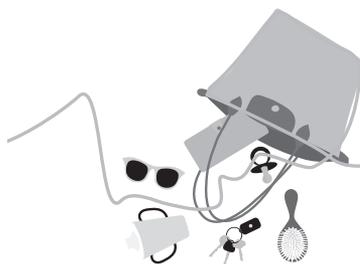


# Grace Under Pressure

Add 3 x children  
Stir in 10,000 x demands  
Bring to boil



Tori Haschka



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[www.facebook.com/BeachesMums](https://www.facebook.com/BeachesMums)

**Because (local) mums know best**

**Members: 20,168**



Dear local mums,

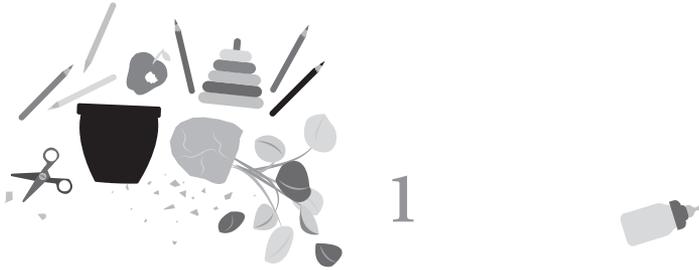
In the spirit of group therapy, what's the grimmest thing you've done in the swamplands of motherhood? Was it:

- a) Accidentally deleted nine months of work
- b) Tried to brush your teeth with a razor smothered in toothpaste
- c) Reversed a car over your child
- d) Torched your marriage
- e) Lost your mind
- f) All of the above

Things might look shiny on social media, but I have just one thing to ask of you. Please, please, don't be me.

Grace Harkness

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# Chicken Poppyseed Pie

## *Nine months earlier*

Grace Harkness was steeling herself for another stretch of #solosuppers.

At the bottom of her whitewashed stairs lay the flotsam of parenthood: folded footsie pyjamas, sippy cups, desiccated comfort bunnies, orphaned shoes and snack boxes with cut grapes and nut-free bliss balls. Next to them stood a stout black carry-on suitcase.

This would be Greg's sixth trip in as many weeks. Her husband's boarding passes listed Singapore, Bangkok, Seoul, Jakarta, Manila and now somewhere else entirely. It was hard to keep up. Thank god for 'Find my friends' on Grace's phone. 'Find my spouse', more like it.

Grace tried to swallow the sudsy backwash of a Rennie. She'd taken it in the vain hope that the antacid would quell the upheaval she felt. Somewhere in the kitchen there was a cup of tepid Earl Grey tea. Making tea was an act of optimism. Perhaps today she would get to drink it hot, she mused as she pulled out the sodden teabag and traipsed it over to the bin.

This wasn't what she thought motherhood would taste like.

Grace spied a glimpse of her face in the hall mirror as she caught Greg at their jaunty yellow front door. Her angled cheeks were Roquefort green and her upper lip was beaded with sweat. She reached for his starched French cuff.

Her spouse of ten years recoiled. 'Grace, you look terrible. Do you guys have gastro again? Because I've got two presentations tomorrow, so, can you maybe keep your distance ...'

Greg kicked aside a piece of Lego with a practiced sweep. His mind had already checked into the pinstriped civility of the airport lounge, with its calming click of keyboards and the gentle clink of cutlery slicing through poached eggs and sourdough toast.

'No.'

They needed to have a conversation.

'I thought you were going to be here for a while,' she said as she reached out for him, trying not to sound desperate.

'You know I have to go. I think it's just going to be one more trip. I have a boss to answer to,' he parried with brisk efficiency as he grabbed his suitcase.

His Uber beeped from the kerb. He was already looking beyond her.

As he shut the door and strode down the driveway, Grace realised he hadn't let her know when he was coming back. Or asked if she was going to be okay. It was just assumed that she would be.

Grace would handle it. She gripped the banister until her knuckles turned white.

'MUM!'

'MUM MUM MUM MUM MUUUUUM!' came the wails from the other room.

*Breathe.*

Grace pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes to steady herself before turning to face two of her own tiny bosses. On her way, she collected four rogue Tupperware containers and returned them to the sink.

Grace looked back at where Greg's suitcase had stood. She wasn't sure if she could even make it to the local shops with their two children and a mere seven kilos of accessories in tow.

