

Mother Fucker -- The leather Mummy and the sexual, childless maternal body

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Mother Fucker

–the leather Mummy and the sexual, childless maternal body
(a scholarly dissertation)

&

Lolly Poppins

(a novel)

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two components: a novel titled “Lolly Poppins” and a scholarly dissertation titled “Mother Fucker”.

Despite a long history of feminist engagement with motherhood as an institution, an essentialist definition of the maternal prevails in popular social dialogues. These essentialist discourses are both scientifically invalid and theoretically untenable, yet they operate to circumscribe the social expectations of women, restricting not only mothers but also those who are excluded from this definition, such as trans* people, men, and childless women. Additionally, in keeping with the long-established and culturally imposed Madonna/whore dichotomy the maternal body continues to be subjected to intense public scrutiny and is heavily censored and regulated, particularly in relation to sexuality.

My dissertation explores this sexual/maternal dichotomy as well as the problem of essentialism through a study of queer, women and trans* leather Mummies. Leather Mummies are people who engage in dominant maternal role-play in a BDSM context, in effect eroticising the omnipotent, nurturing force of the mother. Using a queer feminist framework I engage Butler’s theory of performativity in conjunction with maternal theory and femme/butch politics in order to examine whether the leather Mummy is able to succeed in subverting dominant maternal discourses, or whether she too ends up simply reinforcing maternal essentialism. Through an ethnographic study of the San Francisco leather Mummy community I have observed the leather Mummy’s ability to (re)negotiate the interplay between maternal expression and sexuality, feminism, and queer politics. It is my contention that by transgressing the taboo of the sexual maternal the leather Mummy offers a fresh critique of essentialism by challenging the way we currently define and limit the maternal.

My novel “Lolly Poppins” expands on these questions by addressing the commodification of the mother through the sexualisation of childless maternal figures such as the nanny or the babysitter, and further complicating the relationship between motherhood and the sexually empowered female body. The main protagonist and narrator is Meg, a queer kinky nanny who

moonlights as a sex worker and who is planning to have a child. Through a queer reproduction of the classic chick-lit trope of the single woman's quest to net a husband and start a family, Meg's unconventional journey into motherhood explores the intersections of queer identity, feminism, and the maternal, highlighting the at times uneasy relationship between the three and raising the question of how sexuality might be successfully integrated with motherhood.

Damn, I wish I was your lover
I'd rock you till the daylight comes
Make sure you are smiling and warm
I am everything
Tonight I'll be your mother
I'll do such things to ease your pain
Free your mind and you won't feel ashamed

(Sophie B. Hawkins)

Gillian, if you weren't my mother
I would make you my wife

(The Waifs)

To Mum, as always, for making me choose between boob and books nearly thirty-one momentous years ago.

To Kath. You're right—Mummy always knows best.

And to Dad...I know how proud you would have been to see me finish this. xxx

This thesis has been written in at least seven different countries: in caravans, windowsills, farm houses, and log cabins; on beaches, houseboats, aeroplanes and trains; beside roaring fires, waterfalls, swimming pools and dusty paddocks; up giant trees and down jungle tracks; under the dryer at the hairdressers'; in the homes of numerous different friends. In particular I'd like to thank the following people for providing me not only with a room of one's own, but also with a fabulous view: No and Trappa, Patty and Melania, Aunty Jo-Jo, Joshua, Yvette, Ken, Faith and Co., the Humphreys', Paulzo, Cindy, Grets and Ross, and Laura. Thank you to Baddie and Shannon for reading it, Elli for fixing it, and to Anna for going first. Special thanks go to Alix for sharing his passion with me and for letting me dry my undies on his flatscreen tv, to Zoo for zier magnificent breasts, and to Willy for doing a poo on the final bound copy.

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Mother Fucker
–the leather Mummy and the sexual,
childless maternal body

(a scholarly dissertation)

Glossary

BDSM: An umbrella term which stands for bondage, domination/submission (often abbreviated to D/s), and sado-masochism (SM or S/M). The BDSM community embraces a wide variety of diverse practices and sexual lifestyles, including the eroticising and exchange of power, the inflicting or receiving of pain, fetishes, humiliation, sensation play, role-playing, and the sexual identities and practices which are involved with this kind of play. Throughout this thesis “BDSM” will at times be abbreviated to “SM” and will be used interchangeably with “kink”, a less formal term used within the BDSM community which carries the same or similar meaning, and also with “leather”, a word used to define people who are active in the BDSM community that has its roots in gay male culture, being used to denote an alternative sexual subculture.

cis-gendered: “Cis” refers to people who identify with the gender they are assigned at birth.

femme and butch: Femme and butch are self-determined identities concerned with adopting those characteristics and styles of dress that are traditionally considered feminine or masculine, respectively. These gender identities are most common in the queer women and lesbian community, but are terms that are also sometimes used by gay men, and occasionally in the straight world. In the lesbian/queer women’s community femme can mean adopting any number of those aesthetics or behavioural characteristics generally ascribed to femininity, commonly relating to clothing, makeup, hair styles, accessories, and/or generally acting “girly”. Butches may wear men’s clothing, have their hair cut in a masculine style, and/or adopt characteristics generally ascribed to the masculine end of the behaviour spectrum, such as acting physically strong, emotionally reserved, and being generally “boyish” in behaviour.

play: A term which refers to the act of taking part in BDSM practices.

play party: A party where people generally attend with the purpose of engaging in BDSM play, and where the space is set up largely for this purpose.

pro-dom: An abbreviation of “professional dominatrix”: someone who provides their services professionally as a dominant, in exchange for pay.

queer:

“Queer” is a difficult identity to describe—essentially all terms are inadequate to define this community, as the one fixed point that unites the queer community is the rejecting of any restrictive definitions or binaries. Loosely, “queer” refers to those sexual identities and gender orientations that exist outside of heteronormativity and which, as opposed to gay and lesbian culture, consider themselves to be fluid and unfixed. “Queer” as a sexual identity also implies a political engagement with the impact of patriarchal culture on gender and sexuality.

“Queer” also refers to an academic concept and a methodology, the details of which are discussed in Chapter One—Ethnography.

scene:

“A scene” refers to a BDSM scenario between two or more people, often pre-arranged and negotiated, and which most likely involves some level of power exchange, role-playing, SM, and/or various other erotic activities.

“*The scene*” refers to the BDSM community, a network of people who engage in BDSM and who might loosely associate together either virtually, through internet chat rooms and email lists, or in the real world, attending play parties and various other BDSM-specific or kink-friendly events. However, the community also extends beyond this to refer to people who may never meet but who are still connected by a common interest in BDSM.

sub/bottom: The person who is playing the submissive role in a Dominant/submissive dynamic.

switch: Someone who is open to both topping and bottoming.

top/dom: The person who is playing the dominant role in a Dominant/submissive dynamic. They may also be called “mistress” or “master”, among other titles.

trans*: I use the term “trans*” to encompass the wide spectrum of identities which fall under this umbrella term, including (but by no means limited to) transsexuals, transgender people, trans men, trans women, and genderqueers.

vanilla: A term used within the BDSM community to describe those who do not engage in any BDSM practices.

Introduction

I was standing in aisle three at ten o'clock on a Thursday morning when I got my calling. I was wearing a 1950s American diner dress and a fluoro-pink wig I'd pinched from my housemate's bedroom on my way out the night before, I had a pair of heels in one hand and a tin of red kidney beans in the other, and I was still positively, unquestionably, without a doubt still drunk. I had yet to make it home from the Sly Fox, the local queer/lesbian hangout where I had been the night before for the double celebration of handing in a full draft of my Honours thesis, and to herald in my 27th birthday. It took me a good ten seconds to realise that the ringing sound in my ears was in fact my mobile phone— a friend calling to wish me a happy birthday. As I traipsed along the aisles buying supplies for the party I was throwing myself that night we chatted about my recent break-up, last night's sex-capades, and of course my dreaded thesis, which was all about the pre-Oedipal language of the erotic maternal body.

"I've been doing all this reading about how heaps of women get turned on while breastfeeding, but how it's, like, completely taboo to talk about it," I whispered into the phone, aware that there was an elderly gentleman right next to me browsing the seventeen different types of marmalade on offer on the shelves. "And last week I went to the screening of this film about orgasmic births. It was incredible. And also kind of hot."

"Have you looked at leather Mummies¹ yet?" the friend asked.

"What's that?" I asked absentmindedly, rummaging through the freezer trying to find the vanilla soy ice-cream.

"You know how in the kink² scene there's Daddies? Well, people play as Mummies, too."

"At this point, unless it's going to help me understand what the hell Kristeva and Irigaray are bloody on about, I don't want to know," I told the friend. "You know, I'm supposed to be handing in a PhD proposal in a few weeks, and I haven't even figured

¹ To differentiate between mothers and leather Mummies I have capitalised the "M" in "leather Mummies" and used a lower-case "m" for "mothers" and "mums".

² I use the terms "kink" and "BDSM" interchangeably in this thesis. (See glossary for definitions.)

out what my Honours thesis is about, yet. How the hell am I going to think up a new one as well?" I gave up and threw a tub of mango-swirl in the trolley and staggered to the checkout, ignoring the stares from the old Greek yayas as I straightened my wig.

When the last of the ice-cream cake had been demolished and the birthday hangover had finally subsided, our conversation came back to me, and I realised that this was what I wanted to dedicate the next four years of my life to: something I had never heard of before and knew absolutely nothing about. And it was precisely because I had never heard of it before that I was so certain it was going to be important. Since I had begun dipping my toes into the queer kink scene earlier that year all I had heard about was Daddies this and Daddies that, about how Daddies were hot and how everyone wanted to net themselves a Daddy. So it was fascinating to discover that not only did Daddy's female counterpart exist, but that, even among the feminist dykes and queers and lesbians, Mummy was the far less popular choice. I felt simultaneously angry and intrigued.

Defining Mummy

Assuming that the majority of readers will be likewise unfamiliar with this topic, before I delve any further into the journey of this thesis I will begin by attempting to define the leather Mummy. It is important to bear in mind that at the very essence of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism) is the agreement that all identities are self-defined, and therefore a definitive description will always be impossible to achieve. Nevertheless there are some recurring qualities which can be acknowledged as being commonly associated with the leather Mummy, a detailed account of which can be found in Chapter Two but which I will also touch on here.

As a general rule, leather Mummies primarily engage with Dominance and submission (D/s), but may also incorporate other elements of BDSM. A leather Mummy is a dominant top who is likely to be at times nurturing, caring, authoritarian and disciplinary, alternately soothing and meting out punishment. A Mummy scene consists of role-play between consenting adults³ where one person assumes the dominant role of "Mummy" while the other plays the

³ It is possible that people who are unfamiliar with BDSM may incorrectly associate this kind of role-play with paedophilia or child sexual abuse. It is therefore important to emphasise the phrase "consenting adults"—Mummy play does not involve children and it is not an expression of paedophilic desires; it is a

submissive role as the “Boy/Boi”, “Girl/Grrl”, “Little”, “Baby”,⁴ or simply as the sub or the bottom. Although there are many similarities and cross-overs it is important to clarify that despite the use of words such as “Little Boy” or “Baby”, a Mummy scene does not necessarily occur in conjunction with either adult baby role-play or age-play.⁵ The leather Mummy is a Mummy regardless of whether her⁶ submissive identifies as a child, an adult, or a lampshade—Mummy is a maternal top in her own right. Leather Mummies eroticise the maternal, the power of the mother, and the vulnerability and helplessness of the child, but it is also important to note that while the leather Mummy undoubtedly will engage with the maternal in some way, it is not a pre-requisite that she role-play specifically as a mother.

fantasy enacted by consenting adults who wish to embody either a dominant maternal or submissive child-like space *themselves*: “There is no indication that these individuals are searching for minors or re-enacting incestuous acts from their childhood” (Moser and Kleinplatz 43). Patrick Califia describes the difference between play and reality by drawing attention to the difference between slavery or exploitation and SM: “[...]I have no desire to own anyone on a full-time basis. I am satisfied with their sexual submission. [...] I am interested in something ephemeral, pleasure, not in economic control or forced reproduction” (135). Similarly Largier contrasts torture chambers and SM dungeons, concluding that consent and an understanding of the boundaries of fantasy are the key factors which separate one from the other (22).

⁴ I have capitalised all of these titles in order to make it clear that I am referring to play identities as opposed to actual children.

⁵ Adult babies are submissives who role-play in a very young space, often pre-verbal and “unable” to walk or look after themselves. There is a stereotype that most adult babies are heterosexual men who work in powerful positions (hence fetishising helplessness), and who access sex workers for the service of being mothered. I only met two Mummies who expressed any interest in this fetish, and furthermore most of my participants also expressed a similar reluctance to associate themselves with age-play, a fetish which involves the submissive role-playing as a child or a teenager. Interestingly, despite this reluctance, many of the relationships I observed were between a Mummy and a sub who played in a childish space. Miss Millie, an interview participant who was actively involved in both the leather Mummy scene and the age-play community, argued that more than anything this was a terminology debate: “From what I’ve seen, they probably do an awful lot of age play but they aren’t calling it that. It’s kind of like how, you know, the schoolgirl archetype is everywhere and most people don’t call it age play.”

⁶ While I have attempted to use gender-neutral pronouns where possible, for the sake of simplicity and clarity I have at times made the decision in this thesis to refer to mothers, leather Mummies, and femmes with a female pronoun. This is not to say that all birth-parents identify as either women or mothers, or that everyone identifying as a mother, a leather Mummy or a femme necessarily identifies with a female pronoun either during or outside of play; however my participants were all comfortable with using a female pronoun and so I have also done so, in order to avoid confusion.

The Thesis

The fact I had never heard of Mummy tops struck a chord; in fact, it actually struck two chords. Using an ethnographic study of the San Francisco queer women and trans* leather Mummy community, I have focused on two separate but intersecting areas of inquiry: one concerned with maternal essentialism and the threat of the sexual maternal, and the other with gender hierarchies in queer kink communities. My first question, which is addressed in Chapter Two—"The s/m/other: maternal subjectivities", asks how the leather Mummy might help us to review and, potentially, to re-imagine the maternal. The gap between the performed maternal (as expressed by Mummy tops), and the realities of biological parenting provides us with the opportunity to view the maternal with fresh eyes, eyes that are not restricted by the limitations of current maternal discourse. I investigate whether the space between reality and the fantasy of the maternal mystique, where the sexual and the maternal are able to coexist, might be somehow inhabitable, and if so, how this can alter what we are willing to validate as maternal expression.

My second question, addressed in Chapter Three—"Becoming Mummy: performing femme, femininity, and the maternal", is more finely focused. Here I evaluate whether the leather Mummy reinforces dominant maternal discourse or offers an escape from the limitations of a socially constructed, biologically determined identity. As I am also a member of the queer women and trans* kink community I use participant observation and my own lived experiences in conjunction with literature and ethnographic research in order to present a critique of the political limitations of the queer women and trans* kink community. It is my contention that the leather Mummy highlights a devaluing of femininity which occurs even in this supposedly gender-neutral, subversive space, and reminds us that a post-gender world is still a desirable but currently unattainable myth. I will now outline these two key investigative paths in more detail.

