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Mothers Have Nine Lives
By Joanna Alexandra Norland

The Cast

The children

Kelly: Age 7
Christie: Age 7
Abby: Age 7

The mothers

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

The production can be staged with a cast of three by having the children step into the roles of the mothers. If the children assume the mothers' roles, the characters may be allocated as follows:

Kelly may also play Margaret, Kim, Mia
Christie may also play Gina, Katherine, Marge
Abby may also play Louise, Wendy, Anna

Act 1

Scene 1

(Lights up on three children. They chant the first line in unison)

CHRISTIE and KELLY and ABBY

My mother and your mother were hanging up the clothes. My mother punched your mother right in the nose. What flavor was the blood?

KELLY

Tutti-frutti

CHRISTIE

That's too hard to spell.

KELLY

Cherry, then.

CHRISTIE and KELLY and ABBY

C-H-E-R-E spells cherry and you are out of this game forever and ever more.

CHRISTIE

(to KELLY)

You're out! I get to choose the game

KELLY

You cheated. You started spelling "cherry" on your fist. That's cheating. So I get to pick.

ABBY

But I'm still in.

KELLY

If you guys don't let me pick, I'll tell everyone your mommy won't let you cross the street by yourself, and your mommy still puts rubber sheets on your bed.

ABBY

But you spit over your shoulder and jumped where it landed and promised not to tell.

CHRISTIE

Oh look. It's my pick, and I wanna play Mommies.

KELLY

ABBY'S MOMMY WON'T LET HER CROSS—

ABBY

Oh fine, you pick.

CHRISTIE

Who cares what stupid old game we play anyways. So what are we gonna play?

KELLY

Mommies, silly. It's the best game.

LOUISE/ABBY

“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 minister.

“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 bachelorette party in Las Vegas, then?” asks my best friend.

“Honey, you don't mind if I go play pool with the boys tonight, do 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 Valium?” 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 quitting?” asks my husband.

“Have you tried to control your mood swings with yoga?” asks my doctor.

“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 my doctor.

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

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

“Why are all the damned lights red?” asks my husband.

“Roadwork? 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 my doctor.

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

KELLY

(taking two dolls from a corner of the stage)

I want this one.

LOUISE

Do I want this baby?

KELLY

No, this one. I'm going to build her a castle out of candy.

CHRISTIE

She'll eat the walls. The roof will fall down.

KELLY

Magic sweets, dummy. They're everlasting.

ABBY

Like gum?

KELLY

Yeah. Like gum.

CHRISTIE

I kept a piece of gum for a whole week once, only then I swallowed it by mistake.

KELLY

And there are gonna be roller skating ramps connecting everything so that you never have to use the stairs.

CHRISTIE

Roller skating ramps out of gum?

KELLY

And monkey bars in every room, and a water slide from the attic straight to the basement.

ABBY

How are you gonna build all those things?

KELLY

I'll say the magic word.

GINA/CHRISTIE

What the hell?

ABBY

What magic word?

GINA

Come on. Answer. Answer. What do you guys have phones for if you don't answer them? Oh, hello. Is this the Star? I've got a story I want you guys 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 guys, 'cause I don't have anywhere else to tell it, and I've read how you guys write stuff about people like me, and how things suck when you're on benefits.

You better believe they suck, lady. Like when you got two babies and no double stroller to take 'em out in. You try luggin' em down the street for box of Kraft dinner and a bottle of Coke, and they're making such a racket you can't hear yourself think, so as when you get there, you realise you left your wallet back home on top of the TV set, and you gotta lug 'em all the way 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. No, not about the diet of low-income children. I mean, about the double stroller. 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. She's gonna break hearts some day, I can tell you. And you should see Crystal. The way she sucks her thumb in her sleep, you'd think you were lookin' at an angel . . . But like I was sayin', if I don't get that double stroller soon, I think I'm gonna go crazy.

See, my social worker, she's this real uptight cow. You know, the kind of lady who might as well walk around wearin' a neon sign saying: "I've never been caught toasted in some stranger's bed with my pants down on a Friday night, so what's your excuse?" So when I told her I was four months pregnant and Crystal was coming along, at first, it was, "Miss Nolan, have you considered all your options? Would you like to read through this pamphlet on adoption?" As if I'm just gonna chuck my baby out like some used safe so some other lady can bring her up, and tell her all kinds of shit about her fat, lazy, no good mother who didn't want her. When my soc¹ saw that I wasn't gonna go along with her game, she goes, "Well, with two babies, you're gonna need a double stroller, and you'd better start workin' on it now." It's always "you better" or "you gotta" with my soc.