In their Carrara kitchen, Grace and Greg's four-year-old son Harry was a cauldron of fury. He had just discovered that his father had cleared away the elaborate commune he'd built for his superheroes. In a Hulk-esque meltdown, Harry tore the head off his plastic Thor and hurled him at the stacking sliding doors that opened onto the hardwood deck. He was wailing with remorse, and refusing to eat any breakfast in a gesture of solidarity with his now-headless hero.

Grace attempted to reattach the plastic head with craft glue while simultaneously shovelling a porridge-like slurry of seeds, ancient grains and earnestness into Harry's baby sister. Occasionally, Grace would stop to slug back a swampish-coloured smoothie made from frozen spinach, pineapple, mint, banana and chia seeds (#drinkyourgreens!).

Above her head, a clock ticked.

Grace had spent a career honing her skills in corporate and culinary environments where efficiency was prized above everything. She was a communications professional and a chef. She had three glossy cookbooks under her belt, a battery of aspirational clients and an Instagram following that made the pillow-lipped girls at influencer agencies sit up straight. Grace was a woman who got things done.

Motherhood came as whiplash.

Her first year of parenthood passed in a manic haze. Grace had been so high after Harry's birth that she'd signed a contract to produce a new cookbook before her milk had

even come in. ‘How hard can it be?’ she’d thought. ‘He’ll sleep and I’ll work.’

Famous last words.

As Grace scurried about collecting what she needed for the morning – containers of sliced apple, a zip-lock bag with spare shorts and underpants in it for Harry (he was toilet trained, but the one day she forgets will always be the one day he has an accident in the supermarket) and her shopping list – she cast her mind back to how bullishly optimistic she had been in those early days and laughed.

Her theory of ‘doing it all’ might have held – if the baby slept. But Harry did not get that memo. He occasionally submitted to sleep, but only when he was attached to Grace. He was lulled into silence by the white noise of an immersion blender, and Grace tried not to slosh scalding drips from her tasting spoon onto his peach-soft skull. She had thought that was as gritty as it was going to get. Then that lambent infant unfurled into a hurling hurricane just as she stepped back into the breach to nurse a sequel. That was when Grace realised she knew next to nothing.

As Grace wrestled everyone into the car she realised Ruby was wearing odd shoes. She didn’t have the stomach for the fight; they had already gone three rounds over the way she’d cut Ruby’s toast. There were few things as cumbersome as soldiering through the day with a toddler shackled to your side. Sure, there was the slumping physicality of lugging a 15-kilogram sack of squidge, mashed banana and breakable bones around. But it was the capricious whims of a toddler’s mood that made simple tasks insurmountable. A liped ‘yes’ could tumble into ‘no’ with little logic or warning. A ‘no’ would occasionally escalate to a biting fit. Sometimes these meltdowns could be triggered by something as banal as the colour of a balloon.

Grace was sure that modern frustration had no sharper point than a sleep-starved mother hissing at the automatic supermarket check-out that ‘there are no excess fucking items in the bagging area’ while her offspring keened beside her in a trolley. On any one of these excursions, one of Grace’s children would predictably proclaim with panicked zeal, ‘I NEED TO DO A WEE NOW, MUMMY!’ while the other smashed a piece of complimentary fruit into their cheek. It was enough to make Grace want to steal avocados out of spite.

The ability to grocery shop alone and waft through daily errands with nothing but time for contemplation were luxuries of ease that Grace traced in her memory like phantom limbs. That was life BC. Before Children.

‘Why don’t you put the kids into more care? You’re just making a rod for your back.’ That was Greg’s brutally logical retort whenever Grace tried to illuminate her triggers. Why? Because it was bloody expensive, and her freelance work schedule was capricious.

Because in care, they got sick. The incessant fifying hack of bronchiolitis slipped forward in her memory with terrifying ease. Bronchiolitis wasn’t even a word she’d known how to spell before she had Ruby. Now she had it down pat.

That had been a long, hard winter.

Because there was no government rebate for nannies, and the good ones wanted more money an hour than Grace currently pocketed after tax. The burden of paying for childcare was also somehow assumed to be hers. Because there was a voice inside her head passed down from generations before that told her that wasn’t what ‘good mothers’ did.

‘Why did you even have children if you don’t want to spend time with them?’ was the question that echoed in her head.

Grace was trying to be good. She really was.

She should have aborted this morning's shopping trip before it even started. But she had three recipes due by close of business today, and a virtual cooking class to prepare the collateral for. She needed ingredients. Grace ached for the days when she could nip into the Sainsbury's below their flat in London and pick up slim fillets of sea bass and broccolini without a second thought. Tenderstem. That's what they called it there. These days, broccolini was food for the childless. Stout little woodlands of budget-appeasing broccoli, that was the landscape in which she now dwelled.

