

SO LUCKY

Dawn O'Porter lives in Los Angeles with her husband Chris, her two boys Art and Valentine, and her cat Lilu and dog Potato.

Dawn started out in TV production but quickly landed in front of the camera, making numerous documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4, the most famous being her immersive investigations of polygamy, size zero, childbirth, free love, breast cancer and the movie *Dirty Dancing*. Further TV work included *This Old Thing*, a prime-time Channel 4 show celebrating the wonders of vintage clothing.

Dawn's journalism has appeared in multiple UK publications and she was also the monthly columnist for *Glamour* magazine. She is now a full-time writer of six books – although she would probably have written sixteen if it weren't for her addiction to Instagram Stories.

Most recently, Dawn has written the script for the soon-to-be hit musical *Especially for You*, a jukebox musical using the infamous Stock Aitken Waterman back catalogue. The show will open with a national tour in early 2020.

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Also by Dawn O'Porter

The Cows

SO
LUCKY
DAWN
O'PORTER



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Dedicated to all the Janes in my life

LUCK [n] /lʌk/:

Success or failure apparently brought by
chance rather than through one's own actions.

Everyone else is OK

Everyone else's life is perfect

Everyone is talking about me

Everyone has this figured out except me

Everyone knows I can't do this

We are all SO LUCKY.

What could we possibly have to complain about?

Everyone has their shit

Everyone needs to be kinder to themselves

Everyone's in the struggle together

Everyone isn't me

Everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing
about . . .

1

Ruby

My kid moved out the day she was born. For someone like me, becoming a mother was when I thought I'd finally give my whole self to another human without being constrained by the limitations of my condition. I thought my undying love for this little person would be met by her needing me in a way I had never been needed before. But as it turns out, I'm not sure my kid has ever needed me other than in a physical capacity to keep her alive. Being a mother hasn't been the sweet experience I imagined it to be. In fact, my kid is an asshole. Some might say she gets it from me.

It's 7.05 a.m. I am lying on my bed and she's screaming like she's being attacked in the next room. She isn't being attacked, she is fine. She doesn't sleep in a cot, she knows how to get up. But still, she shouts and screams until I go into her room. Only to tell me to get away from her when I do.

I didn't want a girl. I wanted a boy. I have no idea how to

teach a girl to love herself. I thought, if I had a boy, then Liam could just take care of that side of things. I also don't like how manipulative women are. I didn't realise it started so early.

I reach for my dressing gown that I keep on the other side of the bed. It's no substitute for a husband, but at least it's something to wrap around my body when I wake up in the morning. My dressing gown is one of the few things I adore. It's a 1970s terry-towelling, full-length, high-necked, long-sleeved Victorian-looking thing that hides almost every inch of my body other than my face and neck. I spent ages looking for the perfect one, nothing modern had the same coverage. It means I can answer the door before I get dressed, should someone come knocking. I often wonder who the woman who owned it before me was, as it came with certain signs of wear and tear. Did she also feel the need to hide herself in her own home? Did she have children who loved her? Did she live a life of self-inflicted solitude? Liam hated this dressing gown, but I saw it as my only option after what he did to me on our wedding day.

Getting Bonnie dressed every morning is on a par with being in one of those shark cages, and the shark getting into it with you. She kicks me directly in the chest and stomach. She's bitten me a number of times. She tries to get away, and I have to pull her back and hope to God I don't dislocate a shoulder or hip.

I love her, of course. But I don't love parenting. People tell you not to wish it away. They say I'll miss her being small. I won't. I will never miss this. Living with a toddler is like living

with someone with a complete lack of empathy. Something I swore I wouldn't do again, when I moved out of home, and moved away from my mother.

Monday mornings are always the hardest, especially after she has spent the weekend with her dad. Liam doesn't bother with the boring stuff. He lets her eat what she wants, he lets her stay up late watching TV until she falls asleep. He doesn't bother bathing her or brushing her teeth. Which means that when Bonnie comes back to me she is sticky to the touch, with a yellow smile and dreadlocks in her hair. I am the one who then has to force her into the bath. The one who has to brush out the knots. The one who has to scrape the fur from her teeth. The one who ruins the fun.

