my son, that's a rare opportunity for me, I can tell you.

Of course, last year, I had to talk to twice as many teachers, because both my children went to school here. Now Heather is away in Wolverhampton. At St. Dominic's. She got a wonderful scholarship. We would have been fools to pass it up. That's what my husband said.

Do you have a daughter? You're here about your son, then, too. Justin? I don't think Bobby's ever mentioned Justin. Bobby, Bobby Peters, yes . . . They're best friends. Oh.

See, when Bobby was little, he hated having his meat touch his vegetables on his plate, and now he's just the same about his real life and his family. Every October, when I go to parent-teacher interviews, I wait for his teacher to look at me blankly and say, "but you can't be Mrs. Peters. Bobby told us he's an orphan." (*Beat.*) It hasn't happened yet. I'll take that to be a good sign.

Do you recognize anyone? I don't either. Last year, this was such familiar territory. It must be something about daughters. They have a way of bringing you into their lives. With Heather, it was always --

"Mum, you just have to help out with the Drama Club costumes," or, "Mum, will you buy tickets to the recital for all three nights again?" or, "Mum, I told everyone we'd have Allie's surprise party at our place, since we were going to have it at Marnie's, but now Allie and Marnie aren't speaking because Allie went and bought the aqua boat-neck top at Benetton that Marnie had been saving up for all month, working the Saturday shift at Claire's Accessories — oh, and I said that you'd make the birthday cake — mocha cheesecake is her favorite, okay? Mum, please?"

So I got to know people. The teachers. The kids. And when her friends came over after school, they would just pour their hearts out to me.

"What should I do Mrs. Peters? I struggled with the curling iron for an hour this morning, trying to get my hair to curl under, because Ken had called me up on Friday to ask me to go out — like, to be his girlfriend and everything, only then he wasn't in math, which was really weird because people hardly ever skip with Mr. "Everything you do counts as coursework" Thomas, and then at break, I saw him standing by the drinking fountain with his Levi's jacket on, talking to Debbie — Debbie who just broke up with — "

It made me laugh to hear them. I haven't laughed like that for a while.

Heather said her friends thought she was lucky to have such a "cool" mom. She was always bringing them home, so I got to know everyone. With my

guy, I'm lucky if he brings home his report card — three weeks late.

Of course, Bobby needs me to drive him to softball practice and to friends' houses, but it would violate the first commandment of mother-son etiquette to carry on a conversation on the way. I call him the 'kay-I-guess kid, because that's the only answer I've gotten out him in years.

"Bobby, how was the maths test?"

"Kay I guess."

"How did the tournament go?"

"Kay I Guess."

"And the debating championship?"

"Kay I guess."

"Bobby! You just won the Lottery! You're a millionaire! What do you say to that?"

"Kay I guess."

And then he turns away and stares out the window really hard.

The other afternoon, I ran into him at the fountain in the shopping centre, this month's officially certified cool zone.

"Hi, Bobby," I said. "I got you a pair of jeans at Warren's. Your old ones are worn to threads and shreds."

My guy didn't miss a beat.

"No way, man. The Ferrari is way better than the Porsche. Just check out this picture . . ."

And that night, when I asked him, "Bobby, why did you do that?" — he said, "Do what?"

"You know," I said. "At the shopping centre. You ignored me."

He said, "I didn't see you."

I didn't see you. You don't exist. We bring our sons into the world, and they turf us out of it.

Well, we've always got our daughters, haven't we?

Oh, did I tell you? Heather's coming home for a visit this weekend. I'll be picking her up at the station right after these parent-teacher interviews. Of course, she's bringing a whole pack of her friends. I just can't wait to meet them. There's Rita, if she can get out of rehearsal. They're putting on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She's Titania. And what a fuss she's been making about her costume. And either Alice, or Ellen, but not both. You see, they haven't spoken since the night of the bop.

(Lights fade out to black as MIA tells her story)

Ellen was so excited about going with Matt Blake and then . . .

Scene 8

MARGE

Did you see the headlines?

In the "Guardian" science section, I mean. The astronomy story right under the feature about some new disorder linked to X chromosome sperm.

"Doomesday Rock Could Strike Earth at any Time. Scientists say it's only a matter of time until a meteor intersects the earth's orbit and destroys life as we know it today."

I put down my newspaper then and there, and rushed to the window and strained to see some deadly, distant speck grow to consume the horizon.

But I didn't see anything, so I shrugged and went on to the article about X chromosomes.

After all, what can I do about Will the winged Bolder? Should I tell my Tina, "You'd better come home early from the party, darling. A meteor could swing by any time?" Or, "Please don't go camping with your friends this weekend. If cosmic debris struck and the world exploded into a million pieces, how would I ever find you?"

Besides, meteors aren't the real threat. And Tina already hears enough of my fretting, as it is.

"How are you getting there?"

"Are you sure she has a driving license?"

"How do you know that she's an experienced driver?"

"Call me when you get to Carlie's."

"Will her parents be home?"

"Will they be home all night?"

"What time will you leave?"

"Why so late?"

"How are you getting home?"

"Have you checked that buses run past midnight?"

"Who will wait with you at the stop?"