1) Maternal essentialism and the erotic maternal

My friend had mentioned leather Mummies to me on the phone that day in relation to my Honours thesis, the main focus of which was the premise that the maternal body is expected to be asexual, in keeping with the long-established and culturally imposed Madonna/whore dichotomy (Bartlett 59–60; Friedan 46). If the sexual maternal is

threatening we can only assume that it is threatening because it contains within it the potential to empower motherhood—to free the maternal from its patriarchal constraints (Young 84-9). Society is at best uncomfortable with a sexual maternal body, and at worst aggressively censorious (Newby 48; Longhurst 67-80). Women are labelled “bad” mothers if they have casual sex, date multiple partners, or work in the sex industry (“Because I’m a Whore”; Dodsworth 100) —in other words, if they share their physical body with someone other than the baby (Longhurst 103). While it is obvious that women who are mothers are, or can still choose to be, sexually active, what is not openly discussed is whether a mother is able to exercise sexual autonomy: to actively desire, and most crucially, to derive a private, intimate pleasure from her maternal labour.

Leather Mummies intrigue me because they appear to solve the problem of this uneasy relationship between the maternal and the sexual body by divorcing the maternal from any relationship to female “instinct”, biology, or act of parenting, embracing the maternal instead as a purely hedonistic site of pleasure. Furthermore because the leather Mummy was a self-defined identity, this meant that it was also an identity accessible for anyone to engage with, regardless of their gender. It appeared that Mummy tops offered a fresh critique of both essentialism and of the maternal.

Feminism has repeatedly challenged essentialism on the grounds that femininity is not innate, rather it is both socialised and socially enforced. Furthermore, in feminist scholarship concepts of an essential femaleness or femininity are deemed not only false but are recognised as systems of gender oppression (Rich 15; de Beauvoir 554; Firestone 182; Longhurst 3). As social dialogue would have us believe that the maternal is an innate instinct that women are somehow magically born with, it stands to reason that motherhood, which restricts a woman’s lifestyle, makes her financially dependent on either the state or on her partner, and confines her to the home, is therefore one of the most significant sites of this gender-based oppression (Firestone 1972; Rich 1995).

However, despite this heightened awareness of essentialism, feminist academic research on mothering usually only looks at women who mother their own biological children, stepchildren, adopted children, foster children, or the children in their extended families, and occasionally the relationship of a woman to her deceased child. Even in feminist

discourse mothering is for the main part understood as an act that women (exclusively) are able to perform, and rarely is this base definition explored beyond this point.

Essentialist notions of the maternal are not only restrictive to mothers but also to men (who are excluded from the maternal), and to those women who choose to remain childless, or who cannot bear their own children. “Barren” women are often deemed as lesser women than those with children (Rich 98), and a woman is stigmatised as “lacking” if she chooses to not have children. This is a stigma that has survived today, as we can see from the comments made in 2007 by Liberal senator Bill Heffernan towards Julia Gillard, in reference to her being unfit for leadership because she was childless.

Leather Mummies raise the question: what is the maternal in the absence of a child? And even more importantly, how does the maternal operate when it is positioned externally to gender? By separating the maternal from these essentialist foundations, the question remains of whether it is possible to liberate the maternal, and consequently motherhood, or whether Mummy tops, in the end, only further serve to reinforce sexism, perpetuating as opposed to perverting parental labour and gender stereotypes.

2) Femme and queer theory

As illustrated above, the leather Mummy intrigued me with her de-essentialising possibilities. However, as previously stated, my discovery of Mummy tops also made me angry—angry because I had not heard of them before. For as long as I have been out as a queer woman I have been painfully aware of the undervaluing of femininity in the queer community, and I suspected that the relative invisibility of the leather Mummy was closely related to this problem. I myself suffered a long period of genuinely believing that because I didn’t want to cut my hair short and wear ugly shorts and wife-beater singlets, I must therefore be straight. However, when I finally heard the term “femme” I didn’t feel much better—I felt like my gender had been crammed into a pretty little box and treated as a decoration, to be humoured and objectified by the butches. So not surprisingly, when my supervisor first suggested that I do some reading on femme/butch theory I was riled up by the suggestion. “This thesis is about leather Mummies, not about those bullshit binaries,” I told her. I remember feeling angry at the assumption that because I was researching a queer subject, femme/butch would automatically follow. I have always resented the false hypothesis that

same-sex attracted women always fit into one of these two rigid categories and that their desire is shaped accordingly. On reflection I was also annoyed because for me, femme called to mind vacuous frivolity, subservience and, most importantly, because femme conjured up butch. For once, I thought I had found something that was NOT about butch; Mummy didn't need a masculine presence to validate her—she was strong and sexy in her own right.

Femmes of Power, a book created by Ulrika Dahl and Del LaGrace Volcano which I refer to frequently in this thesis, was prompted by the increasing popularity and/or visibility of trans men and drag kings both within the queer community and in mainstream culture, and the reducing of femmes and femaleness⁷ “to little more than a supporting role” (11). In the book's introduction Volcano asks, “Why is it that masculinity of all types is so astonishingly over-valorised in LGBTQ and even feminist circles?” (Dahl and Volcano 11). I believe that this is a question which is not asked enough. The queer community has lulled itself into a false sense of self-righteousness, eager to lecture mainstream society on the subjects of gender and sexuality but reluctant to consider that our own position in the gender debate may not always be as lofty as we imagine. There is an assumption that everything we do is subversive, and that simply by existing we are challenging the status quo and dismantling patriarchal values and systems of oppression. While this thesis has not been written with the intent to attack and condemn the queer kink community, a community I myself cherish with all my heart, I believe it is essential that we insert some feminist values back into our queer dialogues.

My own difficult relationship with femme is testament to this necessity. Even so far into my research as my time in San Francisco I was still resistant to femme. I was at a brunch at

⁷ At this point it is necessary to draw a distinction between femininity and femme. Femininity refers to the essentialist qualities ascribed to or associated with “women”—the way a woman is expected to dress, move, and act, and the roles she is expected to play—attributes which feminism argues are socially constructed (de Beauvoir 2010; Rich 1995; Alcoff 1988; O'Reilly (2006, 2010)). Femme, on the other hand, is more than just clothes, behaviour, and aesthetics—it is “a sustained gender identity, a chosen rather than assigned femininity” (Harris and Crocker 5). As Aly, a woman interviewed in Dahl and Volcano's *Femmes of Power*, points out, it is this intention which sets femme apart from femininity: “I'm not femme because I was born that way. I'm femme because I decided to be” (134). (See glossary for a detailed definition of femme and butch identities.)

Folsom Fair Day when a lover tried to introduce me to Ulrika Dahl: “She’s a femme academic and activist—I bet she’d be really interested in your work,” she urged me. I don’t want to talk about girly stuff and giggle over the butches and compare nail-polish tips, I remember thinking. I laugh now (and slap myself for missing out on the opportunity), but at the time I still genuinely thought that was all that being femme boiled down to—a desire for butches and pretty pink clothes.

It is amusing to look back on these tantrums, knowing what I now know about the interrelatedness of femme empowerment and the leather Mummy. The Mummies I met on this journey taught me about the pain, anger and frustration of trying to carve out their own space as femme tops, in a scene dominated by butches and Daddies. They told me about the struggle to celebrate their femininity in a community which sees femmes as high maintenance, and they have taught me about the importance of foregrounding femmes in queer dialogues instead of leaving them to hover in the background, supporting their butches from the sidelines (Lapovsky Kennedy 18).

I still don’t like the assumption that because you wear a skirt you will want someone to help you get out of the car, that you will want to be flirted with in a certain way, and that you will be a pillow-queen princess who doesn’t like to get her hands dirty and who can’t parallel-park. The assumptions associated with femme/butch still fuck me right off. Femme activism, however, has drawn me in. Meeting and interviewing the San Francisco Mummies, who are all femme activists in their own ways, has shown me that the problem lies not with the femmes or the leather Mummies but with the external gaze, which denigrates the feminine by casting femme as passive and the maternal as subservient. The leather Mummy ignores these assumptions and does things her own way. I still don’t identify as femme—perhaps I never will—but I have learnt to adjust my own patriarchy-centric approach to power. I have learnt that there are other ways to be tough and strong, and that there are other ways to gain respect.

Conceptual framework

As has already been alluded to, I identify as a kinky queer feminist both in my personal and professional life. Unsurprisingly, I have approached the question of the leather Mummy from a queer feminist conceptual framework of gender and sexuality, and my methods and methodology similarly follow suit. Feminist literature on the maternal, which spans disciplines from psychoanalysis through to anthropology and sociology, considers that the world operates within a patriarchal power structure that systematically oppresses women based on their gender. A feminist paradigm is critical of the essentialist belief that women are innately maternal, and recognises motherhood as an oppressive institution (de Beauvoir 2010; Rich 1995; O'Reilly 2006, 2010).

Feminist theory adequately answers many of the questions about the maternal that the leather Mummy raises, however I have found it necessary to employ a feminist framework in conjunction with queer theory in order to approach the question of femininity and the maternal from a more flexible understanding of gender and sexuality. Queer theory views gender and desire as “fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming” (Browne & Nash 1), and adheres to a Butlerian account of gender as being performed, fabricated, and essentially false, consequently recognising that this performativity creates a space where it is possible to transgress gender barriers (Butler 1990). Also integrated into my queer methodology was an emphasis on femme/butch theory and its embracing of performed femininity as disruptive to socialised gender structures.

Politically speaking, queer is a dissonance or a disruption which intrinsically throws into question all notions of essentialism and normativity (Knopp 21) and enables us to reconsider the maternal body as fluid, and as a potential site of transgression. My thesis seeks to untangle the relationship between Mummy tops and gender, between sexual eroticisms and the politics of taboo. A queer methodology was therefore also necessary to the subject matter of my research question, queer theory being particularly interested in the relationship between practices, sexualities, identities and the erotic (Binnie 32). It is of course also useful to mention those key concepts which I have not employed in my investigation of the leather Mummy. In the early stages of my research whenever I

explained my thesis topic to fellow academics they would invariably respond with, “Ah, yes, and how are you enjoying Freud?” And so for the first couple of years I read all the way from Freud and Lacan, through Helene Deutsch, past Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva and all the way along from Jane Gallop and Nancy Chodorow to Teresa de Lauretis and Elizabeth Grosz. And then I stopped reading. I could easily have chosen the well-worn psychoanalytic track, and would have most likely ended up with a thesis which regarded the leather Mummy as a continuation of the lesbian desire to be mothered, a literal acting out of mother-daughter pre-Oedipal desire (Freud 1991; Maltz 2002).⁸ I could have equally easily adopted a contemporary queer feminist re-reading of Freud such as that of Teresa de Lauretis, who has taken Freud’s at times problematic gender-based assumptions and re-read them from within a queer, feminist lens, thereby finding room for a new lesbian subjectivity where lesbian desire is central to sexual development, as opposed to othered (1994). However, even with this radical rewrite of psychoanalysis, I realised I was not convinced.

A methodology reliant on the pathologising of desire (Langdridge and Barker 6; Largier 18) was incongruent with my feminist politics regarding desire and sexuality, and additionally, as a feminist ethnographer I was uncomfortable with the idea of analysing other people’s desires, choosing instead to reject invasive and paternalistic practices in favour of self-determination. But even more importantly psychoanalysis did not offer relevant answers to my questions. I did not want to look at where the desire to be a leather Mummy originated, but rather how the leather Mummy interacted with the maternal and intersected with the straight vanilla world. I did not want to ask why my participants were

⁸ In my readings I came across the occasional article on leather Daddies (and even less frequently, on Mummies) which used psychoanalysis as the method of approach. Two examples worth mentioning are Maltz and Harris, each of whom posit the leather Mummy/Daddy as both an extension of mother/ son or father/daughter desire, and as a fulfilment of the fantasy of creating one’s own family (Harris 76–80; Maltz 62–66). (To clarify, the desire to create a “chosen” family is a consequence of queers frequently being estranged from their biological families due to issues of homophobia and a lack of understanding or acceptance of queer lifestyles.) However I remain unconvinced of this argument—in my mind this hypothesis not only oversimplifies desire and sexuality but also overlooks the massive impact public hegemonic systems of power and gender have on our private desires. Having said this, I do acknowledge that in my interviews several participants said that, for them, a significant portion of the pleasure of Mummy play was related to the gratification they received from creating their own (leather) families. However this is a whole new area of study which is concerned with complicating family, sexuality, and kink, and is not simply beyond the scope of this study, but is another area of research altogether.

drawn to BDSM, but rather what their sexual practices could tell me about our current systems of gender oppression.

I had a hunch that the leather Mummy, with her subversive sense of play and her habit of breaking the rules, was doing important work on more than one level. As kink theorist Margot Weiss affirms, BDSM presents us with a microcosm of “broader social, political, and economic formations: the links (and tensions) between leisure and labor; consumerism and desire; race, class, and neoliberalism; and politics and privilege” (28). Far from being a purely private practice, occurring solely for the pursuit of pleasure,

[...] SM community, practice, and performance produce a conduit between individual and social bodies, a circuit between the subjective (private desire, identity, individual autonomy, fantasy) and the socioeconomic (public community, social reality, collectivity, social power). In these circuits, BDSM names the specific ways in which practitioners situate themselves within and simultaneously reproduce larger social relations: iterations of public and private, community and commodity, self-mastery and technology, identity and social hierarchy. (Weiss 30-1)

In effect, SM teaches us about the world by placing a small fragment under a kinky magnifying glass (Weinberg and Levi Kamel 21). I found psychoanalysis to be inadequate in terms of the political contextualisation of gender and BDSM, and consequently a queer feminist methodology was far better suited to both the subject matter of this thesis and to my chosen line of inquiry.

Scope and limitations

In Weiss’s study of the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community she noted that a distinct majority of the doms were male, and correspondingly, that the majority of women were subs (161). Similarly, from my own (admittedly preliminary) survey of the straight kink community it appeared that any research on heterosexual leather Mummies would be likely to produce a majority of female Mummies paired with male subs. To me this suggested that heterosexual Mummy tops would also be more likely to replicate (as opposed to subvert) heteronormative gender roles. While at first glance one might argue that a female top is a subversion in itself, when looking specifically at the leather Mummy I would disagree—to my mind a woman mothering a man, whether or not she is doing so in a position as the top, does not destabilise gender norms. As my research was concerned foremost with the

subversive potential of Mummy tops I was therefore not interested in observing heterosexual leather Mummies.

I instead chose to focus specifically on the queer women and trans* BDSM community⁹, because by limiting my research to queer women and trans* players I could be sure that the majority, if not all of the group, were either currently living as women or had at some point in their lives been received as a woman by mainstream society. Consequently, I reasoned, by virtue of their sex or gender the majority would at some point have also been subjected to the social pressure to “be” maternal, which was a focus point of my research. This is not an expectation placed on men, and so for this reason I also chose to exclude the gay male community from my research.

For similar reasons I narrowed the field of study to lifestyle players (people who role-play as Mummies in their private lives) as opposed to professional players (for example dominatrixes who provide Mummy scenes as a service to their clients).¹⁰ The power dynamic is significantly altered when “Mummy” is a service being provided in exchange for financial remuneration, particularly if the gender dynamics of the scene involve a female sex worker and a male client. Furthermore, as Zussman pointed out in her study of BDSM, if the person is playing that role for work and not for the sole pursuit of pleasure, there are more than likely significant differences in the way that they play: “if they [pro-doms] engage in S/M privately at all, their play often differs from their professional roles. [...] [Furthermore,] because professional dominants and submissives are “working” when they go into scene, the shifts of consciousness may be significantly different” (21).

⁹ More specifically, I have chosen to focus on those in the queer community who are *not* cis-male— that is, those who are either cis-female, female-identifying, dykes, lesbians, female-born queer-identifying people, women, or male-to-female or female-to-male trans people.

¹⁰ One of my interview participants did in fact play as a Mummy in both her private life and her work life, however during the interview we only discussed her private play.

