

## Excerpt from 'I Don't Know How She Does It'

Home

**Monday, 1:37 a.m.** How did I get here? Can someone please tell me that? Not in this kitchen, I mean in this life. It is the morning of the school carol concert and I am hitting mince pies. No, let us be quite clear about this, I am distressing mince pies, an altogether more demanding and subtle process.

Discarding the Sainsbury luxury packaging, I wrinkle the pies out of their pleated foil cups, place them on a chopping board and bring down a rolling pin on their blameless floury faces. This is not as easy as it sounds, believe me. Hit the pies too hard and they drop a kind of fat-lady curtsy, skirts of pastry bulging out at the sides, and the fruit starts to ooze. But with a firm downward motion—imagine enough pressure to crush a small beetle—you can start a crumbly little landslide, giving the pastry a pleasing homemade appearance. And homemade is what I'm after here. Home is where the heart is. Home is where the good mother is, baking for her children.

All this trouble because of a letter Emily brought back from school ten days ago, now stuck on the fridge with a Tinky Winky magnet, asking if "parents could please make a voluntary contribution of appropriate festive refreshments" for the Christmas party they always put on after the carols. The note is printed in berry red and at the bottom, next to Miss Empson's signature, there is a snowman wearing a mortarboard and a shy grin. But do not be deceived by the strenuous tone of informality or the outbreak of chummy exclamation marks!!! Oh, no. Notes from school are written in code, a code buried so cunningly in the text that it could only be deciphered at Bletchley Park or by guilty women in the advanced stages of sleep deprivation.

Take that word "parents," for example. When they write parents what they really mean, what they still mean, is mothers. (Has a father who has a wife on the premises ever read a note from school? Technically, it's not impossible, I suppose, but the note will have been a party invitation and, furthermore, it will have been an invitation to a party that has taken place at least ten days earlier.) And "voluntary"? Voluntary is teacher-speak for "On pain of death and/or your child failing to gain a place at the senior school of your choice." As for "appropriate festive refreshments," these are definitely not something bought by a lazy cheat in a supermarket.

How do I know that? Because I still recall the look my own mother exchanged with Mrs. Frieda Davies in 1974, when a small boy in a dusty green parka approached the altar at Harvest Festival with two tins of Libby's cling peaches in a shoe box. The look was unforgettable. It said, What kind of sorry slattern has popped down to the Spar on the corner to celebrate God's bounty when what the good Lord clearly requires is a fruit medley in a basket with cellophane wrap? Or a plaited bread? Frieda Davies's bread, manoeuvred the length of the church by her twins, was plaited as thickly as the tresses of a Rhinemaiden.

"You see, Katharine," Mrs. Davies explained later, doing that disapproving upsneeze thing with her sinuses over teacakes, "there are mothers who make an effort like your mum and me. And then you get the type of person who"—prolonged sniff—"don't make the effort."

Of course I knew who they were: Women Who Cut Corners. Even back in 1974, the dirty word had started to spread about mothers who went out to work. Females who wore trouser suits and even, it was alleged, allowed their children to watch television while it was still light. Rumors of neglect clung to these creatures like dust to their pelmets.

So before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the washtub, and there were the other sort. At the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of the thirteenth of December, hitting mince pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother-made. Women used to have time to make mince pies and had to fake orgasms. Now we can manage the orgasms, but we have to fake the mince pies. And they call this progress.

"Damn. Damn. Where has Paula hidden the sieve?"

"Kate, what do you think you're doing? It's two o'clock in the morning!"

Richard is standing in the kitchen doorway, wincing at the light. Rich with his Jermyn Street pajamas, washed and tumbled to Babygro bobbliness. Rich with his acres of English reasonableness and his fraying kindness. Slow Richard, my American colleague Candy calls him, because work at his ethical architecture firm has slowed almost to a standstill, and it takes him half an hour to take the bin out and he's always telling me to slow down.

"Slow down, Katie, you're like that funfair ride. What's it called? The one where the screaming people stick to the side so long as the damn thing keeps spinning?"

"Centrifugal force."

"I know that. I meant what's the ride called?"

"No idea. Wall of Death?"

"Exactly."

I can see his point. I'm not so far gone that I can't grasp there has to be more to life than forging pastries at midnight. And tiredness. Deep-sea-diver tiredness, voyage-to-the-bottom-of-fatigue tiredness; I've never really come up from it since Emily was born, to be honest. Five years of walking round in a lead suit of sleeplessness. But what's the alternative? Go into school this afternoon and brazen it out, slam a box of Sainsbury's finest down on the table of festive

offerings? Then, to the Mummy Who's Never There and the Mummy Who Shouts, Emily can add the Mummy Who Didn't Make an Effort. Twenty years from now, when my daughter is arrested in the grounds of Buckingham Palace for attempting to kidnap the king, a criminal psychologist will appear on the news and say, "Friends trace the start of Emily Shattock's mental problems to a school carol concert where her mother, a shadowy presence in her life, humiliated her in front of her classmates."