I put the TV on for her while I make her breakfast. I don't like preparing food, even if it is for my child. I hate a lot of things I am supposed to like – especially when it comes to being a mother, but also just life in general. I don't like self-help, self-care, the 'mum scene' or social media. I hate politics, and the way it divides people. I hate football for the way it brings people together, but still puts them on opposite teams. I hate how a woman with her top off is more likely to sell a packet of mints than a woman with her top on. I hate how the male gaze is still more powerful than a woman's self-worth.

I hate how the male gaze so rarely comes in my direction. I hate how when it does I bat it away like a bug that might sting me.

I hate so many things. I hate that after my appointment I'll spend the day making a young girl look thinner and

smoother when there was nothing wrong with her in the first place. I hate that my job has become this. I hate that I am part of the problem I am so upset about, but keep doing it because I am too afraid to try anything else.

My daughter calls me from the other room where she is watching TV. She tells me she hates the programme she is watching and wants something else. I change it and tell her she shouldn't use the word hate. I remind her that she has many more options in her lexicon that she can use to describe how she feels about something, and that she should be more clever with her choice of them.

I hate that I talk to her like that when she is only three and a half.

I call Bonnie into the kitchen for breakfast. She says she isn't hungry and doesn't feel well. I put my hand on her forehead; she's fine. I put *Octonauts* on and give her a bowl of dry cereal to eat on the sofa while I go and get dressed. I hate that I am not the kind of mother who puts my arms around my child and tells her everything is going to be OK.

My appointment is at eleven. After that, things will feel better.

There is only one dress to wear when I am at this stage of the cycle – my burgundy velvet maxi dress with high neck and long bell sleeves with elasticated wristbands. I made it myself when I was at university and it still fits perfectly. I'm the same size at forty-three as I was at twenty-one. That takes a certain amount of effort. When you have a condition like mine, you do what you can to keep the symptoms minimal.

Low weight is key. I eat like a bird and exercise for at least an hour a day. But in the privacy of my own home, of course. Someone like me can't go to a gym. I purchased myself an exercise bike with a computer screen attached to it, so I can do classes with real-time instructors. I noticed a little camera at the top of the screen. It is disabled, but I put some gaffer tape over it just in case. I kept imagining someone being able to see me on my bike. I couldn't take the risk that maybe they could. That is quite possibly the most horrifying thing I can imagine.

My burgundy dress says a lot about who I am. It all came together for me when a guy I'd had dinner with a couple of times once described me as an 'Amish Virginia Woolf'. He wasn't being kind. But, I actually loved the description. I feel a deep connection to Virginia Woolf. It's comforting to know that genius can lie in the socially impaired.

'Amish Chic' became my look. I make most of my own clothes now. Long, gothic velvet gowns. High necks, long sleeves, frills down each breast, a pinched-in waist and long, heavy skirts. I wear black pointy boots with a low heel that lace up the front and finish just above the ankle. My skin is pale, I wear a lick of mascara, some heavy blusher and try to match my lips to my dress whenever I can, usually burgundy. I may or not wear tights, depending on where I'm at in the cycle. But the uniform remains the same. I made a number of thick cotton versions of the dress for the summer months. Pale blue, a floral, but nothing too bold. Vintage Laura Ashley fabrics are my style, I buy them on eBay. The boots remain the same, no matter the dress or weather. I have repulsive

feet. If someone wanted to torture me they would abandon me on a packed beach with a bikini and flip-flops on. I'd likely get into the sea and swim as far away from the shore as I could, hoping to one day reach a deserted island, where I would make a thick dress out of sheets of seaweed and hide in caves at the very hint of life on the horizon. I'm not a summer person. It is now June in London and some days are sweltering. If it's really hot I tend to stay at home as much as I can. One of the reasons I am so locked into my job is that it gives me very little reason to leave the house. I invested in an air conditioning unit last year, which has made the hot summer months much more bearable. Other than getting Bonnie to and from nursery, I have very little reason to go out unless it's social, which is a rare occurrence in itself, but of course I do have friends. To be fair to myself, I am very consistent and I offer very comforting advice to people when they need it. I'm quite proud of that.