Research methods

My research questions focus on unravelling the intricacies of the leather Mummy: what is a leather Mummy, who engages with this kink and why, and how is she received by the wider kink community. Therefore I felt that qualitative ethnographic research including participant observation and interviews would be the most appropriate and effective way of collating an in-depth, detailed description of the leather Mummy community. The preparation for this fieldwork entailed detailed planning—leather Mummies form a sexual sub-culture which is mostly only accessible to others from within that subculture who are “in the know”, and they generally operate fairly covertly and are therefore difficult to visually identify in mainstream society. Furthermore my preliminary research indicated that there were only a few handfuls of people within the queer women and trans* community who identified openly as Mummies in Australia’s major cities, with a slightly larger concentration scattered across the rest of the western world.

For the scope of my thesis it was important to conduct my research in a country where English was the main spoken language, and where the culture was as similar as possible to that of Australia. For this reason I chose to conduct all of my interviews and participant observations in San Francisco, in the United States of America, which has both a vibrant and visible BDSM community and a burgeoning queer scene.¹¹ While I acknowledge that North American history and culture do differ greatly from Australia’s in many aspects, there were enough similarities, particularly in regards to cultural perspectives on gender and sexuality,

¹¹ As Margot Weiss, who conducted an in-depth three-year study of the SF pansexual BDSM community acknowledges, San Francisco has a long history of having a highly active and visible BDSM community (34–47). In two of the most popular nightlife districts there are numerous gay male leather bars and specialty shops, several kink organisations which organise MUNCHes, educational workshops and social events, a permanent dungeon space (at the time of research this was “The Citadel”, which hosted events most nights of the week, some of which were queer and trans-specific), and there are two very popular outdoor leather pride events in the calendar year, both of which I attended—Folsom Leather Pride, which is the “largest leather event in the world” (Weiss 42) and attracts fellow kinksters from across the globe every year, and Dore Alley, a more local version of Folsom, which is said to have a stronger queer presence.

that I felt confident that my research would not be too greatly affected.¹² Additionally, while the bulk of my research took place in San Francisco, there was also a significant amount of preliminary research, both formal and anecdotal, that I was able to undertake in Australia. Therefore while the findings of this research are largely concerned with the San Francisco leather Mummy community, I have also applied these findings to an Australian context.

My fieldwork occurred over three key stages, the first being involved with online ethnography, monitoring relevant discussion forums in fetish chat-rooms, the second with identifying my key participants and conducting participant observation at BDSM and queer events, and the third with conducting a focus group of five leather Mummies, and four one-on-one interviews. While this was a small sample, I was satisfied that it was representative of the San Francisco leather Mummy community for two reasons. Firstly, I managed to interview all of the women who had spoken on the leather Mummy panels organised several years earlier, and although one or two other names were mentioned during the focus group, it appeared that the majority of Mummies who were visible in the community were in my sample group. Secondly, it is important to remember that even in San Francisco, where there is a comparatively large queer kink community, this is still a limited group. The women and trans* kink events that I attended usually drew somewhere between forty and one hundred people, and taking into consideration that the leather Mummy community is a minority group, it stands to reason that my sample would be small.

¹² Early on in my time in San Francisco I crossed the bay to Oakland and attended the 2011 Butch Voices Conference. While there I participated in several workshops, including “Butch and Pregnant: What do I Wear and What Do You Call Me?”, which discussed gender identity in relation to the maternal, and also “Dandies and Sissy Boys”, which explored negative connotations of femininity being maintained within the queer community. These workshops gave me a good overview of where the American queer community stood on questions of the maternal and of femme/butch, and reassured me that the general attitude to these topics was similar in San Francisco as in Sydney.

Writing up

Deciding how best to represent these Mummies and their thoughts, feelings, and lifestyles has been a political decision in itself. In making this decision I have looked beyond traditional academic writing to those research projects which have facilitated spaces where the queer community is able to glitter in its own, self-directed limelight, as opposed to being caught in the spotlight of an inquisitively intrusive tourist's torch. Worthy of particular consideration is Dahl and Volcano's previously mentioned *Femmes of Power*, which employs queer, community-led ethnography to represent a cross-section of the femme-identifying European and American community in as ethical and autonomous a way as possible.

While not disregarding the need for thorough formal ethnographic methodologies, in *Femmes of Power* Dahl is in a sense writing a manifesto for a queer methodology that challenges traditional structures of knowledge and which has the capacity to both academically investigate those subcultures which have been built around a combination of sexuality, politics, and desire, and to enable these communities to speak for themselves, to write their own definitions and draw their own conclusions. Dahl describes this methodology as "a strategic choice" ("*Femmes of Power*" 24), and she addresses the femmes of this book accordingly:

I reject the imperialist fantasy of scientific "discovery" and question a capitalist consumption logic that feeds on always inventing something new. [...] Importantly, the femme scientist solicits collaboration [...] To me you are all articulate and brilliant theorists of the pleasures and pains of femininity. Together we give a cheeky red painted middle finger to Big Science and its urge to discover, reduce, label and patent. ("*Femmes of Power*" 20)

Femmes of Power is structured in a way that rejects "scientific" ethnographic research by positioning the subjects as the true experts of themselves, and by creating the opportunity for a two-way dialogue between the subject and the ethnographer.

While I admire this challenge to academic conventions I felt that maintaining some level of separation between subject and researcher was necessary in my own work in order to present an academically rigorous debate. However I still endeavoured to conduct my

research and write up my findings in a manner that honoured a participant-led approach. For example, I made the methodological decision to reject a traditional “findings” chapter, working instead on the premise that the leather Mummy needed to be represented in a communicative style which reflected her own unfixed, inconclusive fluidity. The resulting structure was intuitive as opposed to pre-determined, waiting until after completing and analysing the fieldwork before deciding how best to proceed, and was reconciled with feminist methods of inquiry which stipulate that the thesis be led by the findings, as opposed to the inverse (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 172). In a structure which is similar but not identical to grounded theory (Bryant and Charmaz 1–24) I adopted an integrative method of writing which allowed my conclusions to continue to adapt as I reflected on and rewrote my findings, both in response and in relation to my literature reviews and my field notes. These findings are reflected on continually throughout my thesis and have been integrated with my ethnographic accounts of the queer leather Mummy community. Each chapter also contains its own internal literature review, and my findings, field-work transcripts and participant observation notes are therefore also able to directly engage in dialogue with these pre-existing debates (Davies 215).

As is to be expected in qualitative research, few questions I posed to my Mummies elicited a clear, consistent response across the board, although it was possible to make some general assumptions about the Mummy community as a whole. Queer bodies are not structured and consequently our stories are not linear; rather they disrupt and complicate traditional ways of understanding. There is no norm, no average, no stock-standard Mummy; you cannot pin her down (though she may pin you down, with her rolling pin). Therefore I do not suggest that any of the answers my participants provided should be accepted as absolute “truths”; rather, in keeping with the nature of qualitative data, each specific response from my participants is taken as representing only the individual. The purpose of this thesis is not to provide sweeping generalisations about the Mummy community, nor is it to provide “proof” of my hypothesis. This thesis is instead designed to provide a unique, detailed snapshot of a little-known community which has until now remained almost entirely out of the academic spotlight.

Chapter outlines

Chapter One, “Ethnography”, outlines my research questions, my methodological approach to the question of the queer, women and trans* leather Mummy, and my research methods, including the practicalities of conducting focus groups and interviews and the steps I took in order to integrate myself into the San Francisco queer kink community. Embedded in this chapter is a brief literature review encompassing queer methodology, feminist research methods, and online and sexual ethnography. I also discuss the ethics involved in both participating in and conducting participant observation in a sexual space, navigating the pre-existing ethics of the BDSM community, and the conflicts involved with being a member of the community under examination. Chapter One then addresses the complications which interfered with my original research plan, the adaptations I subsequently made, and concludes with a synopsis of my methods of data analysis and writing up.

Chapter Two, “The s/m/other: maternal subjectivities”, begins by defining the maternal, approaching the problem of essentialism through a review of maternal pedagogies with a focus on the seminal work of early feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich, who identify motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal structure. I then define the leather Mummy—who she is, what she does, and what she wears—interrogating the spaces where she both revises and reinforces supposed maternal “truths”. In an exploration of role-playing as a leather Mummy as a substitute for motherhood I make the proposal for a childless maternal, a maternal which disrupts, or is even divorced from, biological essentialism.

Through a comparison of the sexual leather Mummy and the asexual mother, this chapter then deals with complicating the taboo of the sexual maternal, dissecting the expectation that mothers relinquish their sexuality “for the sake of the child”. Here I draw on Iris Marion Young’s work on breastfeeding as a site of disruption to the Madonna/whore dilemma, and her contention that the sexual maternal is a site of defiance to the essential maternal. In relation to this socially enforced distance between the sexual and the

maternal bodies, the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the fear of the violent mother, and an analysis of the way that the leather Mummy challenges these constraints.

Chapter Three, "Becoming Mummy: performing femme, femininity, and the maternal", centres on the Butlerian premise that all gender is performed, a theory which in effect eliminates the viability of gender essentialism. In response I put forward the case that if gender is performed, then the maternal, which is an expression of gender, is also performed, and as a result the maternal is exposed for the fiction that it is. Continuing in this vein I explore how a queering of the maternal forces us to question not only what the "maternal" means, but also what the leather Mummy can teach us about its limitations.

In Chapter Three I then consider whether imitation and parody disrupt or reinstate formal inscriptions of power, through an exploration of femme/butch identity as both subversive and as a perpetuation of heteronormative power structures. Evaluating the leather Mummy in relation to queer theory, which positions the femme as a gender activist, I ask why femme tops have to struggle for recognition and respect in the queer kink community, how femme-phobia interacts with the leather Mummy, and why there are more leather Daddies than Mummies in the queer kink scene. Chapter Three concludes with an examination of BDSM, asking whether, similar to femme/butch, the kink community either deconstructs or perpetuates sexist gendered roles. With a focus on cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss's recent study of the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community I investigate the point at which private play interacts with public, dominant hegemonies, once again asking the question of how the leather Mummy is socially constructed, and in turn how she interacts in relation to normative structures of power.

In conclusion I argue that the leather Mummy interacts with the maternal in two different and potentially oppositional ways. In the first she subverts dominant discourses on the maternal body by transgressing the taboo of the sexual maternal, and through an empowered femme position she subverts the gender-based power hierarchies that the queer kink community inadvertently reproduce. However, on the flip-side I contend that the presence of the leather Mummy also serves to feed back into the very discourses that she disrupts, both in the way in which she perpetuates a stereotype of the maternal, and also in the way in which it she frequently received with a level of discomfort by members of the

wider kink community. In the same way that debates concerning the subversive success of both femme/butch identities and BDSM are unable to be resolved, my conclusion is likewise decidedly inconclusive. I can speculate on the success of the leather Mummy in answering questions of essentialism, maternal sexual subjectivity, and misogynist codings of desire, but I cannot declare any definitive conclusion other than to say that queer subjects are a myriad of complexities that continually intersect and divert and are messy, and the leather Mummy is no exception. She is difficult to define and even harder to confine, and the only thing that's certain is that no matter what, Mummy always knows what's best (!).

Chapter One

A method to the madness

Pupil, Dilated

I am here to drink
but perhaps you will suck me in
as I suck you dry
and I will become
my own object

Introduction

Central to the question of the leather Mummy is the problem of where to situate her in relation to the maternal. The maternal is a subject which has been addressed countless times by philosophers, psychoanalysts and feminists, and which has continually been revisited, revised, and at times renounced. How well, then, does a queer, female or trans* leather Mummy fit in relation to traditional concepts of motherhood, and what new light is she able to shed on the conventional maternal archetype? And in return, is feminist maternal theory able to explain the leather Mummy, or is there a point at which it fails? Assuming that feminism will be essentially inadequate in handling a queer subject which disrupts normative readings of gender, sexuality, and motherhood, the question then is whether queer theory might be able to enter the race at this point and carry the thesis over the finish line. But is queer theory able to successfully place the leather Mummy somehow in relation to concepts of performativity and gender parody, or does queer theory, too, leave gaps which are impossible to fill?

In order to answer these questions and investigate the tensions between Mummy tops, the maternal and queer theories of desire it was essential first and foremost to get to know the leather Mummy herself, face to face. For this reason I chose to conduct an ethnographic study of the queer women and trans* leather Mummy community which relied heavily on interviews and participant observation. As mentioned in the introduction, my participant observations and interviews all took place during the seven months I lived in San Francisco, a city which has a particularly vibrant and visible BDSM scene and a small but vocal Mummy community.¹³ My research plan was a perpetual work-in-progress, developing and adjusting itself continually both during the fieldwork and also in the process of “writing up”. This evolutionary process was at least in part due to the constantly shifting relationship between myself and my subject matter—I was already personally involved in

¹³ From my Internet research and conversations with people within the scene, leather Mummy communities seemed to be small the world over. However San Francisco is home to the most publicly prominent leather Mummy community I am aware of, having hosted several public Mummy play discussion panels over the last few years. In fact, San Francisco was the only place in the world where I discovered a history of any public events or discussions focused directly on Mummy play.

the queer kink community when I began this project and midway through my research I also began to engage in Mummy scenes myself. I was painfully aware that I needed to somehow acknowledge my dual position as researcher and participant, and in order to do so it became necessary to move away from those methods of research which adhered to the anthropological tradition of researching the “other” (Smith 2, 8).

This chapter outlines both my theoretical framework and methods of research, beginning with a discussion of how my research is situated within a queer feminist paradigm that views gender as unstable and essentialism as oppressive and problematic. I then discuss the ethical considerations involved with conducting my preliminary research as a silent observer in online fetish chat sites, in order to familiarise myself with the queer leather Mummy community. The remainder of the chapter is concerned with the focus group and interviews I carried out in San Francisco—a comparison of what I had anticipated might happen in my fieldwork versus what actually happened, the benefits and ethical issues I faced as a researcher working within my own community, the ethics of researching a sexual subculture, and an outline of my interview and participant observation methods—and concludes with an explanation of my process of data analysis.

Femme, feminist and queer methodology

I have approached the question of the queer leather Mummy from within a theoretical paradigm which incorporates both a feminist belief that gender is patriarchally policed, and a queer conceptualisation of gender as being fluid, performed, and therefore constructed. These two epistemologies are at times at odds with each other, contradicting and challenging each other's truths, and at others they overlap or are concurrent. While feminist theory largely remains within a structuralist paradigm, challenging normative power structures by advocating for (or even enforcing) an opposing structure (that is, replacing one set of "essences" with another), queer theory turns essentialism on its head by virtue of the contention that gender and sexuality cannot be defined by a set of fixed attributes.

Working first and foremost within a feminist framework my research questions have focused on investigating feminist theories of the maternal, looking at where feminist maternal theory is able to account for the maternal as expressed in Mummy play, and where it falls short. Working within a feminist paradigm I ask: how does the leather Mummy add to a reconceptualising of, or even possibly a deconstructing of, the maternal? How does the maternal operate outside of essentialist expectations of gender? And how does the leather Mummy respond to the idea that the "ideal" mother is asexual and passive, and what does the community's discomfort with the leather Mummy tell us about the values we place on mothers?