Ruby sat nestled in the trolley behind Harry. While she may have had the face of a cherub, most days she performed a solid impression of a banshee. The terrible twos had come early for Ruby (perhaps she was advanced). Her favourite activities were tipping bottles of rice milk onto the floor and spitting paracetamol syrup back at Grace like a petulant dragon. To keep her quiet, Grace had placed a quarter of a watermelon in the infant seat next to her. Ruby had punctured the protective plastic wrap and was transferring fistfuls of melon into her mouth, while Grace searched for the poppyseeds she needed to finish testing a recipe.

By this stage of parenthood, Grace had determined that a successful shopping trip with children could be measured by four criteria.

1. How many of the intended items did you forget?
2. How many bribes did you have to purchase?
3. How many times did you whisper 'for fuck's sake' under your breath?
4. Did you physically threaten your child with a vegetable?

A mark of less than ten was enough to count the trip a success.

Today, Grace's score was fourteen. She had just poked Harry in the ribs with a telegraph cucumber to stop him from

ejecting the eggplants from the trolley. (Harry did not enjoy eggplants. It was a texture thing.) She was sure she had been seen doing it, too.

It was a rare shopping expedition when Grace wasn't spotted by someone who knew her, or knew of her. She was always on show.

'Grace! So great to see you!' Today, it was one of the other mums at Harry's kindergarten, who had frequented a few of Grace's cooking classes. She wore consciously crumpled hemp pyjamas and was vegan. Grace thought about the classic joke: How do you know if someone is a vegan? Just wait five minutes and they'll tell you all about it.

It was funny because it was true.

Grace couldn't for the life of her remember her name. Leaf? Dawn? Fern? From memory, her social media handle was 'HolisticallyPure', which was little help. Grace hissed, 'Sit down!' at Harry through a forced smile. She saw the Sancti-Mum clock the contents of the trolley and grimace when she saw the chicken thighs in there. Her disappointment was clear. Grace sighed. At least they were organic.

'Grace! I haven't seen you in forever! I LOVED that brothy bean recipe you posted last month. The adzuki beans were inspired. I'm guessing you're swamped. Are you swamped?'

Swamped. Sure. That was one word for it.

'So great to see you too, lovely!' Grace trilled as Ruby continued to fist melon into her face and Harry threatened to eject another eggplant. 'Got to fly!'

When she got to the check-out, a slack-jawed young man in a well-worn Fresh is Best uniform looked quizzically at her.

'What happened to the melon?' he asked, looking at its busted green skeleton and Ruby's stained shirt.

'I dropped it,' Grace said, po-faced, as she reached down and pulled out more of her re-usable cotton bags.

At least she had remembered them.

Grace somehow managed to get her children back into her oversized SUV without any injury to life or limb (the paranoid image of wee toes being swallowed by the metal teeth on the escalator verge was one that was hard to shake). She paused to post a photo with one hand of her boot overflowing with aspirational, verdant greens (#mykindofhaul).

As Grace buckled her children into their seats she took a sip of satisfaction from the percussive clip, clip, clip, clip and her children's compliance.

She kissed them both on their heads – the punctuation of parenthood – then carefully drove back towards Freshwater and tried to remember to breathe.

She continued on her rounds, depositing Harry at his coastal-themed kindy without any tantrums from Harry or further requests from the centre manager to volunteer her time. Harry was at kindy because she didn't have enough time. She answered a text message from one of her bosses, Stella, the marketing manager at Fresh is Best, confirming that one of the cake recipes she had sent through should be tagged as nut free and promised she would send the rest of the recipes in by the end of the day. She then turned back home with Ruby in tow and reopened the half-written list that was marching through her head. Ruby began to wail. Grace tried to stop her stress from cresting.

The tide of nausea she was battling didn't help.

Grace opened the car windows. The air outside was crisp and clean. The beach was just four minutes from her front door. Freshwater appeared as a smug smile of sand, flanked by sandstone cliffs. Most days, Grace felt like she was living against an Instagram background that required no filter.

Those like Grace who grew up in Freshwater clung to their privilege tighter than surfers held onto their boards. 'This is

why Australia is the lucky country,' local mums in printed leggings would congratulate each other while pushing their mini-mes on the beachside swings.