Loading Bonnie into her buggy takes a moderate amount of strength on my part. I have to press her down just below her belly button, so that I can get the straps on her and secure her properly. She is particularly unpleasant this morning. I say her name over and over – 'Bonnie, get in now. Bonnie. Bonnie, sit down!' – all the while regretting it. It has never felt natural for me to call her Bonnie. It's a curse of a name, meaning beautiful. An unfair pressure to put on a young girl. It was Liam's grandmother's name, and it meant a lot to him to pass it on. I agreed, but only if she had my surname. Liam didn't argue with that bit at all. I hate how progressive he was about so many things.

She is quite small for her age, but very strong. It takes a minute, but soon enough I have her in. I give her a box of raisins to distract her and somehow we manage to get out of the house.

When she finishes the raisins she throws the box onto the street and demands more. I don't have any, so I ignore her and keep pushing. It's a ten-minute walk to her nursery and I walk fast to burn off the toast and Marmite I had for breakfast. Bonnie gets more and more upset, eventually becoming physical. She launches herself backwards and forwards in the buggy, then from side to side too, trying to get herself free.

'I want to walk,' she yells between long, ear-splitting screams. It's the same every morning.

'There's nothing wrong with her,' I say to a mother who looks at my child pitifully. 'If I let her out we will never get there.' She makes some stupid face that implies I am being cruel, then walks off. Her snotty little brat following in tow. The self-righteousness of parenting is what grates on me the most. I avoid other mums as much as I can.

'She's fine,' I bark at someone else who thinks coming over and saying, 'Ahhhhhh,' and smiling at my crazy child is in some way the right thing to do. It is patronising and insincere. There is nothing to 'Ahhhhhh' about when a toddler is being a level ten.

'Maybe she's hungry,' says an old lady waiting at a crossing next to us. I was doing OK until she weighed in.

'Oh, you think maybe I should consider feeding my child?' I ask. She doesn't get my sarcasm.

'Yes, the poor little thing is probably starving.'

'Oh, well silly me. Forgetting to feed my child.' I could stop there, but why would I do that? 'There was me, listening to her delicate little screams, wondering what on earth could be the matter when all the while all I had to do was feed her. How could I have been so thick?'

The old woman looks at me with fear in her eyes. To be fair, I have gotten quite close to her face. I don't like old ladies and the way they act like they've got all the answers.

'Up yours,' I say, crossing the road. It's a retro phrase I use a lot. Firm, offensive but not swearsy enough for people to ring an alarm. I find it very useful. I occasionally add a finger.

Lauren Pearce – Instagram post

@OfficialLP

The image is of Lauren in her kitchen holding a large glass filled with something green. She is wearing jeans and a tight pink shirt. She is fully made-up with perfectly highlighted blonde hair.

The caption reads:

Keeping healthy is so important to me. Feeling good in my body helps my mind feel better. I love my new #GreenMachineQT juicer. I get at least 3 of my 5 a day in one drink. Happy body, happy brain. #AD #selflove #love #together #women #acceptyourself #beyourself #knowyourtruth #womensupportingwomen #vegan

@florecent360: Why do Ads when you're about to marry one of the richest men in the country? Give your fee to charity??

@missiondone123 to @florecent360: She is her own person! Would it be better to live off her husband? I have so much respect for a woman paying her own way. OWN IT Lauren, I love you!!!

@MineAintYours: AD? SELL OUT. GET A REAL JOB that doesn't involve you only wearing pants.

@MatyMooMelly: I love you so much. Everything you say is what I need to hear. Thanks for being you

@pigeontoe: #relatable NOT.

@fabouty: Remember to love yourself. You are such an inspiration to me.

@Hartherlodge: Srsly, get a grip. Rich, thin, fit. What the fuck else do you need? That smoothie looks like when a dog eats grass then pukes it up.

@seveneh: I wish I had your figure.