In contemporary feminist scholarship there is currently a strong emphasis on maternal activism. A small but significant amount of work is being produced which focuses on revaluing the role of the nurturer, which in turn considers the possibility of reclaiming the maternal as a site of pleasure (see for example Bartlett 2005; Young 2005). As is discussed in Chapter Two—Maternal Subjectivities, maternal feminist ideology positions the leather Mummy alongside other expressions of the childless maternal—a maternal which exists in the absence of a child and which consequently challenges the idea that a maternal body must be "female". Feminism questions the propensity to ascribe maternal attributes to feminine behaviours, arguing that the maternal is not an innate instinct but rather is socially constructed. By acknowledging the possibility of a childless

maternal, feminism begins to ask the question of whether the maternal can be embodied by women who are infertile, women who have adopted or fostered a child, and women who have lost a child either through custody arrangements or through death. The emphasis on this last point is rooted in an insistence that a claim on the maternal should not be denied to those who are typically deemed “unsuitable” mothers—those who are homeless, incarcerated or drug-addicted; those who are queer or trans*; those who are promiscuous or overtly sexual; those who do not subscribe to the gentle, virtuous image of an “ideal” mother.

However, despite presenting a challenge to essentialism, social feminist ideology still relies on a concept of gender as being stable, and it is here that feminism becomes caught in its own essentialist trappings. Postmodern feminism, which moves beyond the polarities of liberal feminism and radical feminism, focuses on the philosophy of gender as opposed to the ethnography of women’s lived experiences and works with Judith Butler’s premise that not only gender but also the concept of sex is performed, parodied, and consequently fabricated (Munnzza 2012). However, social feminism, the branch of the discipline concerned with “erod[ing] that public/private boundary” (Black 26) and which addresses the very tangible politics of motherhood and the maternal which I have seen necessary to draw on extensively in my own work, regards gender as fixed and absolute. While it is arguably a political necessity to be able to define gender, and therefore gender-based oppression, based on an assumption of a male/female binary in order to highlight gender-based oppression, this in some ways contradicts its own assertion that gender-based essentialism is invalid.

In relation to the question of the leather Mummy, then, social feminism is flawed in that it does not account for gender fluidity. Social feminist theory falters on the subject of gender because it relies on the fixed categories of “woman”, “man”, and also of “mother”, which the leather Mummy works so hard to disrupt. Queer theory on the other hand asks if it is possible to step outside gender altogether (Rodriguez 286), and is instrumental in understanding the ways in which the leather Mummy likewise asks whether it is possible for the maternal to exist outside of itself. Queer theory is comfortable with the concept that gender is performed, or rather, that we are performed by gender (Butler 1999), and consequently is able to account for Mummy tops as queering the maternal, destabilising what we understand to be essential feminine attributes.

A queer methodology deals in a non-normative way with non-normative subjects (Browne and Nash 1):

Queer scholars can argue for the “playful” possibilities of unstable and indeterminate subjectivities and for transgressive practices that challenge heteronormative sexual and gender assumptions. (Browne and Nash 5)

For example, on the subject of how the leather Mummy fits into femme/butch narratives of desire, a queer methodology understands femme/butch as gender performativity. Therefore queer theory offers a gender-radical explanation of the position of the femme in regards to the leather Mummy, in relation to questions of both gender and empowerment. Queer theory also becomes essential when asking questions about the intersections of gender, BDSM, and performativity. Is the leather Mummy an authentic expression of the maternal or a parody, and what might this parody mean? Furthermore, how does the leather Mummy fit into the radical feminist debate over whether BDSM perpetuates or subverts patriarchal constructs of power?

Queer Methods and Methodologies is a pioneering text which engages in dialogue about what “queer” as a research method and methodology might actually look like (Browne and Nash 2010). The book consists of a collection of essays which serve to highlight the slipperiness of queer methodology, each author providing their own definition or interpretation of how this might look when enacted in the field. However, although the very sentiment of “queer” is unstable and insists on remaining loosely defined in order to provide for that which cannot be constricted or contained (Browne & Nash, 7–8), the various contributions to this text reiterate one central theme, summarised in the introductory chapter:

“Queer research” can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations [...] Queer scholars can argue for the “playful” possibilities of unstable and indeterminate subjectivities and for transgressive practices that challenge heteronormative sexual and gender assumptions. (4–5)

In its continual interrogation of gender and repositioning of the maternal, the question of the leather Mummy reiterates these sentiments, consequently demanding that it be situated within a queer methodology.

Of course, the concept of a queer methodology extends beyond the subject matter to the methods of research, and also the practice of writing up the findings. It is a disheartening irony that, as Judith Halberstam acknowledges in *Female Masculinities*, it

is technically impossible for a truly queer methodology to emerge from within the limiting constraints of the disciplines that we, as queer academics and ethnographers, are currently required to work within (9). Arguably, however, it is from inside these constraints that the queerest work can occur—queer methodology requires a commitment to flexibility and “a certain disloyalty to conventional disciplinary methods” (10) which Halberstam believes is both important to aspire to, and also, at times, achievable.

This “disloyalty” refers to using unconventional approaches to research, borrowing methods from other disciplines, and combining and adapting these new methods to research subjects who have previously been either overlooked or actively silenced in traditional ethnographic studies (Halberstam 13). By using an intuitive approach with my own research, to some extent my eclectic research plan (which is discussed in detail further on in this chapter) has adhered to this loose description of queer methodology, a methodology which reads more as a challenge than as a prescriptive definition.

In illustration of this idea of a “queer methodology”, Ulrika Dahl intersects both queer and feminist methods by using a collaborative ethnography, thereby questioning the need for a divide between researcher and participants (“Femme on Femme” 144-5) and approaching participants as “co-researchers” (“Femme on Femme” 164). Feminist methods of inquiry reject quantitative in favour of qualitative research, (Hammersley 187) valuing personal or lived experience and viewing the subject as the expert on their own lives (Hammersley 188). Similarly, Dahl argues for a “femme-on-femme” methodology (a term originating from her book *Femmes of Power*, which was written using research done *by* femmes about themselves). Her point is that as queer researchers we need to accept that we are our own subjects, and that it is impossible (and possibly undesirable) to be able to step outside and gain an objective position (“Femme on Femme” 165).

Dahl describes queer methodologies as being involved not only with *researching* communities but also with helping to *create* community:

It is about seeing research as part of, not outside of, social movements, and seeing the research process itself as something that works towards the formulation of community in its (researchers’) execution. (“Femme on Femme” 165)

Expanding on this point, she makes a case for non-traditional sources of knowledge, such as conversations held in “closets and kitchens as well as in clubs and gutters, in internet communities and emails as well as in conference settings and panels” (“Femme on Femme” 165), to be accepted as a femme-on-femme method of research, her point being that communities create their own knowledge in non-linear, informal ways.

Methods

Online ethnography

When I first began this thesis, the leather Mummy was not someone I was familiar with. Therefore my research began with the simple question: who and what is she? I knew that in order to answer this question and to untangle the resulting complications arising from this knowledge, I needed to see the Mummy community first-hand, to observe the kink in action, and to meet these players and ask them about their lives. But I knew nothing about these Mummies—how they referred to themselves, the language they used to talk about their lifestyles, their play, and their desires, where they played, or who they played with.

Before officially approaching the leather Mummy community I realised it was important to conduct some preliminary research (Schensul, Schensul, and leCompte 69–87). Learning the research subject's cultural practices or rules, social norms and ways of speaking and communicating assists in being more easily accepted into the community. As Weiss, who conducted a large-scale study of the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community notes, "In BDSM, terminology matters. The community recognizes itself—its practices, its desires—in and through a shared, yet contested language" (Weiss vii). It was important that I learn the relevant "language", or lingo, "the rules guiding social relationships; and the cultural patterns, expectations, and meanings" (Schensul, Schensul, and leCompte 70) shared by those who identified as queer leather Mummies.

Schensul, Schensul, and leCompte suggest it is best to first observe from a distance, as an observer, before engaging as a *participant* observer, in order to get a feel for which particular areas or issues are of most importance. They also emphasise that this is most effective if it can be done unnoticed, such as watching mothers and their children in a park or observing people in a shopping centre (87). The best available location where I could observe the community undetected was on internet fetish sites.

Online observation allowed me to familiarise myself with the appropriate language and etiquette of the Mummy community, which in turn aided my future attempts to be accepted by, and assimilated within, queer leather Mummy circles. This technique, often called lurking, could be done silently without disrupting or altering the behaviour of the online community. There are, of course, ethical questions surrounding online

lurking. Should the internet researcher announce their presence, or is it acceptable to remain covert? Even the very word “lurking” suggests something unpleasant or even creepy—online lurkers have been described “as freeloaders who leech the energy of online communities without offering anything in return (Kollock and Smith 1996)” (Crawford 527).

In defence, Kate Crawford stresses the importance of the often-overlooked role of the silent online presence. She draws attention to those members of online communities who act as silent observers; while the concept is different to the lurking researcher, Crawford argues that a silent online presence can be a valid and ethical way of “listening”. Research to date has privileged “having a voice online” (Crawford 525), yet Crawford asserts that the lurker also plays an important role in net-based community dynamics: “As a metaphor, listening is useful; it captures some of the characteristics of the ongoing processes of receptivity that mark much online engagement” (525).

Interestingly, lurkers have always constituted the majority of individuals in most online spaces; some researchers claim that over 90% of an online community will only practise light public activity, if any (Crawford 527). If most of the members of the online community are themselves lurking, if the forum or chat room is not explicitly private, and so long as they do not use any written statements without explicit consent, then perhaps the researcher too can observe the community in question without causing harm.

During the first phase of my fieldwork I acted as a silent observer on Fetlife, the only international fetish website I could find which had a forum dedicated to queer leather Mummies. The internet has in recent times made it possible for small, sparse, and relatively invisible communities to be linked and connected, despite their members being dispersed right across the world (Bird and Barber 141). It is widely agreed in anthropological and social research circles that the internet has been instrumental in enabling the forming of small sexual subcultures (Quinn and Forsyth 2005; Mills 1998). This is particularly true for members of the BDSM community, as RDK Herman points out in his exploration of the spaces BDSM inhabits: “It is here, as much as at the events themselves, that the forging of community identity can take place” (98).

I was aware that the ethics involved with online ethnography would be significantly different to those relating to research conducted face-to-face, and I was careful to

consider questions of assumed or expected privacy on public forums and websites. The Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) ethical guidelines state that if the site has specific private chat room spaces it can be assumed that anything a user particularly wants to be kept private will be said there, instead of in the public forums (<http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>). I was careful to only use the more public forums and discussion boards on Fetlife, and I did not monitor any private chat rooms. The AoIR ethical guidelines also state that "the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, [and the] right to informed consent" (5). Fetlife's privacy policy requires anyone intending to conduct research on the site to first contact the moderators to seek permission, which I accordingly complied with.

Participant observation

There are also many parallels to draw between Crawford's defence of internet lurkers and the role of voyeurs at BDSM play parties and sex parties. While, as Newmahr offers, "SM participants are not playing *to* the audience [...] [rather, they] seek instead to affect *each other* in the presence of onlookers" (2010, 395), the voyeur's presence is still often essential to the energy of the party. Public scenes often require the presence of non-participatory voyeurs, whether it be to enhance the impact of, for example, humiliation play, or simply to provide an audience and satisfy an exhibitionist fantasy.

In my role as a participant observer at the play parties I attended, I often felt that I assumed the role of both voyeur and lurker, a position that at times made me feel uncomfortable. However if I take up Crawford's argument, this strategy loses some of its negative connotations. While Crawford is more concerned with the role of the listener in relation to online engagement, there are aspects of her debate which were useful for my own methodological practice—if lurking is an act of active listening, an "ongoing process of reciprocity" (525), then the researcher "listening in", be it online or observing a scene at a play party, can also be seen as engaging with that community.

As with online ethnography, conducting participant observation always requires careful ethical consideration. However, when the participant observer is involved with a sexual subculture this also carries with it an additional set of unique ethical factors. Group spaces which have been set up specifically for BDSM or sexual play usually have their own code of conduct that participants must adhere to, and their own rules of

etiquette regarding safety and appropriate attire. Consequently, in my own participant observation at play parties I was bound by the venue's "Safer Spaces" rules of play¹⁴ as well as by my own feminist ethnographic ethics.

I believe that the purpose of participant observation is to experience the event in much the same way as members of the community would experience it, attempting to assimilate as best as possible so as to not feel like an outsider. This was not a challenge—I was already very familiar with the protocol of these spaces from having both participated in, and at times even helped to organise similar spaces myself over the past ten years. I was therefore aware that it was of the utmost importance to dress in a way appropriate for the event, and always made a point of wearing space-appropriate clothing. Attending a fetish event wearing street clothes is not only disrespectful (many events, such as Hellfire, a regular kink dance party in Sydney, specifically refuse to admit anyone wearing street clothes),¹⁵ but is also likely to raise suspicion, and immediately identifies that person as an outsider or as a "sexual tourist" who has come to gawk.

I also always participated first and foremost as a player myself. Sociologist and ethnographer Robert Burgess identifies several different levels of participant observation, from the complete participant role through to the complete observer. These different approaches are fairly self-explanatory—the complete participant integrates themselves fully into the community in question whereas the complete observer remains external to the group (Burgess 80–82). In the interests of narrowing the gap between me as the researcher and my research subjects, I chose the former. This was in direct contrast to queer ethnographer Corrie Hammers, who, in her investigation of lesbian/queer bathhouse culture in Canada went out of her way to avoid being mistaken for a patron of the bathhouse. Hammers agrees that certain spaces call for certain behaviours (309), however in her attempts to ensure her process was also safe and ethical, when she conducted her participant observation at the sex-

¹⁴ These "rules" are usually concerned with providing a safe space for all attendees, and include instructions regarding "informed consent; propriety, privacy, and secrecy [...] audio [and] video taping" (Weiss 91–2). For example see Hellfire's play rules policy: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-sydney-hellfire-club/club-policy/70776652315>

¹⁵ Hellfire's current policy is "No Effort, No Entry"—basic black is not enough, and the patrons must put some effort into dressing appropriately for the night (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/the-sydneyhellfire-club/dress-code-department-were-tightening-up/415315962315>)

on-premises venues she remained fully clothed to maintain an air of seriousness and to “ward off awkward situations with interviewees and bathhouse patrons” (316) (or in other words, to prevent people from hitting on her). In effect this attitude eliminated the possibility for any actual “participation” to occur during her participant observation, and as Hammers herself admits, dressing in this way also most likely affected how people participated in the space, as well as how she herself experienced the space (317).

Deciding to further differentiate herself from her participants, Hammers also carried a dictaphone with her so that she could interview people at the venue, although she tried to take notes only when doing so would be inconspicuous, elaborating on them after the event (316). She explained that she was conducting observational research to anyone who asked, as well as divulging this information “in conversations with others where revealing [her] researcher identity was appropriate (such as those few occasions where [she] felt that individuals might be coming onto [her])” (315). I opted for a more covert style of participant observation, and because I placed my emphasis on the “participation” part of my observation, I did not feel the need for the same level of declaration as Hammers did. In my participant observations, whether they were at queer social events, MUNCHes,¹⁶ play parties, poetry events, or simply through my volunteering at the San Francisco Centre for Sex and Culture, I always took notes after the event in order to avoid appearing inconspicuous, and also to avoid disrupting events or making people uncomfortable. Admittedly, the drawback was that I was not writing my thoughts down immediately, and some ideas and observations were probably forgotten; however, I felt the benefits of going incognito far outweighed this.

I was also cheerfully receptive to being hit on. In Joseph Styles’ research into gay bath houses he admitted that his initial attempts to research the scene as an impartial observer failed. However, once he began to participate himself, cruising the bath houses and engaging in sexual interactions with the other men, an understanding of the interplay of sexuality and space became possible (139–43). My research model deliberately made room for as much participation as possible, to the extent that, as mentioned earlier, I have included my own experiences of Mummy play in my findings.