So she gives me this number for the Family Support Unit, cuz they were supposed to get one for me right off, the double stroller, I mean. I called 'em that day. That was December, do you get me? Last December. And all the twat - the twit answering the phone could say was, "we don't have that item in stock, but we can offer you a box of nite-time Pampers if that would help," and she said she would call me when a double stroller came in.

So that's why, last week, when my soc goes, "really, Miss Nolan, you should try to take your kids out to the park two or three times a week for a breath of fresh air," 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 son of a bitch still hasn't fixed the lift and it's stuck up on the eighth floor, carry 'em miles down the street to the

²Short for 'social worker'; pronounced to rhyme with gauche.

nearest park, and hope the high school kids are making out somewhere else for a change. Two or three times a week, did you say? No problem.”

So maybe somthin' got through to her, 'cause she lays off for a bit, and that afternoon, she calls while I'm boilin' up Jenny's alphabet soup. “The Family Support Unit has a stroller waiting for you,” she says. “They've had it for three months. Why didn't you keep calling them like they told you to?”

All I had to do, she said, was to go downtown with Jenny and Crystal's birth certificates and pick it up.

You should have seen me dancin' round my place all night. 'Cause it wasn't just a stroller. It was like I was gonna get back a little piece of my freedom. I mean, I love my girls. If I didn't have them, I'd have no one lovin' me, and that's like havin' nothin' at all, but it gets hard when its blazing hot, and your babies are cryin' and wailing, and you can't even take 'em outside for a breather.

So I call my sister to come baby-sit, and I take the bus downtown. The Family Support Unit is tucked away behind another building, as if they're hoping you don't find it, 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 its got bells and ducks strung across the top.

I show my babies' birth certificates to the twit 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 stroll down the street with my double stroller, with Jenny and Crystal swattin' at the ducks and bells, and all of us laughing and everything and nothing. Then she comes up for air to say, “I'm sorry, Miss Nolan. We only give out double strollers to mothers with twins.”

I tell her, so what if they're not twins?

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

I tell her where she could shove her policy. Right up there with the six foot pole she's got up her ass. I tell her I'm not leaving without that stroller. I'm just gonna

stand there, right at the counter, and tell everyone who comes in what a pile of steaming crap the Family Support Unit really is.

So she picks up the phone and goes, "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 stroller. I'd 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 your 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 'round to take pictures of my two girls? You should see the way Jenny's hair is c— Why not? Ye mean you're not a reporter? Well who can I talk to, then?

ABBY

Come on, what's the magic word?

GINA

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

KELLY

The magic word's a secret, silly.

ABBY

I don't need magic words. I'm married to the King.

CHRISTIE

Me too. I mean, I'm married to the other king.

KELLY

Being magic is better than being married. I fly around and rescue people from sinking ships and earthquakes.

CHRISTIE

So do I. I'm married to a king, and I'm magic, so I rescue people too.

ABBY

I thought we were playing mommies

MARGARET/KELLY

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

CHRISTIE

I do magic when my baby's sleeping.

MARGARET

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, “Mom, how would you like to spend some quality time with your brand new granddaughter?” And everything fell into place. Three mornings a week, mom 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 great response, and things were 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 this and that, 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'd hang up my coat. But then some crisis would break, and my replacement would shake his head and say, “we never covered this in journalism school,” and well, that would be that for the rest of the day.

Meanwhile, mom 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)

I suppose Mom'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. A fierce deadline. A make or break proposition. We need a lioness at our helm. 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 mom, who said that she needed to go home to cook dinner for my dad every once in a while. Mom can be a bit 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 mom's problems.

And how we love having Clarissa over for a visit. I'll admit it. Richard and I just spoil her rotten. Last time she was here, it was all we could do to keep ourselves from smothering her.

That was in June—or maybe the last week in May.

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 backlog of e-mail messages. 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 mom would say, “Margaret, did you have to choose a man who resembles your father in everything?”

Anyway, next month, when the prototype of the magazine goes to press, we're going to have 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, with everyone 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—

ABBY

My baby's waking up.

MARGARET

You just never know what wonderful surprises the next moment will hold.

CHRISTIE

Yuck! She peed her bed.

ABBY

Your baby did too.

CHRISTIE
EWWWWW!!!

ABBY
EWWWWW!!!

(beat)

KELLY

My baby never pees. She never wets her bed.

CHRISTIE

Mine either. It's better that way.

ABBY

Guess what, Sally? There's no school today.

(speaking for her doll)

In that case I want to wear my new pink dress.”

CHRISTIE

Read me a story mummy

KELLY

“Let's have a magic lesson. Show me how to fly.”

CHRISTIE

Okay, Cassie. “A’ is for alligator. Snap. Snap.”

ABBY

You look s-o-o beautiful in your dress, Sally.

KELLY

Hold on so I don't drop you.

CHRISTIE

“B’ is for bear. Grrrr!”