Beth

I think to myself, right in the middle of it. If I am going to have all of this sex, with all of these strange men, I have to get some enjoyment out of it for me. I pull myself on top of him, and rub myself on his thigh. I forget about his pleasure, and just focus on my own. I'm bringing myself to the most phenomenal orgasm when I hear . . .

'Beth? Beth?' His voice is breathy and gentle. 'Beth? Beth?'

My eyes open.

'Were you having another one of your dreams?'

Shit.

'Yes I was,' I say. He thinks that the dreams I have, the ones that cause me to writhe around moaning in my sleep, are recurring dreams of me ballroom dancing. Because that is what I told him. I said that ballroom dancing is an unrequited ambition of mine. He got me classes for my last birthday. I am yet to use the vouchers.

'I was doing the waltz, with you. We were going to win I reckon,' I tell him, sleepily. Thinking it best not to mention the hot builder who was just paying more attention to my fanny than my foxtrot.

'You'd have been a beautiful dancer,' he says, smiling. 'Here, he's ready for you.' He passes me my four-month-old baby,

Tommy. I sit up, unclip my bra, and put my nipple in his mouth. Michael looks away. 'Let me know when you're done,' he says. 'I'll come get him and you can get some more sleep.'

'It's OK, I better work. What time is it?'

'Nine.'

'Wow, thanks. That's a legit lie-in.'

'Well, you've pumped enough to feed an entire baby army. He took his bottle happily at seven, there was no need to wake you,' he says, kissing my head gently.

'Thank you. I'm very lucky to have you as my husband.'

'And Tommy and I are very lucky to have you. Call me when you're done.'

Michael leaves the room. I hold my baby to my breast with one arm and use the other to reach for my phone.

As expected, my inbox is bulging already. The caterers, the florists, the cake maker, the PRs. This job is extremely demanding. I'd hoped to get six months' maternity leave when I got pregnant, but this came in a few months ago and I couldn't turn it down. That's the trouble when you run your own business, no one pays you for your time off. So I ordered the tablecloths when I was in the labour ward. I sacked a florist while my stitches were being done. I'm everyone's best friend, but I can be a boss when I need to be.

Michael managed to negotiate three months' paternity leave because he works for a start-up that sees itself as entirely modern in its approach to absolutely everything. Which is an ironic place for him to work. He is forty-four and not modern. Unlike me – I'm thirty-six but sit in an office with

a twenty-six-year-old every day who gives a masterclass on how to be a millennial. But I am grateful for Michael's random modern job, because it's meant that I've been able to keep up with the level of attention needed to organise the celebrity wedding of the year. And I'm grateful I didn't have to sacrifice my work, although having to be 'grateful' towards my husband hasn't gotten me any closer to resolving our problem.

I was really enjoying that dream. I put down my phone and slip my hand between my legs. As if he knows what I'm thinking, my baby gurgles and pulls back from my nipple, giving me a judgemental side eye. He's probably right.

I swap him onto the other boob and stroke his head. It's a miracle I have him at all, and I *am* so grateful. Not because there is anything wrong with me. I'm thirty-six and apparently a 'geriatric' when it comes to making babies, but the doctor said I have the ovaries of a twenty-year-old. Michael is perfectly fertile too, despite his age. Men are so lucky in that way; they can be fathers once they're well past their 'peak'. We have to do it at the most inconvenient time in our lives, when our careers should really be all we have to think about. He took all of the tests as a distraction from the act of actually having sex. It was awkward in the appointments with the fertility doctor; he'd say he'd do what he could to get to the bottom of why I wasn't getting pregnant, and all the while I wanted to scream the reason directly into my husband's face.

'IT'S BECAUSE YOU WON'T HAVE SEX WITH ME. YOU NEVER FUCK ME. THAT IS WHY I AM NOT PREGNANT.' I felt like if I ever got pregnant from the once

a month I managed to get him to come inside me, it would be a miracle. But I did. And then I was. And now I have my baby, so at least I got that out of this marriage.