¹⁶ A MUNCH is a monthly social meet-up for people who share a similar kink. Usually they take place in public spaces such as cafes or restaurants, and those attending do so in non-fetish street clothes. There is also usually no play involved—it is purely a social event.

Inside information

Being a member of the community I was researching was useful not only in being accepted as a peer, but also in the quality of information I was able to gather. Ralph Bolton, who conducted research on the gay male community's response to the AIDS pandemic in Brussels, points to the importance of "knowing" the sexual scene as an insider. By integrating himself into the gay male casual sex community Bolton was privy to a plethora of information that he would otherwise have not had access to. His research included interviews with key organisations and other researchers and a survey of gay literature and media; however, as he argues, the most useful and insightful information and observations were achieved through merely hanging out "in gay venues, observing and engaging the men who frequented these places in conversation about their lives" (147).

Queer ethnographers Peter Hennen and Wim Lunsing also chose the complete integration approach, positioning themselves within their respective research communities. Hennen's focus was on the Radical Faeries,¹⁷ a group of mostly queer men who reject traditional notions of masculinity and who from time to time congregate at a rural property called "Faerieland", a space which rejects traditional understandings of masculinity and welcomes gender fluidity, the queering of gender norms, and an exploration of femininity (500). Hennen felt a personal affinity with this community and consequently was able to engage on a personal as well as professional level. Hennen donned a dress and assumed a "faerie name" while staying at Faerieland, and much of his knowledge was gained through the osmosis of participant observation (501–2), which he asserts enabled him to conduct his research in as authentic a manner as possible.

Lunsing's research was concerned with investigating the gay and lesbian scene in Japan. Being a gay man himself, he took steps to integrate himself into the community, altering the way he dressed in an attempt to conform to the stereotypical "attractive"

¹⁷ The Radical Faeries have communities in rural settings in the USA and Australia, as well as other parts of the world. These communities often have some people living there permanently, while others come and go, visiting for weekends or holidays and using the space as a sort of gender-free retreat from the outside world.

gay male aesthetic. Consequently he had many Japanese lovers during his time in the field. He felt that this gave him the opportunity to experience gay life in Japan in as realistic a way as possible, exposing him to experiences which he would not have either known about or understood if he had not participated in the culture so completely.

An important method I used in interviewing was to tell of my experiences. After that, informants usually became eager to tell me theirs. Having experienced harassment myself, I could empathize with my informants, understand how they reacted toward it, and in some cases help them voice experiences they had never before discussed. (181–182)

Lunsing used his membership with the gay male community as a method for connecting emotionally with his participants and creating a space where they felt comfortable enough to open up to him, a strategy I was also able to use in my fieldwork.

I lived in San Francisco for seven months while I was conducting my fieldwork, during which time I familiarised myself with the San Francisco queer, women and trans* Mummy community through social events, introductions by mutual friends, and by accessing community spaces which were specific to the BDSM community. I attended queer band nights, dance parties, performance poetry nights and dinner parties, women and trans* sex parties, women and trans* play parties, sex industry mothers' groups, queer kinky art exhibitions, sex work art installations, queer conferences, BDSM community discussion panels, kink education workshops, queer film nights, Pride marches, kinky queer performance nights, gay bars, sex worker writing circles, and kink writing circles.¹⁸ These were the same events that my friends and lovers frequented and that I would have been attending myself, regardless of whether or not I had research to carry out. Therefore my presence at these events was always two-fold, my motivation being driven by both my research needs and by the desire to socialise and participate in my community.

¹⁸ By attending a variety of different events I was able to observe leather Mummies in several different scenarios. For example at the Citadel play parties the Mummies attended in fetish-wear and were generally in a more serious headspace, were less social and more focused on maintaining the D/s dynamic between themselves and their submissives. At social events such as dinner parties and art exhibitions, the Mummies were in a social as opposed to a play head-space, were often present without their submissives, and were more approachable and had more time for and interest in chatting casually with me. Both circumstances had their ethnographic benefits.

Because I was researching my own community I was already familiar with and comfortable in these types of events and spaces, and my sense of belonging made recruiting participants much easier than if I had been an outsider. Sean Slavin, who conducted research on gay male rave culture, talks about how his insider knowledge of the scene helped him to “fit in” or move through the field in the company of research participants without getting in the way or attracting too much attention (271). Additionally, I was further assisted by the way that I look. As Dahl acknowledges in her discussion of community in *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, the queer aesthetic is recognisable in countries across the western world, and also in some non-western cities (“Femme on Femme” 153). The way queers cut (and colour) their hair, the kind of clothes and accessories they wear and the badges and patches they sew on to their bags and jackets all serve to create a queer visual signifier. Looking the part not only awarded me easy access to the Mummy community but also, I would argue, diminished the divide between researcher and participant. I was received not as an outsider but as a friend, a contemporary, a fellow kinky queer.

Horsley and Dyson note the benefits of being from the same subculture as that of one’s research participants:

Feminist theory suggests that being an insider to an experience positions the researcher in ways that make it possible to understand what others in a similar position have to say, and in ways far less accessible to outsiders (67).

Furthermore, being an insider meant that I came with references—I already knew several queers from Sydney who had spent time in San Francisco, and through these connections I made friends with one or two key contacts who then introduced me to the wider group. This snowball effect meant that I was not “cold-calling”, and the levels of trust were higher than if I had been a complete stranger to the group. Without a doubt these connections enabled me to access a superior standard of intimate knowledge.

Auto-ethnography

At a gig one night I am introduced to Mistress Elizabeth, who I am told is a Mummy. She is incredibly sexy. Older, commanding, merlot-coloured lipstick and a dark honey glow to her skin. During the gig I crawl over to her in the dark and kneel at her feet as I ask for her phone number. To interview her, of course. I am beginning to understand why my supervisor made me do so much reading about having sex on the field. Traditional ethnographic ethics impressed the importance of maintaining a professional distance between yourself and your research subjects. But what to do with the information that you gather when you've taken off your researcher's sensible cap and slipped on a collar instead?

Around the time that I arrived in San Francisco I also started to experiment with topping as a Mummy in my own personal play. When I began my research project I had no Mummy play experience, nor did I think I had any desire to do so in the future. However, as is often the case in these situations, I soon proved myself wrong. Staci Newmahr, who conducted extensive and intensive research of a North American BDSM community and who became a serious player herself in the process, describes the study of BDSM, which is grounded so deeply in experiences of the corporeal body, as requiring “intellectual and theoretical attention to the body as epistemology” (15). On reflection I believe it would have been very difficult to write this thesis without having had some first-hand experience of the subject.

My dabbling in Mummy play, as elementary as it was, helped shape my understanding of the leather Mummy on a more personal, intimate level, and by becoming a (novice) member of the community I was observing, I was also able to some extent to transgress the division between ethnographer and subject (Newmahr 15). When I first began my research I admitted to being aware of a distance between me and the Mummy community. I was intellectually intrigued, but I was also emotionally withdrawn from the topic—I did not find leather Mummies sexy and I secretly found it difficult to relate to her erotics. The moment, two months into my fieldwork, when I first demanded that a new lover call me Mommie as I spanked her, my unease with the topic ceased to exist.

I began to take extensive field-notes on my own experiences, which some ethnographers would call auto-ethnography, “connect[ing] the personal to the cultural” (Gobo 62), but which others, in particular Newmahr, would argue is merely reflexive writing, requiring that the “self” be treated as the focus of the work (16). In Del Lagrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl’s aforementioned joint project *Femmes of Power*, which presents a snapshot of the European and American queer femme communities, Dahl, who freely admits she identifies as a member of the queer femme community herself, indicates that she acts simultaneously as “both object and subject” (“Femmes of Power” 20) of her own research. In *Queer Methods and Methodologies* she further elaborates, putting forward the case for this blending of positionalities to be recognised as a queer methodology (“Femme on Femme” 154).

Anthropologist Charlotte Davies’ work on reflexive ethnography looks closely at the complexities of writing from a combined subjective and objective perspective. Davies cites several ethnographers who lived intensively amongst their research subjects and who to various degrees used these personal experiences as their field-notes. The power of autobiography, she writes, is in “[c]oming to understand another culture through embodied experience” (180). She describes the experience of concurrently inhabiting the site of both researcher and subject (181) and notes the problems associated with this dual positioning, namely the impossibility of being both outside and inside simultaneously, of not having true free association with a community (181-2). Unfortunately, as Davies acknowledges, the very nature of the researcher’s hat is that it automatically identifies the one who wears it as an outsider. Furthermore, Davies is careful to point out that being a member of the community in question does not necessarily grant the researcher full accurate access (182-3).

Newmahr further acknowledges this concern: “I began participating in SM play within a few months of beginning my fieldwork, but there were significant ways in which I remained an outsider in this community” (622). However, she takes pains to point out that, had she not engaged in BDSM play herself, there would have been many significant levels of knowledge and understanding that she would never have had access to. In response to her first public flogging she writes:

My analysis of this scene—of the interaction, of my own internal and external responses, of the notes I wrote—yielded insights that paved the way for an understanding of SM that extended well beyond my own introspection. [...] I

had moved from observer to participant, and for the first time I was fully convinced that I would not be able to understand SM without doing SM. (623-4)

While Newmahr fully immersed herself in the local BDSM community, my exposure was more intermittent, and therefore my field-notes relating to my own personal experiences of Mummy roles play somewhat less of a central role in my thesis. However this blurring of the distinction between subject and object (McLean, 272) and the emotional insight into the leather Mummy which I gained by engaging in play myself was something I could not have ever fully understood through the second-hand experience of interviews and external observation.

The descriptive writing which emerged from my own forays into Mummy play became an integral part of my research. As a feminist scholar I believe in the empirical knowledge of the body—lived experiences carry as much, if not more weight than quantifiable facts. Through my own writing I was able to delve deeper into questions of desire and to explore the relationship between gender, the maternal, and kink. However I was initially uncomfortable with including these experiences in my formal research findings, and it was only during my third rewrite of this chapter that I realised it was valid and important data.

Taboo: Sex [...] in Anthropological Fieldwork (Kulick and Willson) and *Sex, Sexuality, and the Anthropologist* (Markowitz and Ashkenazi) are two anthologies which bravely suggest that there is valuable knowledge to be gained from both admitting your own sexual subjectivities and from recognising the value of the knowledge gained while actively engaging with your research subjects, not as an impartial outsider, but as a sexual being yourself. As anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood asks, in her recounting of a relationship she had with a woman from a neighbouring village while conducting ethnography in Indonesia:

If the denial of our subjectivity enables exoticizing in anthropology, how does recognition of our subjectivity, our agency in relationships in the field, counter that practice? In particular, how does the subjective experience of sexuality in the field challenge the distance between “us” and “them”? (51-52).

Blackwood suggests that recognising our sexual subjectivity in the field might present a valuable opportunity to lessen the distance between ethnographer and research subject.

Time and time again I found it useful in my own research to relate to my participants as a fellow Mummy, as a fellow queer, and as a fellow kinkster. Relating to my participants as equals created a sense of intimacy which made it possible to connect on a more authentic level, encouraging honesty and fostering trust as well as a sense of femme solidarity, mutual understanding, and shared experience. In my day-to-day social life I met and became friends with several queer Mummies and I briefly dated a Mummy who also played as a Mummy in her work as a pro-dom. None of these informal interactions were directly referenced in my research notes or my findings—to do so without consent would have been to contravene my principles of feminist methodology¹⁹. However these interactions assisted me in a similar way to my preliminary research, familiarising me with the San Francisco BDSM community, the appropriate language to use when discussing leather Mummies, and of course, by providing me with a list of potential interview participants. Furthermore they provided me with an intimate understanding of the leather Mummy from all three perspectives—as observer, as Mummy, and as Mummy’s little girl. It must also be acknowledged, however, that this familiarity with the queer kink scene and my own participation in the leather Mummy community at times may have affected my interpretation of the results and encouraged me to focus on some areas more than others, in direct relation to my own personal interests and biases. This subjectivity must be taken into account in the following thesis.

¹⁹ Informed consent, minimal risk of harm to participants, including loss of privacy, and genuine knowledge of the aims of the research, are all key factors to consider when designing an ethical methodology (Flick 46, Ferdinand et al. 519).

San Francisco

Familiarising myself with the local community

During my preliminary Fetlife monitoring I observed one particular member who posted more regularly than the others and who had been responsible for organising two San Francisco leather Mummy discussion panels. I contacted him privately and we had an initial meeting when he was in Australia for Mardi Gras, and stayed in touch leading up to my move to San Francisco. He became a key informant in my fieldwork, introducing me to potential interview participants, inviting me to appropriate events and happily answering my early questions about the San Francisco community. As he had organised discussion panels he also had a good sense of how leather Mummies were generally received by the wider kink community, and gave me numerous insights into and anecdotes about Mummy tops, all of which became useful when formulating my interview questions.

I lived in San Francisco from July 2011 to January 2012, during which time I attended many of the local queer women and trans*-specific events, including sex parties and play parties at both private venues and public dungeon spaces, various sex-education workshops at the Centre for Sex and Culture, Folsom Leather Pride, and Dorey Alley. [See Appendix A for the complete list of ethnographic sites, as well as a detailed description of key locations.] I conducted participant observation at four play parties, one Littles MUNCH²⁰ and at several informal social events. These events provided invaluable connections with, and access to, the queer Mummy community.

Feminist research principles suggest that community-based services and organisations can provide an ethically responsible method of meeting and engaging with potential

²⁰ The Littles MUNCH I attended was for adults who enjoy engaging in age-play—that is, role-playing as children. This particular MUNCH involved more play than usual, most MUNCHes being strictly social gatherings. It was held in a private space and there were “child-oriented” activities set up all around the room (for example colouring-in rugs, story corners, and games areas) so that the attendees could spend an hour or two playing. All of the people who attended did so in role as either a “little” person or as a “big person” (the “big” people being me and the organiser, who between us took charge of the play spaces). Some attendees also wore adult-sized onesies or outfits which mimicked children’s clothing, such as dinosaur shirts, shorts with braces, frilly dresses, and bow-shaped hair clips.

participants by allowing the researcher to get to know the subjects on a social level, thereby bridging the gap between researcher and subject. Furthermore feminist methods require that the researcher gives back to the community, making the research a two-way street, with benefits for the subjects as well as the researcher (Hammersley 189). Community services can provide a space where the researcher is able to volunteer, and consequently make a contribution to the community (Tierney, 2007:17). For the seven months I lived in San Francisco I was a regular volunteer at the Centre for Sex and Culture (CSC), a community space coordinated by Carol Queen and Robert Lawrence which also houses an archive of sexuality resources. In addition to providing me with the opportunity to mix with people who were active in the kink community, through the CSC I also attended several kink-focused academic presentations, sex education workshops and art exhibitions, as well as a monthly erotic writing circle and a sex workers' writing circle where I was able to receive feedback on my novel, the creative practice element of this thesis.

The focus group and the interviews

My participant observations generated rich ethnographic notes based on my own descriptions of and reactions to what I observed, but while this method of research was effective in familiarising me with the Mummy scene and with the San Francisco leather community, I needed to go deeper than the superficialities of what a leather Mummy looked like. How did she personally relate to the maternal, and how could she challenge gender essentialism? What was her experience of being out in the leather community, and what did this mean for the subversive potential of kink? I needed to hear from the players themselves, to learn how their desires were formed and enacted and to discover what being "Mummy" meant to them.

