

MOTHERS & OTHERS

INTRODUCTION

When are you having kids? It's a question asked of women all the time and seldom asked of men. A question that fails to consider the differences between women – social, psychological and physical – and assumes motherhood is the ultimate goal to which all women should strive.

The last few decades have seen social changes with enormous implications for traditional parenting roles. In Australia, the rise of women in leadership positions, improved medical technology, better parental leave, same-sex parents, changing attitudes towards stay-at-home fathers, and an increase in women actively deciding to remain childless are just a few of the things that have challenged traditional ideas about motherhood in our culture. Yet traditions die hard and these changes arouse public debates which frequently descend into antagonism and judgement, once again limiting and polarising women.

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Complexity, difference and truly unique positions of motherhood are often lost in the oppositional fray.

In 2013 we commissioned *Just Between Us: Australian writers tell the truth about female friendship*. The anthology presented friendships between women as they really are, focusing on individual experiences that challenged the pervasive myth of the ‘best friend forever’. In *Mothers & Others* we have turned our attention to this other important realm of women’s lives, to strip away the stereotypes and insidious ideologies that mask the truths of motherhood.

Mothers & Others explores the plurality of experiences around motherhood – whether they be about non-traditional modes of mothering, economic and political constraints, infertility or the death of a child, or women side-stepping parenthood altogether, by circumstance or by choice.

To write against the grain on this issue is scary. Our contributors have forged ahead and told their stories with warmth, wit and honesty. Given the enormity of the topic, its fundamental position in our culture and our lives, these stories are acts of courage. The women presented in this anthology are some of our nation’s finest writers and thinkers, and we are honoured to be able to share their ideas and experiences.

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Editors

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NONFICTION BY
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When she was pregnant with me, most of my mother's teeth fell out, one by one. At first they wobbled a bit, then loosened from the gums until she could yank them out with a small twist of her thumb and forefinger, like pulling a kernel of corn from its husk. At the Thai refugee camp where I was conceived, my mother mostly lived on rice, a single meal a day. There was nothing to give her back the calcium which I had leached from her bones and teeth. She ate vegetables once a week, bought from the market vendors outside the camp. Sometimes she had red bean soup. Every morning she had to carry enormous pails of water from the communal well; she was scared the heavy lifting would bring on early labour, but I clung on.

My mum was eight months pregnant when she found out we were coming to Australia. She knew nothing about the country, had never seen it on a map. In fact, she had never even learned to read maps; her school in Cambodia

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had closed when she was in second grade, the very first step of ethnic cleansing. But still, she was not stupid. She knew that there was no way they would let a woman who was almost full term on a long-distance flight. She also knew that if she did not board that plane with my dad, who knew how long we would be stuck in the camp? Twenty-three years old, alone with a newborn, waiting in a kind of purgatory: that was what life would be like. She also knew that some men, after going overseas, forgot about their wives back home. Because she was so malnourished, my mother's stomach didn't appear too distended, so when the interviewers at the camp asked how far along she was, she lied and held up one hand – only about five months.

On the plane I began to kick. Mum worried that she might go into labour mid-flight, but no, I was tenacious: again, I clung on, despite the turbulence. 'You were determined to be born an Australian child,' she said to me later.

New refugees arriving in Melbourne in the late seventies and early eighties stayed at a place called the Midway Migrant Hostel, which my parents nicknamed the Hilton hotel, with no sense of irony. To those coming from Third World countries ravaged by genocide and war, where people ate scorpions and leather belts to survive, the migrant hostel was the equivalent to a five-star hotel: clean sheets, pillows, showers, food three times a day, small single-serve packets of jam and peanut butter, Nescafé coffee, milk and sugar. They could not believe their luck. Mum couldn't eat the meals served because the cheesy smells induced nausea, so she ate bread dipped in heavily sweetened, milky instant coffee instead. 'You know you're expecting a girl when you crave sweet things,' she once said to me.

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My parents were only in Australia for a month before I arrived. When I was born, my mother woke up to a small jelly cup and a Dixie cup of ice-cream. She thought that the hospital staff were throwing a party for her. A nurse asked her if she wanted something to drink and she asked for coffee with sugar. She had no idea how to stop a baby from crying, so she fed me spoonfuls of Nescafé.

When Mum was pregnant with my younger sisters she worked all the time and she vomited all the time. She would quickly scoff down her food so she could get back to work in the shed of our house behind the carpet factory, casting rings and linking tiny gold loops to make bracelets and necklaces. Sometimes I had to clean up the vomit, with long white strands of rice noodles still intact. Sometimes, she vomited and coughed so much she became incontinent. Once, she was hospitalised for almost a week from dehydration, and every day of that week Dad took me and my younger brother and sister to McDonald's for dinner because he believed that the franchise's strict hygiene and nutritional standards were better than anything he could muster up in our mouldy kitchen. Mum eventually came home with a walking frame. Still, she had four children. This is what I learned then: it doesn't matter what you eat, your baby will take the best part of you.