I love my husband, I do. He is kind and fun in pretty much every area of life other than sex. His mother is the battle-axe of all battle-axes and their relationship is weird and loaded with sexual context. They, of course, don't see it, but I do. Is it really normal for a grown man to pop over to his mum's house for a foot massage? Is it? No, it isn't. Is it also normal to call your mother every morning, or to ask her to go to dentist appointments with you because you are scared? I want my little boy to know that I am always there for him, but I also want him to have healthy sexual relationships with other women, and not insist that I come on all their family holidays. I will also do my best not to make his future lovers feel like their relationship with him is second place. As long as he always comes home for Christmas.

Michael is always 'tired'. He says it's his age.

We had a lot of sex when we got together, which was fun while it was happening but often ended strangely. He'd say things like, 'It's natural for a man to want to flee after sex.' Or, 'You didn't come, I don't mind if you finish yourself off.' Funnily enough I rarely did – a comment like that can send a clitoris sailing to the ground like an unopened parachute. Thud.

It wasn't that he was cruel, just weird about sex. But we did it lots, so the romantic in me always presumed that all we needed was time. Practice. I put his issues down to the lack of wedlock at the time. He's kind of traditional and maybe

marriage meant a lot to him? I presumed he'd be in his element from our wedding night on. But no, it was as if he had sullied his bride. When we got back to our suite he said, 'It's a shame you've slept with people before.' I walked out of the room, took off the sexy underwear I had on under my dress, changed it for my normal stuff and went back in to discover him asleep, or pretending to be asleep to get out of having sex with his whore of a wife.

There were always subtle undertones of blame. And as his sex drive has dwindled, his challenged machismo likes to make me feel that it's all my fault. A few weeks ago he said sex was off the cards because my breath smelt. I cleaned my teeth. To which he responded with, 'Mint makes me nauseous. You always get the toothpaste I don't like.' The dentist told me two days later that there were no signs of halitosis or anything dying underneath my tongue. But even still, I covered my mouth whenever I spoke to him for about a week after that.

Even during childbirth my body seemed to bother him. He stayed up by my head and kept giving me a really annoying head massage. The midwife asked him if he wanted to watch as Tommy was crowning, and Michael said, 'God no, that's not something I need to see.' I remember thinking, 'We just created a miracle and you're too disgusted by my body to watch it enter the world?' He also insisted that I wore a t-shirt while I was in labour. I hadn't packed one, so he gave me the one he had under his shirt. It was so tight on my big belly and felt uncomfortable. Also there was a strong smell of BO that made me feel sick. When I tried to take it off he said, 'You'll regret that. I was going to take a photo.'

My nudity makes him uncomfortable.

It's not like my new stretch marks and flabby belly are going to help with that, is it?

'You must have as much sex as you want,' I say to Tommy, as he suckles. 'Just make sure he or she is up for it, use a condom, and always say thank you.' He looks up at me, and I think he understands.

'Michael,' I call, getting out of bed and laying the baby down.

'You done?' he asks, peeping his head around the door.

'Yes, and I better get to work.'

He picks the baby up right away and burps him on his shoulder.

'Cool,' he says, leaving the room. 'I'll leave you to get dressed.'

God forbid he sees me naked.

Ruby

Arriving at the nursery, Bonnie yells at me like I'm a wild bear she needs to scare away. I unstrap her from the hell of her pushchair. Almost as soon as she is free, she runs inside with a huge smile on her face, and straight over to a teacher. She hugs her. I have to look away.

'They're always hardest on their mums,' says Miss Tabitha behind me. I had no idea she was there. I try to collapse the buggy, but something is stuck in the wheel and it won't fold properly.

'She's good as gold when she's here,' she continues, twisting the knife further into my heart. I carried her in my belly. My body was sliced open to get her out. I've kept her alive for three and a half years. I sacrificed my work, I lost a husband. How does she think it is reassuring to hear that I am the only person to whom she expresses hate?

The buggy won't close. I want to get out of this nursery and away from Miss Tabitha's nonchalant and unhelpful support. I am so hot in this heavy velvet and the extra layer of insulation that lies beneath it. My stress levels are not something I can hide.

'Can I help?' she asks, infuriating me further.