"Kate? Hello?"

"I need the sieve, Richard."

"What for?"

"So I can cover the mince pies with icing sugar."

"Why?"

"Because they are too evenly colored, and everyone at school will know I haven't made them myself, that's why."

Richard blinks slowly, like Stan Laurel taking in another fine mess. "Not why icing sugar, why cooking? Katie, are you mad? You only got back from the States three hours ago. No one expects you to produce anything for the carol concert."

"Well, I expect me to." The anger in my voice takes me by surprise and I notice Richard flinch. "So, where has Paula hidden the sodding sieve?"

Rich looks older suddenly. The frown line, once an amused exclamation mark between my husband's eyebrows, has deepened and widened without my noticing into a five-bar gate. My lovely funny Richard, who once looked at me as Dennis Quaid looked at Ellen Barkin in *The Big Easy* and now, thirteen years into an equal, mutually supportive partnership, looks at me the way a smoking beagle looks at a medical researcher—aware that such experiments may need to be conducted for the sake of human progress but still somehow pleading for release.

"Don't shout." He sighs. "You'll wake them." One candy-striped arm gestures upstairs where our children are asleep. "Anyway, Paula hasn't hidden it. You've got to stop blaming the nanny for everything, Kate. The sieve lives in the drawer next to the microwave."

"No, it lives right here in this cupboard."

"Not since 1997 it doesn't."

"Are you implying that I haven't used my own sieve for three years?"

"Darling, to my certain knowledge you have never met your sieve. Please come to bed. You have to be up in five hours."

Seeing Richard go upstairs, I long to follow him but I can't leave the kitchen in this state. I just can't. The room bears signs of heavy fighting; there is Lego shrapnel over a wide area, and a couple of mutilated Barbies—one legless, one headless—are having some kind of picnic on our tartan travel rug, which is still matted with grass from its last outing on Primrose Hill in August. Over by the vegetable rack, on the floor, there is a heap of raisins which I'm sure was there the morning I left for the airport. Some things have altered in my absence: half a dozen apples have been added to the big glass bowl on the pine table that sits next to the doors leading out to the garden, but no one has thought to discard the old fruit beneath and the pears at the bottom have started weeping a sticky amber resin. As I throw each pear in the bin, I shudder a little at the touch of rotten flesh. After washing and drying the bowl, I carefully wipe any stray amber goo off the apples and put them back. The whole operation takes maybe seven minutes. Next I start to swab the drifts of icing sugar off the stainless steel worktop, but the act of scouring releases an evil odor. I sniff the dishcloth. Slimy with bacteria, it has the sweet sickening stench of dead-flower water. Exactly how rancid would a dishcloth have to be before someone else in this house thought to throw it away?

I ram the dishcloth in the overflowing bin and look under the sink for a new one. There is no new one. Of course, there is no new one, Kate, you haven't been here to buy a new one. Retrieve old dishcloth from the bin and soak it in hot water with a dot of bleach. All I need to do now is put Emily's wings and halo out for the morning.

Have just turned off the lights and am starting up the stairs when I have a bad thought. If Paula sees the Sainsbury's cartons in the bin, she will spread news of my Great Mince Pie forgery on the nanny grapevine. Oh, hell. Retrieving the cartons from the bin, I wrap them inside yesterday's paper and carry the bundle at arm's length out through the front door. Looking right and left to make sure I am unobserved, I slip them into the big black sack in front of the house. Finally, with the evidence of my guilt disposed of, I follow my husband up to bed.

Through the landing window and the December fog, a crescent moon is reclining in its deck chair over London. Even the moon gets to put its feet up once a month. Man in the Moon, of course. If it was a Woman in the Moon, she'd never sit down. Well, would she?

I take my time brushing my teeth. A count of twenty for each molar. If I stay in the bathroom long enough, Richard will fall asleep and will not try to have sex with me. If we don't have sex, I can skip a shower in the morning. If I skip the shower, I will have time to start on the e-mails that have built up while I've been away and maybe even get some presents bought on the way to work. Only ten shopping days to Christmas, and I am in possession of precisely nine gifts, which leaves twelve to get plus stocking fillers for the children. And still no delivery from KwikToy, the rapid online present service.

"Kate, are you coming to bed?" Rich calls from the bedroom.

His voice sounds slurry with sleep. Good.

"I have something I need to talk to you about. Kate?"

"In a minute," I say. "Just going up to make sure they're OK."

I climb the flight of stairs to the next landing. The carpet is so badly frayed up here that the lip of each step looks like the dead grass you find under a marquee five days after a wedding. Someone's going to have an accident one of these days. At the top, I catch my breath and silently curse these tall thin London houses. Standing in the stillness outside the children's doors, I can hear their different styles of sleeping—his piglet snufflings, her princess sighs.