(WENDY/ABBY mimes opening the door to a child's room and walking in)

KELLY

Swoosh!

WENDY/ABBY

What's that, honey?

CHRISTIE

'C' is for cat. Meow.

WENDY

You're a kitten? You're a little, lost kitten? Well of course I'll take you in. 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 and the closing the door behind her)

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 a real 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 figured that if Frank needed a house, then I must be looking. You want to know something? I almost told her, "Frank doesn't need a house, honey. He's perfectly happy without one," or, "I'll find a house for him soon, really soon." And 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 modern parents know they owe their children honesty, so I explained that I can only get a house for some people, people with jobs, and 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 social worker 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 we're going to try to give her everything she could need, we couldn't give her our genes or our blood, and I never shared my body space with her.

Of course, that book with those colored 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 . . . she's been putting the pieces together, and all of a sudden, you see how it is, she's mewling like a kitten two, three times every night.

There are other questions taking root in her mind, even now, and it's only a matter of time until the threads weave themselves into words. And from now on, the answers are only going to make things worse, not better.

Mommy, 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 got sick, sweetheart. They had to take out the part where the baby's supposed to grow.

Is that why you keep going to the hospital.

Yes, sweetheart. I'm not sick, but they like to make sure I'm still well, by giving me tests.

Tara started school this year. Soon she'll find out that you don't always pass every test you take. What will I say when she asks, "Will you always pass your tests, mommy?"

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

CHRISTIE

Meow.

WENDY

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

KELLY

Force field! Duck!!

ABBY

Once upon a time, there was a boy whose dad showed him how to fly, like your baby, and they crashed into the sun and fell into the ocean.

KELLY

We can swim.

CHRISTIE

Well my baby's not flying or swimming. We're making pies for the PTA bakesale. Chocolate fudge pies with strawberry marshmallow icing and hundreds and thousands on top. We have to hurry up.

ABBY

How many are you making?

CHRISTIE

One—

KIM/KELLY

Jill, Suzie!

CHRISTIE

—hundred million thousand.

(to her doll)

Come on. Help me put them in the oven.

KIM

Hurry up and get dressed. 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 flower girl 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 cupcakes, Jill? PTA 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 Mac's Milk on the corner, on our way to the bus stop . . . Well maybe Lindsay Thomas gave her mother a bit more warning . . . 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 school.

Jill, I said orange juice, not orange soda.

Besides there are stains on your tutu.

Orange juice and orange soda are not the same thing . . .

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

Jill, orange juice and soda, 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 trade for smelly stickers? Why didn't you tell me not to make treat bags, then? . . All right. We'll put some Pepperidge Farm cookies in a tin. I bet we won't be the only ones, either.

Yes, Suzie, I suppose that if Jill can have soda 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 sweater and a skirt this time?

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

Your cheerleader 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 cheerleaders wear them.

Jill, I will be signing you up for swimming lessons today, so for the last time, are you
sure you want -- 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?

CHRISTIE

We make a thousand strawberry chocolate fudge pies. And we win a contest for
them. My baby wins every baking contest there is.

ABBY

But my baby—

KELLY

Well my baby wins swimming contests. She swims faster than light, so the light can't
catch her, and she's invisible.

ABBY

But my baby—

KELLY

And she is so strong that she can kick over buildings, like they were Lego, and she's got a computer attached to her brain so that she can answer every question in the world.

KATHERINE/CHRISTIE

Math is one of her strongest talents.

KELLY

Even the ones in the fourth grade math book.

KATHERINE

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 fourth graders. 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 flourish, just flourish, in your program, if you gave her half a 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 junior Stanley Kaplan coach. And this one from her supervisor at the anatomy lab. He says 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? That doesn't sound like my Leslie. She thrives on challenges . . . You 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 a child to "just 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. Why, she would have followed your instructions to the very letter. I've said it before, Mrs. Reynolds, and I will say it again: My Leslie is a thoroughly exceptional girl.

ABBY

Well my baby is the prettiest baby in the world.

KATHERINE

Everyone says so.

ABBY

She's so pretty that everybody gets blinded to death when they see her.

KELLY

Not me and my baby, cuz we're wearing eyeshades.

CHRISTIE

Your babies come visit my baby at the bakesale, okay?

ABBY

Only, I don't see my baby go, so I ask everyone. . .

MIA/KELLY

Excuse me?

ABBY

Have you seen my baby? Have you seen the prettiest baby in the world go by?

MIA/KELLY

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 kid. And when it comes to my son, that's a rare opportunity for me, I can tell you that much.