'No,' I reply, sweat appearing on my forehead and dripping

down my nose. I wipe it away with my billowing velvet sleeve.

'Are you sure I can't help?' she says again, as if I'm an idiot. If she went away I'd be able to do this but she is standing over me like a teacher assessing my work. I am really struggling now. I know my rage is against me, and that if I stopped banging the bloody thing, took a breath and went at it a bit easier it would do what it normally does and just fold. But I'm annoyed, I am making a point and backing down isn't part of my DNA.

'DAMN IT,' I shout, slamming the buggy down and kicking it with my foot. I try not to swear, even in times of high stress. There is a moment of stillness before I realise a few of the other teachers have joined Miss Tabitha, and that one of them has shut the door into the nursery to shield the children from my aggression. They presume I am about to apologise. I am not.

'What are you looking at?' I say, my top lip curling over my teeth like a wild cat's. Something about the way I say this makes them all take a step back. A brave one starts walking slowly towards me with an extended hand.

'Don't touch me,' I bark.

'I'm not going to touch you,' she says gently. 'I'm going to collapse the buggy for you. There's no need to be so angry.'

'No need to be angry?' She has no idea! I feel a hand on my back. 'Leave me alone, please,' I screech, launching myself forward and landing on top of the pushchair. With me lying across it, it shoots about four feet down the corridor and crashes into the wall. The skirt of my dress gets caught in the

wheel. An ear-splitting ripping sound fills the hallway, and my dress is torn open from the hem to just above the knee. I'm left lying across the pushchair with my legs exposed. They can see my legs. I could react with tears or anger. I, as usual, choose the latter to mask the former.

'Now look what you made me do!' I yell, jumping to my feet, desperately gathering my torn skirt so I can hold it shut with my hands. They say nothing but look at me with as much disdain as their job description will allow.

I have to get out of here. I can't face these women again. Not now they have seen my legs.

'You know what? I've been unhappy with this place for a while. You feed them too many snacks. Bonnie never eats her dinner,' I say, charging toward the closed nursery door.

'Ruby, the children are about to start their music class. Let's leave them to it, shall we?'

I ignore Miss Tabitha. I have to get out of here. They saw my legs. Oh God, they saw my legs. I open the door to the nursery, all of the children turning to look. I walk over to Bonnie and tell her to come with me.

'No,' she stomps.

'Bonnie, come with Mummy please. It's time to go.'

'No. No,' she screams, lying down flat on the floor.

'Come on!' I say, calm but stern, acting like I have a total grip of this situation. I am her mother. She can behave this way, but ultimately has to do what I say. I try again.

'Up now please, Bonnie. We have to go.'

She is now cataclysmic. Screeching and writhing, desperate to be saved from the horror of more time with me. I feel the

same agony, but I cannot back down. I keep hold of my skirt with one hand, not allowing the split to open again.

'Right, Bonnie, enough!' I say, as I pick her up with my spare hand. I don't know how I manage it, sheer desperation maybe, but soon she is up and on my hip. She kicks and pulls but I hold her as tight as I can and I storm out of the room. Teachers try to stop me, but I need to get out of here. And I can't come back. Not now they have seen my legs.

I pick the stroller up with my left hand and carry both Bonnie and it out of the door and on to the street. The split wide open. Why oh why would this happen on the day I didn't wear tights?

I call Liam. The phone rings out. I call again. No answer. He texts immediately.

Sorry, in Amsterdam at this conference. Everything OK?

Damn it, I forgot he's away this week. I tell him nothing is wrong. He replies again with a picture of a very unattractive dog he said he saw.

Can you show this to Bonnie? She loves a dog!

I don't reply.

My phone rings out twice, then rings again. I'd put it back in my bag and am desperately trying to retrieve it while Bonnie screams in her buggy.

'I want to go back to nursery,' she chants. I want her to go back too, but I am too distressed to turn around. They think I'm crazy. They saw my legs. I can never go back. Ever.

By the time I find my phone I see that I have three missed calls from my mother. She hasn't called me in around three

months. Why now? It's like she knows I am having a disastrous parenting moment and she is right there to rub it in.