The Centre for Sex and Culture (hereafter referred to as "the Centre") had an active email list which I used to advertise for interview participants, and while I did not in the end recruit anyone directly from the Centre, it served as my official base, helped to promote my project, and was a useful reference point when introducing myself to potential new participants. In my casual discussions with people at the Centre I was also able to test and question my research methodology and hypotheses with fellow kinksters. As a result of my social involvement in the San Francisco queer community, over time people also grew to know me either in person or by association, which increased a sense of trust between me

and my research participants and consequently made the interviewing recruitment process much smoother than if I had been an outsider (Slavin 269). However, on the flip-side, because I had either dated or now knew a few of these people socially, this familiarity was a factor I had to take into consideration during the interviewing process. I worked hard to ensure that the interviews remained professional but on reflection it is possible that at times, this may have slightly stunted the outcome.

I had originally planned for the bulk of my fieldwork to be focused on conducting one-on-one interviews, however during my time in San Francisco I attended San Francisco State University's Sexuality Institute Summer School program²¹ where I was given feedback on my research questions from locally based academics, and where I revised my methodology under the supervision of several experienced ethnographers. My original research plan was to conduct from six to eight private interviews, however during this revision period I was advised to alter this to one large focus group (or group interview), and several one-on-one interviews.

It was important for me, as a feminist researcher, to make sure that my participants didn't feel like they were being "othered" or put under the microscope like some exotic specimen. Instead, I wanted to create an environment where the participants felt empowered, and where the leather Mummies had the opportunity to present a collective voice. Feminist ethnographer Esther Madriz asserts that using focus groups in anthropological research gives women of colour more agency than one-on-one interviews. While Madriz is working specifically from a position of race this framework is also applicable to the femme leather Mummy, the intersection of femmes and women of colour being that they are both marginalised groups who are frequently denied a voice in the broader community. Madriz works from a set of feminist research principles which insist on the importance of providing a safe space where the participants are able to "share ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in the company of people from the same [...] backgrounds" (835), and where the knowledge gained

²¹ The San Francisco State University's Sexuality Institute Summer School ran for a month and provided me with several useful contacts within both the queer kink community and the queer/ sexuality studies academic community. The post-graduate program included extensive one-on-one consultation about our research projects with experienced sexual ethnographers: <http://cregs.sfsu.edu/our-projects/summer-institute-on-sexuality/>

from observing social interactions and “the communal and collectivist nature of women’s lives” (836) is valued. As Madriz notes it is difficult to reach this level of frankness in one-on-one interviews, which are usually structured around a one-way “question-answer” dialogue and which often feel intimidating, causing the participants to behave in a more restrained or formal manner (835).

Madriz says that women of colour “have historically used conversation with other women as a way to deal with their shared oppression” (839), in effect reframing “gossip” as valuable cultural knowledge (842). This approach was also relevant in the leather Mummy community, where I observed that most of the most pertinent discussions (about issues such as femme-phobia and butch domination of the kink scene) took place at social events, in informal conversations between friends. It was these casual conversations that I wanted to record—the irreverent, unrestrained dialogue which emerges from the comradeship of shared experience.

Similar to Weiss, who used focus groups to research the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community, I wanted to get a feel for the “community as a whole, its internal debates, tensions, practices, pressures, and shared knowledges” (Weiss 25). While the leather Mummies were not an analogous group (on the contrary, each participant had their own personal opinions and experiences which often differed from the group’s), their shared knowledge was more important to me than individual stories. Focus groups are “well-suited for identifying cultural norms; understanding people’s perceptions of a given topic [...] [and] stimulating debate about controversial issues” (Bryant 118), the process of discussion allowing the researcher to observe the reasoning behind these different viewpoints, regardless of whether or not the group reaches consensus (Bryant 116). I wanted to create a think-tank environment where ideas could percolate and be debated and where people’s stories could be shared, validated, and built on.

Of equal importance was the desire to hand the microphone over to the Mummies and step back into the shadows. In keeping with feminist research principles which privilege “the participants’ hierarchies of importance” (Madriz 840) over the researcher’s, the focus group “decreases the amount of interaction between the facilitator and the individual members of the group [...] [thereby] decreasing the influence the researcher has over the

interview process” (Madriz 836–7). The group decides the direction of the discussion and the pace at which it moves, and is able to self-facilitate by asking questions of each other, pointing out contradictions in each other’s arguments, pushing each other to clarify points, and debating amongst themselves (Madriz 841).

In the interests of removing myself as much as possible from the discussion I used a freeform structure for both the group and the interviews. Other than occasionally asking for clarification or, even more infrequently, referring to a handful of pre-prepared prompt questions to get conversation back on track, I rarely spoke. The discussion was largely self-driven by the participants, who took up topics of interest and discarded those which were not, deciding for themselves what was important. This structure prevented me from pushing my own agenda and enabled the discussion to move beyond the questions I had pre-prepared (Madriz 838; Weiss 27). One example where this proved to be particularly fruitful was on the topic of femme, which I had not anticipated would generate so much passionate discussion. However femme ended up being one of the focal points of my final argument, and greatly influenced the final direction of my thesis. (For a detailed list of the questions I asked see Appendix B.)

A group interview poses the potential ethical issue of being unable to provide anonymity to its participants (Bryant 117), however in my situation all of the Mummies were either social acquaintances or friends, and were comfortable meeting as a group. These women knew each other from various play parties and queer social events, had socialised together, talked on Mummy panels together, and organised queer and/or BDSM events together. Similar to Dahl’s femme participants in *Femmes of Power*, the majority of my research subjects were already activists, performers, educators and community organisers in their personal lives (158). All of my participants were vocal advocates of Mummy play and many had acted as spokespeople for the leather Mummy community over the years. They were therefore both familiar and at ease with discussing the topic on an analytical level, and I imagine that most of them had probably already considered most of the questions I raised in my interviews. In many ways, therefore, I feel somewhat of a fraud to be putting my name to this thesis. The women I interviewed are the true experts on the subject of the queer leather Mummy, and I am deeply grateful that they saw fit to share with me the wealth of knowledge and analysis collectively held by this articulate and reflective group of minds. While this thesis

was not constructed as a collaborative project (dissimilar in this respect to Dahl and Volcano's), I am committed to a queer methodology which involves disregarding the traditional standpoint of participant as subject and researcher as authority (Dahl, "Femme on Femme" 145). While writing this thesis I have been uncomfortable speaking both about and on behalf of the Mummy community, and despite my involvement in the queer kink community and my own experimentation with Mummy play I have been painfully aware of my position as an outsider to the group. My ethnographic decisions have played an integral role in honouring this queer methodology, and thus conducting a focus group was a political decision in itself.

Fostering community space through focus groups is not only a useful research method but is also a form of social activism. Madriz makes a case for focus groups as being congruent with feminist social justice frameworks in the way that they "expose and validate women's everyday experiences of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies" (836). She contends that a collective voice serves to validate and empower the individual:

The interaction occurring within the group accentuates empathy and commonality of experiences and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation [...] and it allows them to build on each other's opinions and thoughts (Oakley, 1981). (842).

Furthermore, Madriz believes that through this process of communal "consciousness-raising", social change is able to occur (839).

On the night of the group interview, in my living room filled with perfume, red lipstick, husky voices and heaving breasts, I was witness to the capacity of a focus group to foster social activism. The discussion went for over two hours. We made Vietnamese cold-rolls and drank red wine, we laughed and shared stories and lounged on couches and played with the cats, ate ice-cream and berries and took cigarette breaks. Other than the dictaphone sitting on the coffee table and my occasional reference to my list of questions, we were for all intents and purposes a group of friends sitting together for a bitch and a gossip and a chat about what makes us tick.

All of the women in the room that night interviewed identified as femme (there is a closer discussion of this in Chapter Two—Maternal Subjectivities) and there was a strong sense of

femme, as well as feminist, solidarity in the air. I was given the impression that this autonomous space had been much needed. Many of the topics of discussion (raised independently by the group, as opposed to by me) were focused around femme-phobia, the prevalence of butch in the queer community, and the devaluing of femme tops. There was pain as well as anger in these discussions, and I was left with the distinct impression that this time had been productive and affirming not only for me, but for all of the Mummies who had attended. In a society that objectifies femmes while simultaneously silencing the femme voice, using research methods which facilitate the femme to speak on her own behalf while at the same time generating discussion directed at helping participants to make sense of their own disempowerment is, I believe, an empowering process in itself (Madriz 843).

Madriz asserts that focus groups have been revealed to be “more gratifying and stimulating than individual interviews (Morgan, 1988; Wilkinson, 1998)” (835), and I was reminded of this when, at the end of the focus group, many of the participants thanked me for having given them the rare opportunity to come together and discuss Mummy play amongst themselves (as opposed to explaining it to a public audience, for example, when speaking on the Mummy panels).²² The positive feedback I received from the Mummies as they were leaving, and their willingness to talk to me again at a later date if needed, was testament to the fact that the night had been more than just a one-way process of data collection—the research process had also given something back in return.

²² One woman, who was responsible for organising the women and trans* play parties at the local dungeon, was so inspired that she said she wanted to start organising regular Mummy meet-ups and autonomous femme social events in the future.

Demographics, consent forms and other formalities

My group interview consisted of five women ranging in age from their mid-twenties to their mid-sixties. I conducted a follow-up interview with two of the focus group participants in order to look more closely at one or two points they had raised in the group, and conducted one-on-one interviews with two other Mummies who were unable to make it to the group. All interviewees identified as cis-gendered women. While it is recognised that trans* Mummies exist in the community, none came forward to be included in the research. The Mummies all lived in the San Francisco/Oakland bay area and they all identified as queer. There was also a diverse mix of backgrounds and life experience amongst the participants. As I was conducting qualitative research I did not have any racial, cultural, or age quotas, but the coincidental diversity that occurred in my sample provided some interesting variations. There were women with differently abled bodies, women from African-American and Latino backgrounds, women who worked or had worked as drag kings, in child care, with the Catholic Church, and as pro-doms. Some were full-time players, engaging in a BDSM Mummy relationship 24-7, and others only played part-time. However this incidental cross-section of the community is in no way being offered as a true sample of diversity, nor does mentioning it attempt to address in any way the deficit of a class- or race-based analysis of queer kink practices of desire.

In accordance with feminist research principles, after the interviewing had concluded I sent all of my participants the transcripts of their interviews in order to check that they were still comfortable with what they had said, and to ensure that no one felt they had been misrepresented or misquoted. I also provided my participants with a copy of this completed research paper, so that the research could be used by the community in any manner which they saw fit. I kept an open dialogue with my participants, inviting them to email me with any questions or concerns, and all participants were given a copy of the consent form, which clearly stated that if they so chose, they had the opportunity to withdraw at any point either during the interviewing or in retrospect.

I chose informal settings for all of my interviews in the hope that conversation would flow more naturally if my participants felt relaxed. I conducted the focus group and one of the interviews in my own home, providing food and drink and moving at a leisurely, conversational pace. The other interviews were held either at a reasonably private table in

a café of their choice, or in one case, in the participant's own home, which also doubled as her workplace (the apartment was equipped for the needs of a wide variety of BDSM clients— there was a dentist's chair in the bathroom, riding crops in the lounge, a system of ropes and pulleys and shackles on the ceiling in the bedroom, and a dungeon in her garage). I wanted to capture as closely as possible those conversations about Mummy play I had already been witness to in pubs, at play parties, and in cafes—I wanted typed transcripts of those heated debates about why there are so few Mummies in the leather scene, why Daddies are so revered, and why Mummy is often treated as something repulsive. But most importantly I wanted to capture the desire that drove these women—the essence of being Mummy, the pleasure they gained from it, what made them tick, and what made them wet. This is also why I conducted so much participant observation, why I wrote so many field-notes, and why I chose qualitative over quantitative research—desire cannot be expressed by ticking the boxes in a questionnaire.

Complications and adaptations to the research plan

I initially anticipated that I would conduct a significant amount of my preliminary research online, however I found that the queer leather Mummy forums were not very active sites, sometimes with months between postings. I consequently used far less of the online ethnographic research in my findings than I had expected. Nevertheless, the information I gathered in this first phase of research provided me with a good introduction to the leather Mummy scene and also assisted in forming contacts with potential research subjects, key informants, and to identify key social events at which to conduct participant observation.

My original research plan also accommodated a research blog, *mintgreenmommies*, which was to be used to both maintain open dialogue with the Mummy community and to disseminate my findings both during and at the end of the project. I had intended for this to be a highly active blog that would be updated on a frequent basis, generating online discussion between Mummies from across the globe and facilitating two-way discussions between myself as a researcher and my participants. The objective was to adhere to a feminist ethnographic framework by providing the opportunity for participants to voice their opinions and provide input and feedback on the direction of my work. I had also hoped that by showing myself to be authentic through maintaining the transparency of my

research-in-progress, I would be able to gain the trust of my participants. However I found that I was not confident putting my questions and reflections in print at such an early, embryonic stage, and so I soon abandoned the blog. It served as a useful initial reference point for potential participants who wanted to know more about me and my project, but other than that it remained inactive.

Similarly, in one respect my participant observation notes also turned out to be less fruitful than I had expected. I had assumed that I would encounter plenty of opportunities in which to observe a Mummy scene in action, however in reality this was not the case. Although a kink scene may occur in public it is still in essence an intimate, private space, difficult for the outsider to observe. For one, scenes involving Mummy play are by far the minority at kink events, and so when they did take place around me they were often difficult to recognise, unless of course I had prior knowledge that the top identified as a Mummy. For another, pre-existing power dynamics, the history between the two players, and precursive plans and negotiations all contribute to the dynamics of a scene but are invisible to the external observer. Consequently I often felt that I was only able to observe a very small part of what was actually occurring. As a result most of my participant observation ended up being focused not on literal observations of Mummy scenes but on what I would almost call informal interviews—casual conversations about Mummy play with leather Mummies I met at play parties, dinner parties, and other queer social events.

Regardless, these interactions still helped me to familiarise myself with who and what a Mummy is, and in some cases also provided me with rich ethnographic descriptions of my future interview participants. I was able to get a feel for these women—their energy, the way they fleshily embodied Mummy, the way they dressed and talked and moved and smelt. Through these observations Mummy became a visceral body as well as an academic concept. Furthermore, from talking informally to these women I was able to gauge a sense of which questions would lead to productive discussion in the interviews and which questions might lead to dead ends. While I did not entirely reframe my research to fit the community's needs and interests, as a feminist ethnographer I was open to testing out new directions arising in the course of the research, as opposed to adhering to a preconceived hypothesis (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 188–9; Hammers 314–15).

Making sense of my findings

My ethnographic fieldwork ended when I left San Francisco, USA, and returned to Sydney, Australia. I had over six hours of interviews to transcribe, a disorganised scramble of participant observation notes, and pages and pages of elaborate and painfully literary narrative accounts of the Mummy play scenes I had personally participated in. Somehow I had to untangle it all and find the thesis lurking somewhere within. The popular ethnographic procedure for data analysis involves a process of coding which is highly formalised, using scientifically rigorous categories and concept-mapping systems and sometimes even data analysis computer programmes (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss 1988). However I felt that a queer method of analysis, favouring a more intuitive and less formal style of data analysis, would be more appropriate to the scale of qualitative research I had conducted.

My data analysis methods were loosely based in grounded theory, which supports “emerging analyses. Data collection and analyses proceed simultaneously and each informs and streamlines the other” (Byrant and Charmaz 1). As opposed to separately categorising every sentence of my notes, I instead looked for the overall themes emerging from my field-notes, and from there mapped out any perceptible patterns or interconnecting relationships, pinpointing where the various key concepts converged with and diverted from each other. This helped me to observe the interplay of ideas within and across subcategories, and provided an overall picture of the emergent core thread of debate (Madison 36–7 & 183–5; Davies 195–203; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 188–8). I then began a process of systematically sorting and categorising my notes into subcategories, most of which fit somehow into either the overarching subject of “the maternal” or “queer desire and identity”. On closer analysis I found that those findings which did not relate to either topic were not relevant to my research questions, and were consequently set aside.