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Two years ago, before I was even married, my mum went to the Boxing Day sales at Kmart and bought six enormous plastic-lidded tubs and filled them with all the baby paraphernalia she could find on sale: little socks, nappies, rubber teats, onesies in all colours, Christmas T-shirt-and-shorts

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combos for toddlers, fleecy terry-towelling toys and plastic rattles.

When Nick and I got married, my parents rose very early to prepare food and receive guests. Afterwards they cleaned the church and had more guests over for dinner. Late that night, they drove us home to our new flat. They lovingly made up our bed for us with brand-new sheets and a warm winter minky blanket, and stuck red double happiness signs above it. As a final touch, Mum laid out two pairs of pyjamas she got on special in China: pink flannel Hello Kitty for me, and a counterfeit Nike T-shirt and shorts for Nick. I knew I had married the right man when he didn't find this hilarious. He understood how practical Chinese parents can be.

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After Nick and I came home from our honeymoon, my parents immediately started asking when we would give them grandchildren. Three months ago, when we told them the good news over dinner at their house, my parents expressed their elation the only way they knew how: by reciting a list of things I shouldn't eat – cashews, coconut juice, eggs that are not fully cooked, too much spinach, even the little pearls in bubble tea.

'We need to get a pram!' Mum announced to Dad the next Sunday evening at dinner. Thus began her regular weekly updates to me: 'No need to buy nappies for newborns, I've already bought some on sale.' 'Don't go buying bottles – I've already taken care of that.'

My dad ordered a book online called *Foods that Heal, Foods that Harm* and took to sending me texts full of

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advice. Like a lioness with a particularly good catch, my mum proudly showed me matching Minnie Mouse and Spiderman baby director's chairs she'd got on sale, striped baby Bonds leggings and tiny tea sets. She filled my sister's old bedroom with stacks of boxes filled with plastic toys, rattles and rompers. They reminded me of old-fashioned glory boxes, but instead of preparing me for marriage, these were boxes to prepare us for a new life.

My parents warned Nick and me against going to Little Saigon Market in Footscray to do our grocery shopping. 'All those squashed and rotting vegetables and fruit on the floor. You'll slip and fall!' My dad also told me not to carry anything heavier than two kilos. He recalled all the members of our family who'd had miscarriages in Australia – my aunt who lifted a heavy box while she was working at Retravision, another who carried too many grocery bags back from the Little Saigon Market, one who jumped up and down to clear a blocked nose. It seemed a tragic irony: all those tenacious babies back in Cambodia and Vietnam, clinging on, while the ones in the lucky country were so easily dislodged. My parents insisted that I move no faster than an old woman's shuffle. 'Walk, don't run!' they admonished me, as if I was five years old again.

When I was younger I might have felt stifled by all this, but now I realise how lucky I am. My mother never knew how her babies would be received in the world, how much love they could get from outsiders. She wasn't confident that she would be a good mother to us. She knew so little about babies when she had me, far away from her parents who were still stateless and homeless in Vietnam. She was so young. So alone. She never even had time for a proper

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wedding – a huge deal in our culture – because my parents had to leave in the middle of the night to cross the border. There was no one to lay out two pairs of pyjamas on the bed as a blessing and comfort. They slept on jungle floors trying to reach that camp in Thailand.

Pregnancy has made me sick – morning sickness, afternoon sickness, evening sickness.

Then the migraines started. They begin as a hammering behind my eyeballs, a pushing pulsing pain that spreads across my temple and cheek and jaw. One time it lasted nine days straight. It feels scary to have such a lack of control over my own body – after each ailment subsides a new one takes its place. Even the prescription of my glasses has changed. My body feels like a passive vessel with a leak, draining away my energy.

But with this lack of control comes something unexpectedly wonderful: I realised how much my husband and family *have it all together*. Nick boils the kettle for me if he hears me vomiting, so I can have a hot drink afterwards. He brings me breakfast in bed when I'm too nauseous to get up, and does the dishes in the morning. My brother gave us a classical music CD – probably pirated from China – with the lost-in-translation title, *Education Music for Embryo*. Nick's grandma gave us a baby journal and knitted a little hoodie for the baby. Other people are thinking of the baby for me.

Our doctor said to us, 'You will still be the same person even when you're pregnant. It will not change who you are.'

Our retired friends said to us, 'Having a child will change you in ways you never imagined.'

But in the end, my mum and dad assure me, 'This baby will be loved by so many people.'

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Almost three and a half decades later, their firstborn – a child they named after the girl in Lewis Carroll’s book, because they thought Australia was a Wonderland – is having her firstborn. They didn’t know whether they would survive the war, let alone get to this lucky point in life.

So now, years later, we wear our daggy, comforting counterfeit pyjamas to bed, and we are thankful for all the help we have.