I struggle on for a while and we come to the entrance of a park. I push Bonnie in, and let her out of her buggy. She immediately runs off and starts collecting sticks and leaves, happy. I take a seat on a bench and call my mother back, taking in a long slow breath before I do.

'Who is this?' she asks when she answers. She is drunk, I can tell.

'Hello, Mum, I saw that you called.'

'What do you want?'

'I'm in a park with Bonnie,' I tell her, knowing this mood well, and knowing that detailed responses are pointless. 'Just calling back to check you're alive.'

'Like you care, you little beast,' she says, followed by a cackle so loud I put my hand over my phone to make sure no one else in the park hears it.

'Don't be unkind, Mother.'

'What did you say?' she asks, her tone instantly snapping into defence mode.

'I said, please don't be unkind. I don't like it when you call me that.'

'Oooo, she doesn't like it when I call her that. She gets all upset. The poor ugly beast.'

'Mother, did you want something specific because if not I am going to go.'

'I'm going to kill myself,' she says. Suddenly deadpan.

'Don't do that,' I tell her, as I have done so many times over the years.

'You can't stop me. I'm going to do it tonight.'

'No you won't,' I say.

'Yes I will.'

'Why?' I ask her, wondering if this might be the one miraculous time I get an answer.

'Shut up. It's not like you care about me—'

I hold the phone away from my ear while she continues to rant abuse.

'Are you done?' I ask, after a minute or so. She seems to be and goes quiet. 'Mum, I've got to go.' I brace myself for the next stab.

'Go on then. Piss off. If your own mother doesn't love you, who will?' she says, before hanging up.

I feel tears begin to well in my eyes as I watch Bonnie play happily without me. I know the second I tell her we need to leave, she will act just like my mother does towards me. Screaming, kicking, yelling, telling me she doesn't love me, acting like my very presence in her life is unbearable. I never imagined that becoming a parent would be like reliving my adolescence. Minus the cruel name at least. Mum has called me 'The Beast' ever since she burst in on me in the shower when I was sixteen. It's why I never dare risk my own child seeing me naked. Who only knows what cruel salutations a toddler might come up with.

How does everyone else make parenting look so easy?

'Move please,' says a man who is standing in front of me, blocking my view of Bonnie.

'Excuse me?' I reply, with a certain amount of attitude.

‘Please move from the bench,’ he repeats. ‘Please.’

‘I absolutely will not move from this bench. I was here first. I’m watching my daughter.’

‘Look, I’d really appreciate it if you would go and sit over there. Please,’ he says calmly, still laden with something heavy. ‘You don’t understand. Please, just move.’

He points to an empty bench a few metres away. I can’t be bothered to fight him – I have had enough conflict for one morning and need a break. I gather my bag and the buggy and move a few benches down. Making sure he hears me say ‘Up yours’ as I go.

As I settle onto my new seat, I have one eye on him, and one eye on Bonnie. She is playing happily, so I concentrate most of my attention on the man. Is he trying to watch Bonnie play? He’s now revealed that he is carrying a packet of baby wipes. It’s very odd. I cautiously start to move towards my daughter, just in case.

But then he stands up and faces the bench. Using the wet wipes he cleans the bird poo and any other dirt off the slats. Scrubbing hard in places, polishing others. It is meticulous work. By the time he has finished, it is gleaming like the day it was painted. Satisfied, he sits on it and looks out at the park. I can see a million thoughts passing behind his eyes. I wonder what they are. Eventually, he stands up slowly and walks away; somehow, a little less upset than he was before. What an extraordinary show to witness.

I head straight over to the bench. A silver plaque is attached to the middle of it that I hadn’t noticed before.

DAWN O'PORTER

Verity, loving daughter and sister. Gone too soon, forever missed and loved. Your spirit will always live in these gardens. 1989–1996

I sit on the bench and look over at Bonnie. Could the man be Verity's father? I try to imagine losing Bonnie. Wondering how I would feel if all I had left were my memories and a bench.

I need to work harder at those memories.