While remaining loyal to a feminist methodology by endeavouring to avoid analysing my data from the position of any preconceived hypothesis, from these emergent themes I was able to assess which of my “hunches” had been accurate, and which had been off the mark. At times the relationship between the two major themes was stronger than I had originally

assumed, and some unexpected sub-themes also soon became apparent, leading to new areas of inquiry (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 193–7). A significant example is the question of femme identity—I had not expected such a strong association between Mummy, femme, and the 1950s housewife aesthetic, and furthermore I had not considered the question of femme tops and the reception of femmes in the wider queer community. Questions of femme versus femininity also arose, as did the challenge of teasing out the interplay between femme-phobia and the devaluation of femme tops, and, consequently, of Mummies. This altered the direction of my thesis considerably. I found that I had not prepared my literature review adequately, and therefore these discoveries sparked a new area of theoretical investigation, leading me down slightly different paths to those I had initially expected to be exploring.

Using excerpts from my interviews with the San Francisco Mummies, the following chapter, Chapter Two—Maternal Subjectivities, discusses some of these areas of unexpected insight, along with a detailed discussion of the maternal as an identity in relation to the leather Mummy.

Chapter Two

The S/Mother

—Maternal Subjectivities

I want to crush you

and then iron out the creases

We meet at the Butch Voices conference and end up fucking on my roof while the fog slowly rolls in over San Francisco, softer than air on our skin. She is from the old-guard dykes on bikes crew, much older than me, more mature, more experienced, yet her voice is high and childish and her mannerisms often follow suit. One day early on in our fling she tells me shyly that I make her feel Little. Not small as in insignificant, not short as in 5'2 to my 5'7 in heels, but Little with a capital L. Little like a kid, Little like a Little submissive. Something resonates in me when she says this but the conversation is cut short in our rush to be somewhere on time, so we pick up the subject again via text a few days later. She tells me, "When you were talking about the little boy you take care of [I am a nanny] and how you make up bedtime stories for him, understanding what he needs more than he does and finding a way to give that to him, using your imagination to feed his, I got a little pang of something not quite jealousy, but something...and I had an overwhelming urge to plead for a story myself." I feel a tug in response, a desire to pull her close and cuddle her, to let her nuzzle into my breasts while I stroke her hair. I also feel turned on.

Introduction

While Chapter One outlined my methods, methodology, and the details of my ethnographic fieldwork, Chapter Two begins by defining motherhood as an institution, the act of mothering, and the maternal as an identity and mode of desire. Through a detailed illustration of the leather Mummy—how she is defined, what she looks like, and what makes her hot— these definitions are then compared to the ways in which the leather Mummy interacts with and revises the maternal. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the socially enforced distance between the sexual and the maternal bodies and the way that these constraints are challenged through the erotics of Mummy play. Through a deconstruction of the oppressive limitations of an essentialist reading of the maternal, this chapter questions the supposed maternal “truths” which constitute popular social discourse, and considers the possibilities of a maternal self that is not biologically determined or restricted, that can be performed and perverted, and that is accessible as an erotically pleasurable practice.

The maternal

“Mummy naturally pours off you,” my lover texts me, later on that night. I am acting as both ethnographer and filthy dirty perv when I push her for more details. She reminds me of the time recently where we were in a public bar and I discreetly got out my breast and shoved it in her mouth, smothering her with it right there on the dance floor. “It makes me feel safe when I’m nuzzling your bosom.” She says I have a calming, knowing vibe, an energy she associates with the word “Mummy”. “I feel like I want to please and impress you, curl up next to you and win your complete attention.” She needn’t worry—the dynamic building between us means that she already has my undivided attention. The timing, however, is curious—I have just begun accessing alternative fertility treatments with the view to start trying to get pregnant within the year, and when she asks what title I want her to call me I realise that I need to find a word that my future children won’t use, and also something I don’t connect to my own mother. Eventually I settle on Mommie (in an American accent it sounds completely different to Mummy), and we decide that she will be Peanut.

Historically, a woman’s worth has been situated in notions of mothering and the family. As Ann Oakley summarises: “[...]motherhood represents the greatest achievement of a woman’s life: the sole true means of self-realization” (“Housewife” 186). For centuries women have been anchored to the home, to child-rearing, and to an eternal commitment to sacrifice everything for the benefit of their families, the ramifications of which are still reflected in the domestic expectations placed on women today. It is important to acknowledge that these pressures are situated within a largely white, western, middle-class context, and that the maternal ideal is an impossibility for many women of colour, working-class women, and single mothers. However, regardless of how unachievable, the maternal ideal still prevails. With the emergence of feminism the maternal became a recurring problem which successive feminist theorists saw as important to address. In the late 1940s, ahead of her time, Simone de Beauvoir forged the path for second-wave feminism when she identified motherhood as a key component of women’s oppression (“The Second Sex” 2010), a call which Adrienne Rich took up again in her mid-seventies ground-breaking work *Of Woman Born*, arguing that motherhood as an institution has cast women in the oppressed role of domestic and

reproductive slave for her husband, provider and carer for his children, and patriotic martyr for her country (1995).

Shulamith Firestone revisited this theme in the heat of the 1970s feminist movement, claiming the physical acts of pregnancy and childbirth as the root of women's oppression. In a particularly excessive radical feminist move Firestone states that in order to be free of patriarchy women need to reject the use of their bodies as baby machines, and suggests embracing reproductive technology, in particular extra-uterine gestation, in order to be liberated from the physical act of childbearing and the oppressive trap of motherhood (182). Although heavily criticised from both outside and within the feminist debate, Firestone represents the extreme fringe of the second-wave feminist movement which, even in its more moderate circles, looked disparagingly on those women who sought to reproduce or raise children.

At the heart of the feminist furore is the problem of the "ideal mother", a catalogue of unrealistic (and mostly undesirable) criteria which serve to control a woman's actions and decisions, regulate her desires, and reinforce a patriarchal definition of the maternal. Included in this list is the expectation that the mother be selfless; provide nourishment, shelter, unconditional love and endless support; put her child's needs before her career, her sex life and her mental health; and of course be joyful in all of these sacrifices (Rich 1995).²³ These sentiments are echoed repeatedly in both maternal theory and contemporary writing on motherhood (Andrea O'Reilly 2006, 2007, 2010; Fiona Giles 2002, 2003, 2005; Sara Ruddick 1989; Alison Bartlett 1998, 2005; Robyn Longhurst 2008; and Iris Marion Young 2005, to name but a few) and continue to constitute the maternal benchmark today. The woman who deviates from this path, who is unfulfilled by motherhood or who prioritises her needs ahead of the child's, is deemed a bad mother, criticised and

²³ The expectation that women are natural-born carers does not stop with children. Moore points out that this expectation is also tied in to the assumption that women's jobs are more expendable than men's, that "Women are at home in the community to care because they are mothers and do not work, or if they do work it is secondary to their maternal/caring role and they will therefore be happy to give it up." (Moore 98–99) The role of "carer" for the sick and the elderly also automatically falls to women: "No one in their right mind would suggest that a forty-year-old man should stay at home to look after a sick parent" (Moore 98).

condemned in the public eye. However it is this very policing of gender, this insistence on the interrelatedness of femininity, maternity, the home, domesticity, and child-rearing, that the Mummy kink receives with such delight.

The leather Mummy—what does she look like?

“I am the epitome of Barbara Billingsley...Mrs Cleaver; I bake and I cook and I take care of you and I discipline.” (Momma Ruth)

* * *

Cleo

I meet up with Cleo in a café for a follow-up interview a week or two after the focus group, but as soon as she arrives she asks me if I am hungry and then whisks me away to her favourite restaurant across the road. She orders wine even though it has just gone midday, and encourages me to do the same. She is wearing a rich red lipstick which she reapplies several times throughout the interview, and a tight black top that shows off her cleavage. Her long dark hair has been well groomed and her eyes are heavily made-up, and overall she gives off the impression of a young Mrs Robinson, lush, decadent, and simmering sensuality. Throughout the interview she gushes about her new puppy (a dog puppy, not a human puppy) and explains the painstaking regime she has established for his training. “He needs structure, otherwise he’ll be awake and wanting to play in the middle of the night, and that just won’t do. I am totally devoted to raising him right: we have nap time, play time, food time, and then it starts all over again.” I ask her how she convinces a young pup to have a nap. “I sit him in my lap and force-pat him until he’s calmed down, and eventually he drifts off.”

I am struck by the realisation that this is probably also a good illustration of what she is like as a Mummy. In the focus group she had talked indulgently about resting her Boy’s head in her lap and stroking her hair until she is nearly asleep, and in our one-on-one interview she talks passionately about the strict D/s training she is embarking on with her other sub, this one a Little Girl. Cleo refers to the personal sacrifices she has made in order to train her, and I can tell that for Cleo it is not just a game, but rather a serious commitment she has made to provide her Girl with useful life skills, make her into “a better submissive, a better person,” and generally “raise” her in much the same way as a parental mother would do with a child. Cleo insists on ordering me a second wine after I finish the first (even though I can be heard on the transcript tapes protesting that ethically I shouldn’t be drinking during my fieldwork!). She also insists on paying. After lunch I go back to her house to meet the puppy and have a little

play—she’s trying to get it used to strangers. Her Boy is at home when we arrive. She is sweet and quiet and shy but responds eagerly to Cleo’s directions to fix us both a drink, and with a little coaxing comes out of her shell and talks proudly about her hometown and how she’s taking Cleo home to visit and to meet the family. “Will your mum and Cleo get on well?” I ask, intrigued by the idea of this Boy’s two Mummies meeting in the flesh. “Oh yes,” she says. “They’re like two peas in a pod, they’re so similar. They’re gunna get on just fine.” Two peas in a pod, I muse. So the lesbian cliché is true, huh: this Boy really is dating her mother.

Adrienne Rich describes the childless woman/mother dichotomy as the only two options available to women (250). If we accept this statement then the leather Mummy is one of the very few examples who effectively straddles the middle ground between the two, creating a liminal space external to patriarchal conventions. Before we explore this emancipatory potential, however, it is first necessary to analyse what and who a leather Mummy is. The general consensus both in the focus group and in my one-on-one interviews was that “Mummy” is self-identified and can therefore be almost anything across a very wide spectrum of options. However, with this in mind, when my participants were asked about their own identities as Mummies, the energy of Mummy top-space and the type of activities Mummy might be likely to engage with, recurring themes did arise.

Just as in a conventional mother-child relationship “Mummy” is usually dominant:²⁴ she is in charge, she is in control, she has the ability to manipulate and she can be very, very cruel.

²⁴ However as I discovered from personal experience in the final six weeks of my thesis, it is not *compulsory* that the Mummy be a top. As luck would have it, just as I was putting the finishing touches on my final draft I entered into a kink relationship as a submissive Mummy, a dynamic that I had not previously considered possible. A quick survey of internet literotica unearthed a sub-genre of fantasy about teen boys and Mummy figures which featured the Mummy in the submissive role. The majority of these narratives centred around coming-of-age stories, often with a subplot involving an absent or impotent father, and a teenage boy stepping up to take care of his mother, fulfilling her sexual needs and becoming the protector and provider of the family. Initially I thought this new development would shake my entire thesis, considering that this narrative of desire relies on a transcendence of subordinate role relationships, flipping Mummy into a submissive role. However I have reconciled my (late) discovery by differentiating in this thesis between Mummy role-play and Mummy tops or leather Mummies. There are plenty of similarities and cross-overs, particularly in the fact that both involve an erotic or eroticised maternal; however for the purposes of this research I am interested only in Mummy tops, where the Mummy is the dominant player.

However the allure of Mummy is that she can also be very kind—she may reduce her sub to tears one moment but in the next she will be stroking their hair and coddling them, or letting them cry into her heaving bosom. During my fieldwork I frequently observed the Mummies engaging in humiliation play, publicly teasing or babying their subs both in and outside of formal scenes. Mummy-space was often described as being “loving and warm” (Velvet), a safe, intimate, smothering place steeped in nurturing, caring energy. As with Rich’s list of maternal criteria, “Mummy” was said to provide nourishment (usually through food), to nurture with her body (particularly by suckling with her breasts), and to protect her “helpless” bottom from the world.

Of course, as with most BDSM practices the power exchange also brings with it certain responsibilities (Moser 91–3). One of Mummy’s key duties was to physically provide care, be that with discipline, emotional availability or physical mothering. Cleo even went so far as to describe herself as a service top:²⁵

I will bathe my Boy and wash him head to toe, and I will cuddle him and I will nurture him and I will cook for him. [...] Mummy for me definitely is [...] the one that is responsible for the Boy or Girl, the one that makes sure they brush their teeth at night and they go to the doctor [...]

(Cleo)

While some subs were generally obedient, many were bratty or irresponsible, needing scolding, discipline, and guidance, and it was seen as the Mummy’s job to teach, “just like any other mummy would” (Cleo).

However, it is important to maintain that it is impossible to portray a definitive picture of the leather Mummy, desire being as multi-faceted as the individuals who engage in it. No two people will ever have identical responses to, for example, a bondage scene; each individual’s experience will differ in terms of what they find pleasurable and why (Moser and Kleinplatz 36). In particular I want to draw attention to two of my participants who frequently differed from the rest of the group in their responses to my interview questions: Mistress Elizabeth and Miss Millie, who on the whole identified less with a nurturing, smothering version of Mummy and more with a sadistic, cruel, or strict Mummy-top-space. For example Miss Millie

²⁵ A service top is someone who plays the dominant role but who provides service—anything from brushing their hair to cooking their meals or paying the bills—to their submissive.

said that her Mummy-space hinged on the power of the mother to coerce, manipulate and take advantage of her child's innocence and vulnerability; interestingly she described Mummy as the darkest place she played in. However even these two agreed that, just like a mother, the biggest allure of Mummy lay in being not just the centre of someone's universe but in being their *whole* universe, authoritative, omnipresent, and omnipotent.²⁶

The pleasure of this power dynamic is of course twofold—in Dahl's *Femmes of Power* Mistress Morgana, a high femme Mummy in both her personal and professional life, describes the erotics of Mummy play from the submissive's perspective:

Many people are drawn to age play²⁷ because it is a distinctly grown-up retreat into the carelessness (and powerlessness) of childhood. There's great symbolic significance in the image of a strong woman leaning over you and depriving you of your maturity, your agency, your self-determination. (130)

We are at our most vulnerable when we are children, often reliant on our mothers or some version of a maternal figure to protect us, nurture us, and make our decisions for us. The leather Mummy capitalises on that position of authority while at the same time toying with stereotypes of femininity and perverting conventional perceptions of phallo-centric power.

For most of my participants, femininity and the aesthetics of femininity (anything from clothing through to domestic props such as kitchen implements and retro household

²⁶ In a UK newspaper poll in the lead-up to the millennium I remember reading about a face-off between "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious", "mother" and "home", to see which would be voted the word of the century. "Home" and "mother" both seemed to have been chosen because they were evocative of memories of safety, warmth, contentment, and stability. Granted, there are many many people who do not share this sentiment, having been abused or neglected by their mothers (at least half of the Mummies I interviewed fell into this group); however the point remains that the mother is invariably revered above all other figures. Unfortunately I can't remember which word won.