"If you miss the bus, do you have enough money for a cab?"

I buy my newspaper at the 24-hour garage, when I get out from night school, and I read it while I wait for Tina to come home.

There are reports that dig their barbs into my mind and cling and sting and smart. Not stories about meteors. It's the articles about stabbings, and inquests and arrests. And pictures of girls who are just my Tina's age — it says so in the caption — with their faces so scarred and bruised that you couldn't possibly recognize them, even if it turned out that you knew one of them.

It's not that I believe everything I read. I know the media sensationalizes. I know reporters stretch for effect. But those pictures, those girls. And all they did was to walk home a little too late, or take a wrong turn, or answer when someone called to them from a car.

"What did you stay up for? Do you think I'm still a baby?" Tina complains, when she gets in. But even so, the next night, I stay up again.

"How can I stay out like the others, knowing that you're up and waiting," she says. And so the next night, I stay up again.

I can't protect my daughter from killer meteors any more than I could protect my body from the man who was her father, or keep out the X chromosome sperm which meant a girl child, with a lifetime of danger ahead of her.

But maybe there are some things I can protect her from —

Just by letting her know that I am waiting up, and looking out.

Scene 9

ANNA

That's what he said. "Anna, it'll just be the two of us. Me and Daniel. Golfing is a dad-and-lad kind of thing. At first I thought — How can they be so selfish? How can they go and disappoint everyone like that? Uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and Granny — They all count on us to host Christmas dinner. How can he just leave me to take care of it all?

And then I said to myself — Anna, wait a minute. If it's so easy for Carl and Daniel to duck out of the Christmas mayhem, well why can't you? This year, I'm going to have Christmas dinner with just my Connie. It'll be a —

(hunting for a rhyme)

mum-and-chum kind of thing. Or a mum-and-swan kind of thing, because, I've got to admit it, somewhere along the way, my duckling has turned into quite something else.

You see, usually, when my daughter Connie comes home from the university for Christmas, I barely get to say a word to her. Connie drives in around noon. I zip up my jacket to go out and greet her, but before I even open the door, the phone starts ringing. It's a sister-in-law, or an auntie. "Should I bring roast turnip mousse or tuna aspic? . . . Oh, and how is Connie?"

"Connie?" I say. "I think she's . . ."

Daniel comes tearing down the stairs. Family Christmas is for losers. Why can't he go to Rob's and play Nintendo? We argue. We deadlock. We strike a deal. He'll stay through to the Christmas pudding, and tell his Granny about winning the silver medal at the Midlands science fair. I'll spring for that skateboard he's been after.

"How's university, Connie?" I shout, as I baste the turkey, plug in the blender, and keep an eye on the simmering vegetables.

But the blender drowns out her answer. So I switch it off, and the doorbell goes. But it's only one-thirty. Didn't I tell them all to come at two?

Keep sane by keeping busy. Hunt up ashtrays. Baste. Mix chip dip. Baste. Remind Daniel to talk to his Granny - fifteen minutes on the clock, or there's no skateboard. Baste. Find board games and cards for Helen's kids. Baste. Serve dinner. The turkey's tough. "I knew you weren't basting enough, but I thought I'd better not say," says Granny.

"Connie must be having so much fun at college," says Helen. "Molecular genetics. Fancy that. Looking inside DNA and everything."

"Connie?" I say. "I expect she's — "

Just when it looks like they're set on staying the night, and there's nothing to do but give in and start opening the pull-out couches, they all mercifully waddle back to their cars. Sponge away coffee rings. Stack the dishwasher. Spoon leftovers into Tupperware and label the containers.

"Oh, Connie," I say, as I hand her a guest towel, "I keep meaning to ask you — "

Daniel yells up from the basement that Helen's monsters have mixed up all the pieces to his board games, and I need to come and help him sort them all out.

"Goodnight, Mum," says Connie. "I have a long drive ahead of me tomorrow."

The next morning, when I come down to the kitchen, Connie is gone. She's scrawled a quick message on a post-it and stuck it to the fridge.

"Great Christmas, Mum.
Catch you at Easter."

Catch you at Easter. Catch you for dad's birthday. Catch you at Christmas.
(pause as a new thought occurs to ANNA)

Did she inherit that turn of phrase from me? Is it in our DNA? "I'll catch you when I get home from work, Connie," or "when I get back from Tesco's," or "after Daniel's football match."

But we never catch. We always miss. We always miss out.

Not this time, though. This time, will be different. This year, there will be no relatives, no turkey, no leftovers, and no board games. I'm going to sit my daughter down and take all the time I need to find out about her course, her friends, and that lovely young man she said she's been seeing. I try not to look too eager when Carl starts going on about his all-testosterone golfing weekend, but how can I pass this up?

(sound of a telephone ringing)

ANNA

Hello? Connie! I was just thinking about you. The Christmas chaos? Well, dear, I have something a little different in mind this year. Actually . . . to Derek's? His parents invited you. Oh, really. Well, that's very hospitable of them. And if they're dying to meet you, it would be awful to disappoint them.

Of course we'll manage without you dear. I'm sure Christmas will be . . . lovely. Yes, of course I'm sure.

(the end)

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