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 Peterborough. At Lakefield. 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 all such familiar territory. It must be something about daughters. They have a way of bringing you into their lives. With Heather, it was always, "Mom, you just have to help out with the Drama Club costumes," or, "Mom, are you gonna buy tickets to the recital for all three nights again?" or, "Mom, 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 cuz 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? Mom, 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. “Pop quizzes count for a quarter of your grade” 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 you would think we were violating the first commandment of mother-son etiquette if we carried on a conversation en route. 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 math test?”

“Kay I guess.”

“How did the tournament go?”

“Kay I Guess.”

“Bobby! You just won the Million Dollar Lottery! You’re the richest man on earth! How do you feel about that?”

“Kay I guess.”

And then he turns away and stares really hard out the window and pretends he's being chauffeured by Robby the Road Robot.

The other afternoon, I ran into him at the fountain in the mall, 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 cooler than the Porsche. Just check out these stats.”

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

“You know,” I said. “At the mall. 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, they delete 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 she's been making such a fuss about her costume. And either Alice, or Ellen, but not both. You see, they haven't spoken since the night of the mixer.

ABBY

(speaking for her doll)

"I'm right over here, mommy."

MIA

Ellen was all excited about going with Matt Blake—

ABBY

"Mommy, look!"

CHRISTIE

A bad guy's stealing all the pies! Ewww!!! It's Pat Drake!

KELLY

Hands up, Pat Drake! My baby throws the bad guy in jail.

CHRISTIE

My baby does too. And she makes him give back all those pies, okay?

ABBY

And our babies get their name in every paper in the country.

MARGE/CHRISTIE

Did you see the headlines?

KELLY

Everyone in the world reads it.

MARGE/CHRISTIE

In the Globe and Mail 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, rushed to the window and strained to see some deadly, distant speck growing larger to consume the horizon.

But I didn't see anything, so I shrugged and went on to the story 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, baby. 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 gas station, 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 like burrs to a piece of felt. Not stories about meteors, but 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 scarred and bruised beyond recognition, even if it turned out, heaven forbid, 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. “It ruins my night out, knowing you’re up and waiting.” And that’s why 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 which meant a girl child, with a lifetime of danger ahead of her.

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

KELLY

My baby and I are gonna catch even more crooks now.

MARGE

—Just by letting her, and the universe know that I'm waiting up and looking out.

ABBY

Are you joining the police?

KELLY

No, we're way better than the police. They asked us to take over the whole police force, but we said no.

CHRISTIE

And my husband, the king, can throw the crooks into the dungeon.

KELLY

No. It'll just be the two of us.

ANNA/ABBY

That's what he said. “Anna, it'll just be the two of us. Me and Daniel. Hunting 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 Thanksgiving 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 Thanksgiving mayhem, well why can't you? This year, I'm going to have Thanksgiving with just my Connie. It'll be . . . mom-and-spawn kind of thing. Or a mom-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 university for Thanksgiving, 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 salmon aspic? . . . Oh, and how is Connie?"

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

Daniel comes tearing down the stairs. Family Thanksgiving sucks. Why can't he go to Rob's and play Nintendo with the guys? We argue, we haggle, we strike a deal. He'll stay through to the pumpkin pie, and tell his Granny about winning the silver medal at the regional science fair. I'll spring for that skateboard he's been after.

"How's school, 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. I could swear I told them 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 anything," says Granny.

"Connie must be having so much fun at college," says Helen. "All that nuclear science, looking inside atoms and things."

"Connie?" I say. "I guess 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 respective 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 it's my job to sort them out, because it was my bright idea to let them play with his stuff.

"Goodnight, Ma," 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.

"Thanksgiving was a blast, Ma.

Take care.

Catch you at Christmas."

Catch you at Christmas. Catch you at Easter. Catch you next Thanksgiving. It's just like the notes I used to leave for her — "I'll catch you when I get home from work, Connie," or "when I get back from the supermarket," or "after Daniel's hockey game."

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

Not this time, though. This year will be different. 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 new guy she wrote she's started seeing. Who would have thought that I could ever be this thankful for Thanksgiving? I try not to look too eager when Carl starts going on about his all-testosterone hunting trip, but how can I pass this up?

KELLY

Ring ring.

ANNA

Hello? Connie! I was just thinking about you. The Thanksgiving 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 Thanksgiving will be—

KELLY

Boring!

ANNA

Lovely.

KELLY

Playing with dolls is boring! I have a better idea.

CHRISTIE

What?

KELLY

We'll pretend that you two are my babies.

ABBY

Why can't we all be mommies, like before?

KELLY

There can't be a mommy without a baby, silly. Besides, I'm a good mommy. I feed you, and take you to the circus, and teach you to read, and buy you ballerina dresses, and you can help me catch crooks with nuclear laser beams.

CHRISTIE

It's not fair.

ABBY

You always get to be the mommy.

CHRISTIE

And being the mommy is the best part.

(the end.)

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