When I can't sleep and, believe me, I would dream of sleep if my mind weren't too full of other stuff for dreams, I like to creep into Ben's room and sit on the blue chair and just watch him. My baby looks as though he has hurled himself at unconsciousness, like a very small man trying to leap aboard an accelerating bus. Tonight, he's sprawled the length of the cot on his front, arms extended, tiny fingers curled round an invisible pole. Nestled to his cheek is the disgusting kangaroo that he worships—a shelf full of the finest stuffed animals an anxious parent can buy, and what does he choose to love? A cross-eyed marsupial from Woolworth's remainder bin. Ben can't tell us when he's tired yet, so he simply says Roo instead. He can't sleep without Roo because Roo to him means sleep.

It's the first time I've seen my son in four days. Four days, three nights. First there was the trip to Stockholm to spend some face time with a jumpy new client, then Rod Task called from the office and told me to get my ass over to New York and hold the hand of an old client who needed reassuring that the new client wasn't taking up too much of my time.

Benjamin never holds my absences against me. Too little still. He always greets me with helpless delight like a fan windmilling arms at a Hollywood premiere. Not his sister, though. Emily is five years old and full of jealous wisdom. Mummy's return is always the cue for an intricate sequence of snubs and punishments.

"Actually, Paula reads me that story."

"But I want Dadda to give me a bath."

Wallis Simpson got a warmer welcome from the Queen Mother than I get from Emily after a business trip. But I bear it. My heart sort of pleats inside and somehow I bear it. Maybe I think I deserve it.

I leave Ben snoring softly and gently push the door of the other room. Bathed in the candied glow of her Cinderella light, my daughter is, as is her preference, naked as a newborn. (Clothes, unless you count bridal or princess wear, are a

constant irritation to her.) When I pull the duvet up, her legs twitch in protest like a laboratory frog. Even when she was a baby, Emily couldn't stand being covered. I bought her one of those zip-up sleep bags, but she thrashed around in it and blew out her cheeks like the God of Wind in the corner of old maps, till I had to admit defeat and gave it away. Even in sleep, when my girl's face has the furzy bloom of an apricot, you can see the determined jut to her chin. Her last school report said, Emily is a very competitive little girl and will need to learn to lose more gracefully.

"Remind you of anyone, Kate?," said Richard and let out that trodden-puppy yelp he has developed lately.

There have been times over the past hyear when I have tried to explain to my daughter—I felt she was old enough to hear this—why Mummy has to go to work. Because Mum and Ded both need to earn money to pay for our house and for all the things she enjoys doing like ballet lessons and going on holiday. Because Mummy has a job she is good at and it's really important for women to work as well as men. Each time the speech builds to a stirring climax — trumpets, choirs, the tearful sisterhood waving flags—in which I assure Emily that she will understand all of this when she is a big girl and wants to do interesting things herself.

Unfortunately, the case for equal opportunities, long established in liberal Western society, cuts no ice in the fundamentalist regime of the five-year-old. There is no God but Mummy, and Daddy is her prophet.

In the morning, when I'm getting ready to leave the house, Emily asks the same question over and over until I want to hit her and then all the way to work, I want to cry for having wanted to hit her.

"Are you putting me to bed tonight? Is Mummy putting me to bed tonight? Are you? Who is putting me to bed tonight? Are you, Mum, are you?"

Do you know how many ways there are of saying the word no without actually using the word no? I do.

## **MUST REMEMBER**

Angel wings. Quote for new stair carpet. Take lasagne out of freezer for Saturday lunch. Buy kitchen roll, stainless steel special polish thingy, present and card for Harry's party. How old is Harry? Five? Six? Must get organized with well-stocked present drawer like proper mother. Buy Christmas tree and stylish lights recommended in Telegraph (Selfridge's or Habitat? Can't remember. Damn.) Nanny's Christmas bribe/present (Eurostar ticket? Cash? DKNY?) Emily wants Baby Wee-Wee doll (over my dead body). Present for Richard (Wine-tasting? Arsenal? Pajamas), In-laws book—The Lost Gardens of Somewhere? Ask Richard to collect dry cleaning. Office party what to wear? Black velvet too small. Stop eating now. Fishnets lilac. Leg wax no time, shave instead. Cancel stress-busting massage. Highlights must book soonest (starting to look like mid-period George Michael). Pelvic floor squeeze! Supplies of Pill!!!!

Ice cake (royal icing?—chk Delia.) Cranberries. Mini party sausages. Stamps for cards Second class x40. Present for E's teacher? And, whatever you do, wean Ben off dummy before Xmas with in-laws. Chase KwikToy, useless mail order present company. Smear test NB. Wine, Gin. Vin santo. Ring Mum. Where did I put Simon Hopkinson "dry with hair dryer" duck recipe? Stuffing? Hamster???