But Freshwater today was different to the suburb where Grace had first learned to duck under waves. It was now a place where interlopers thought nothing of dropping \$14 million on the last remaining beachside weatherboard cottage so they could dig an adjacent swimming pool without the hassle of getting council approval. It had become a place where image was everything, gossip ran fast and loyalties held firm. Once you were in its thrall, it was hard to muster the motivation to leave. There's a reason they call the Northern Beaches the 'insular peninsula'. Freshwater was a gilded cage that people took pride in locking themselves into.

It could send you mad, if you let it.

Grace had always assumed that her anxiety was just a pilot fish of her personality, and something that helped her function at a relatively high level. It was what made her sharp. Then she had her children, and her pilot fish morphed into a shark.

The prospect of another indefinable stretch of solo wrangling loomed large. The spectre of the poppyseed-sized disaster in her uterus weighed like a whale. Grace pulled over and reached again for her digital crutch. She unlocked her phone and sent a hopeful plea to the name at the top of her message history. Her safety net pinged back with a series of emojis: a smiley face, a thumbs up and a kiss.

As soon as Grace scraped the front of her car across Petra's driveway the front door opened and Grace's stalwart friend shepherded Ruby straight into a game with her youngest child, who was building Atlantis out of kinetic sand.

Nobody could craft a make-believe world like Petra.

Petra pushed Grace's long hair off her forehead and looked directly at her.

‘Have you eaten? You have crazy eyes on.’ Petra never wasted much time with niceties. That was the shorthand of old friends.

Grace barrelled on.

‘I just have to find these poppyseeds. I need them for this afternoon and I don’t have it in me to tackle another grocery shop with Ruby in tow.’

‘I get it.’

Petra really did.

She kissed Grace on the forehead, the same way that Grace did her children, and pushed her out the door. ‘Afterwards, go get a coffee and a muffin and talk to the waves for a few minutes. We’re good here.’

Unencumbered, Grace moved with slick efficiency. She found the poppyseeds at the small grocer in Brookvale – the same one that she and Petra had dubbed ‘kale broom’ last year, after the owner was seen sweeping the floor with a bunch of brassicas before putting them back on the shelf for sale. Once the poppyseeds were sorted, Grace picked up an almond chai in her keep cup and made her way to the tiered timber beach lookout. Luxuriating in the silence, she tapped out her list for the day.

## **TODAY I WILL**

Grace always wrote ‘Today I will’ rather than ‘To do’. It was a hack she’d picked up from an efficiency podcast that was supposed to make her more accountable to herself.

- Test chicken pie recipe. Photograph.
- 3 × Instagram posts. Cue quinoa sponsored post for next week.
- 2 × washing, in, out, fold, away.

- Sew button back on Harry's blue shirt.
- Make more banana oat cookies for kids' morning teas.
- Invoices.
- Asthma drugs.
- Keep kids alive.
- Be grateful.
- Build my village.

The last few sounded like they belonged on a motivational poster accompanied by a photo of a mob of curious meerkats; the sort that hapless executives tacked above their desks. Yet it was an instruction Grace scribed daily. It had come from a wise woman. Her words echoed back to Grace whenever things got particularly gritty.

*'Grace. Everyone needs a village. We're not supposed to mother alone. We need aunties and nonnas and sisters and friends.'*

At the time Grace had been stumped when she asked, *'Who do you have?'*

Grace's mind had reeled to blankness. And then she had realised she had Petra. Petra was the only reason she could find the horizon most days.

*'These days we need to build our own villages, Grace.'*

As she drove away from the beach and towards her daughter's indigo eyes and marshmallow cheeks, Grace wondered how she could repay Petra for her help this morning.

Chicken poppyseed pie. Grace would finish testing the recipe this afternoon and photograph it during golden hour. She could then drop it around for Petra and her husband Stuart's dinner.

Her own spouse would be eating chicken satay and wild rice at 40,000 feet. Once the children were safely asleep Grace would be content with a solo supper of the pie scraps.

Tori Haschka

Who knew – maybe it would even be Instagram-worthy (#nowaste).

As she rounded the final bend, Grace felt a swelling of satisfaction, secure in the knowledge that at least one Freshwater family would be sitting down to a plate full of comfort tonight.



Tori Haschka is a Sydney-based author, food writer and mum of two. Her articles have featured in *Grazia*, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, *Mamamia* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* and her blog [eatori.com](http://eatori.com) was ranked by *Saveur Magazine* as one of the five best food and travel blogs in the world. *Grace Under Pressure* is her first novel.