²⁷ While Mistress Morgana makes no differentiation between age-play and Mummy play, in my interviews I found that not all Mummies were comfortable describing their Mummy dynamics in terms of age-play. Some of them associated age-play with adult babies or incest-play, areas they were not interested in engaging with. As outlined in the introduction I have steered away from drawing any direct correlation between the two, although I acknowledge there are many points where the two kinks interrelate.

appliances)²⁸ played a significant role in the construction of their Mummy identity. For some the aesthetic was merely imagined, but for others the clothes they wore and the way they wore them was an integral part of their Mummy identities. All of the Mummies I interviewed identified with the female pronoun “she” and to varying degrees they all also identified as femme,²⁹ although Mistress Elizabeth and Cokie (and possibly one or two others) were also either comfortable with gender-neutral or masculine pronouns, or had butch/masculine-of-centre spaces they also liked to play in. However for the vast majority, high femme and the maternal were intrinsically linked,³⁰ which is unsurprising considering that motherhood is considered to represent the absolute height of femininity, an “essential part of womanhood” (Wearing 42). Consequently I had expected some reference to high femme fashion, be it aprons and hair curlers or even simply high heels and lipstick, but what I had not anticipated was that Mummy would be tied to a specific decade—the 1950s.

Most of the Mummies I interviewed said there was a direct connection between their Mummy persona and the 1950s, and most expanded on this with some reference to the fragility of feminine authority and the appeal of domestic power, domestic kitsch, and subverting the suburban dream:

²⁸ However while the majority of the Mummies I interviewed incorporated a domestic aesthetic into their play, this was not always the case. It is important to acknowledge that the leather Mummy is not reliant on visual signifiers—she can be recognisable as a Mummy simply by the maternal energy that she exudes

²⁹ Of course this is not an essential criterion for being a Mummy—I was briefly in contact with a trans man and also two butch-identifying women who identified as Mummy tops, but they were all unavailable for interviewing

³⁰ Conversely, there is a socialised correlation between expressions of masculinity (i.e. butch women or f-t-m trans* men) and infertility (Walks 3–4; Oakley, “Housewife” 188). This deeply entrenched association of femininity with the maternal and expressions of masculinity with infertility was highlighted in a workshop I attended at the Oakland Butch Voices conference in July 2011 entitled “Butch and Pregnant: What do I Wear and What Do You Call Me?”. Discussion at the workshop centred around the difficulties faced by butch women and trans* men who bear children, be it in finding appropriate maternity clothing to wear (most of which is hyper-feminine), or simply in being acknowledged as a fertile body. (For example several couples who were in femme/butch relationships said that medical staff and members of the wider community frequently made the false assumption that the femme partner was going to be the birth-parent.)

I definitely have, have that sensibility also of that 50s nurturing...taking care of everything, taking care of all that is home life, all that is necessary to be responsible for... (Jezebel)

As Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* illustrates, the 1950s housewife cliché speaks of an era where the domestic realm, namely the kitchen, was the woman's only stronghold, the only place where she was able to exercise any sense of independence and authority. Outside of the home women had been relegated to their pre-war positions, their employment prospects limited to either menial jobs or the marriage/motherhood trajectory, and feminism had not yet given women a louder voice. But when it came to preparing the evening meal or deciding what clothes the children would wear each day, the housewife reigned supreme (Friedan 15–19, 43–46, 238–242). In everything else she held little sway, but her children adored and obeyed her. In a strange double-bind, therefore, motherhood acted as both a prison and a source of limited authority—as maternal theorist Sara Ruddick notes, “Even the most powerless woman knows that she is physically powerful, stronger than her young children” (35).

Mistress Morgana speaks candidly about her attraction to both the Mummy role and to the domestic kink, the “femininely twisted Martha Stewart” (129), as she terms it:

The stern but warm, loving yet strict dominance of the fully clothed and “mature woman” is intensely powerful in that it's both so queer and so strangely distant and ordinary. [...] To me the 50s is the decade of full-bodied women and absent fathers (Dahl & Volcano 129-30).

Not only was the home the source of feminine power but it was a space populated almost solely by women and children, with little interference by a male authority. Ironically, then, with men largely absent from the home and a bevy of disempowered housewives sitting bored in the kitchen, the 1950s with its over-bearing patriarchal potency unwittingly creates the perfect backdrop for a lesbian Mummy play scene.

My final point on the leather Mummy's visual aesthetics, however, is not about domesticity but about eroticism. Comparing her visual signifiers (1950s clothing, provocative red lips, aprons, hair curlers, and high heels) to theoretical understandings of the limitations and expectations of who and what a mother is (or assumedly should be), it

is interesting to observe where the BDSM concept of Mummy meets and deviates from the publicly projected (and protected) idea of the maternal body. For example a socially acceptable mother would perhaps be imagined as wearing attractive but conservative clothing—feminine without being sexy, practical and not too revealing. An “unacceptable” mother, on the other hand, would probably look something like the leather Mummy—bulging cleavage, short skirt, and thigh-high leather boots.

In an *Australian Women's Weekly* fashion page from October 2012, one reader looking for fashion advice writes: “I am a first-time mother with a five-month-old daughter and am about to turn thirty, so I need to start a new wardrobe to fit in with my new status” (140). Assumedly she feels that her new title of “mother” has brought with it the pressure to change her image from “sexy” to “responsible”. The leather Mummies, on the other hand, reject this social convention entirely. By combining the practical (an apron) with the impractical (a pair of high heels) the leather Mummy is disrupting what a “mother” should look like. What this signifies to me is the first point where we see a breakdown in the division between the sexual and maternal bodies—the leather Mummy combines the domestic with the erotic in her visual appearance as well as in her play, instantly traversing the sexual maternal taboo.

The essential maternal

It turns me on when Peanut tells me that I ooze a maternal vibe, when she calls me Mommie and burrows into my chest, but when my ex used to describe me as motherly it irritated me. "Motherly" sounded abject: dreary and decidedly unsexy. It irritated me because I felt a lack of agency; I felt as if I was supposed to like it because I was femme, and that's what girlygirls are supposed to do, right? They mother, they look after everyone, and they like it. I didn't want to look after her. I wanted her to grow up and get her shit together and look after herself. Since the day I was given my first dolly to bathe and cuddle and feed I have been in training for this role. At first, this meant looking after the little ones while our parents all got drunk together at the family barbecues. Later it meant babysitting for my mother's friends, and then, as I got older and came out, it meant being grilled on how I planned to get pregnant without sperm-on-tap in my bedroom. I do want my own babies, desperately in fact, but of course I wonder how much of this is instinct and how much has been learnt. And sometimes I rage at the assumptions and expectations placed on me and my vagina and my pink high heels.³¹

Feminist scholars such as de Beauvoir (2010), Rich (1995), Alcoff (1988) and O'Reilly (2006, 2010) have argued against the belief that women are innately maternal, an essentialist notion which restricts both women and men in its homogenising of identity but which has survived in various guises through to today. Simone de Beauvoir in particular is scathingly critical of maternal essentialism, arguing that the maternal is a socially constructed fantasy rather than an inherent female characteristic (554). Feminists in the 1970s took up the argument repeatedly, challenging the idea that women should both want and need a child for fulfilment, that men do not possess maternal instincts and that women are supposedly born with them (de Beauvoir 2010; Rich 1995; O'Reilly 2010).

The obvious problem with essentialist readings of the maternal, Linda Alcoff argues in her discussion of the conflict between cultural feminism and post-structuralism, is that this biological determinism and "belief in women's innate peacefulness and ability to nurture

³¹ (Intentional reference to the 1989 Debbie Harry hit "I Want That Man".)

[...] promote[s] unrealistic expectations about 'normal' female behaviour that most of us cannot satisfy" (413). Furthermore, as maternal theorist and activist Andrea O'Reilly explains, the current patriarchal models of mothering serve to support a system of "male privilege and power" which has its basis in an unequal distribution of power between the sexes ("Rocking the Cradle" 18). Despite a persistent dissenting voice these gendered ways of thinking have still survived today, often somewhat disguised but still prevalent in our attitudes, our assumptions, our laws, our media, and in our own gender-based expectations of each other. Essentialism disguised as the sanctity of motherhood is one of the key arguments used in a recent article about gay men using surrogates in the Australian Women's Weekly ("Raising a Generation of Motherless Children"), with objectors declaring that surrogacy "breaks what is arguably the most intimate of all bonds, that of a mother and a child" (Sheather 90), and that the absence of a mother "is a loss that no person, however well-intentioned they are, can actually fill" (Sheather 93). This line of thought effectively discredits all other forms of mothering (or parenting), favouring biology and the female-gendered maternal body over all else.

In a move to challenge essentialist sentiments and disentangle biological reproduction from the maternal body, feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst raises the question of wet nurses. Who is more maternal, she asks, the wet nurse who holds the baby to her breast day after day, feeding the child and soothing it when it cries, or the birth mother, who hands her child over to the wet nurse because she does not wish to feed it herself? Longhurst makes a case for an expansion of maternal theory to encompass maternities which are expressed in social or spatial contexts outside of the physical (3). "Maternal bodies, contrary to popular belief, are not entirely 'natural', rather they are an interface between nature and culture, biology and the social, materiality and discourse" (4), she says. We are not born into maternal bodies; rather, we create them.

However unfortunately even in contemporary feminist dialogues about the maternal body the majority of literature still invariably identifies female gender and the existence of a child as the two essential criteria of a maternal body (Hansen 431-2), thus limiting the maternal to bodies who have the biological potential to give birth and denying the possibility that a maternal identity can be chosen as opposed to assigned. In response to the evident shortcomings of feminist maternal discourse I therefore argue for the necessity of a new

term which is able to describe the act of mothering as *separate* to questions of gender. I put forward the gender-neutral term “aternal”³² in the hopes that it might be adopted by feminist maternal scholars in lieu of the culturally loaded and gendered descriptors “maternal” and “paternal”. It is my hope that by liberating the *act* of mothering from its essentialist foundations, and broadening the scope, not only of the meaning of mothering, but also of who is able to perform it and how, the mother *herself* will be liberated from the unfair and unrealistic expectations she is subject to.

³² Acknowledgements to Adriana Trujillo, who first suggested this idea to me during a casual conversation outside a café in Alice Springs.

The childless maternal

Mistress Elizabeth

When I arrive for my interview at Mistress Elizabeth's house she announces that her new submissive-in-training will be coming over at some point. "Don't worry about her," she breathes, "she'll just keep busy tidying up." Sure enough, when the girl arrives she immediately begins to make the bed in the next room, shaking out the sheets like a maid. She is a pale, geeky, ordinary-looking girl dressed in plain street clothes, and for all accounts and purposes this could be a paid cleaning job, except that she is not being paid. In fact she has travelled halfway across the city just for the pleasure of doing this. At the end of the interview I ask to use the toilet. I have to walk through the bedroom to get to the bathroom—there are black satin sheets on the bed and there's an assortment of complicated-looking hooks and chains and restraints fixed to the ceiling. When I push open the bathroom door the girl is there, pulling up her knickers. I apologise but she just giggles and looks pleased, and I get the distinct feeling she has planned this.

A man also arrives towards the end. He, too, is there to conduct an interview (Mistress Elizabeth is a popular spokesperson for the BDSM community) but we have not yet finished so he automatically disappears and starts scrubbing the sink. There's something about Mistress Elizabeth that makes people want to please and obey her, but not in the same way as the other Mummies. With the others there is a cloying, doting warmth, a feeling that you are being wrapped up in a blanket with a hot water bottle and a kiss. Mistress Elizabeth on the other hand has an air of calm control that seems to penetrate everyone who enters her presence. She holds court like a puppeteer—I've seen her silently stare down a whole line of strangers in the toilet queue at the pub until they all step back and allow her to take the next vacant stall.

Mistress Elizabeth is a formidable top, magnetic and sophisticated and skilfully seductive. She loves her Boy fiercely and unconditionally, despite the fact he has now moved states, but she has the air of a mother whose children have grown up and are no longer dependent on her—she does not need to look after anyone but herself. She is different from the other Mummies. She wears the obligatory red lipstick but hers is dark where the others' is bright,

and she is stern and distant, not warm and cuddly. I struggle to see the Mummy in her at times.

By recognising the maternal as constructed we are able to widen the definition of who can access the maternal and how, making room for the leather Mummy to be accepted as a valid expression of it. Current readings of the maternal, which either define the mother through essentialist or child-centric terms, mean that the mother is only able to come into being in the presence of a child, whereas the leather Mummy is an incongruous exception, autonomously inhabiting a maternal space in her own right. True, a Mummy scene will generally involve at least one person filling the role of the “stand-in child”, be that as the sub, “daughter”, “son”, “Girl”, “Boy”, or simply as the player in the dynamic who is being “mothered”, however there was general agreement from my interview participants that Mummy is not defined by her Boy or Girl—Mummy is an independent and self-defined entity. Of course, it is difficult when dissecting desire to ever truly escape the intersubjective dyad, however it is important to acknowledge that, as with leather Daddies, the leather Mummy is, or at least can be, an autonomous identity. Mummy would still be Mummy if she turned up to a play party alone, in ordinary clothes, didn’t engage in any scenes and simply sat chatting to her friends all night by the chip-bowl. She does not need anyone to “make” her a Mummy—if she calls herself “Mummy” that is enough.

A large portion of current maternal feminist discourse on the de-essentialised maternal body focuses on other forms of mothering and the way they disrupt normative readings of the mother. Maternal theorist Elaine Tuttle Hansen lists step-mothers, nannies, babysitters, aunties, women who have lost custody of their children and women who have lost children through miscarriage, infant, or adult death as other forms of mothering (441-2). Hansen expands the definition of “mother” by putting forward the case that the maternal is not dependent on the continued presence of a child who is given life, love and protection; rather the maternal is an act (433). She argues that a mother becomes a mother before the child is even born and stays a mother after the child dies, moves away, or in some other way leaves the mother’s custody (445-6). “The story of the mother without child [...] brings us closer to that frequently stated goal of feminist study: seeing maternal points of view more fully, hearing maternal voices more clearly and variously, understanding maternal subjectivity more deeply and complexly” (46), she asserts.

There are a plethora of words being used by maternal theorists to try and pin down these unstable maternal spatialities. Gustafson for example uses the word “non-mother” to describe those women who have given up their child to another carer (26). Mullings terms the act of fostering as “temporary mothering” for the state (166), and while Murray protests the invisible maternal status of the woman who gives her child up for adoption (147), Kearney and Bailey question why we view adoptive and birth mothers separately, despite the fact that their experiences are, in many respects, markedly similar (151-2). Letherby uses the term “nonmotherhood” (258) to describe the maternal relationship specific to women who have not given birth to children but who mother others’ children, and argues that as a stepmother herself she satisfies all of the criteria connected to the maternal (selflessly providing caring, love, and nurturance), other than pregnancy and birth (262). Letherby also uses the words “nearly mother” (259) to describe those who, like herself, have lost a child through miscarriage or stillbirth (262), whereas Tonkin draws awareness to the idea of “potential maternity”, the space inhabited by one who is childless by chance (as opposed to by choice) (180).

One of Tonkin’s “unintentionally childless” interview subjects describes this space as “something that is present as an absence” (180), which provides a clear segue into my proposal for a *childless* maternal to be included in maternal pedagogies. The childless maternal body is defined by neither a child’s presence nor its absence (that is, it is not necessary for a child to have *ever* existed). Perhaps the best example of a childless maternal body is of course the leather Mummy, where the subject (the Mummy) exists³³ in her own right, independent of any object (child). “Mummy” comes into being, not simply and exclusively because a child is born, but rather because of her own self-determined, autonomous identification with and interactions with the maternal.

Having said this, more often than not the Mummies I interviewed did have a Boy or a Girl whom they actively mothered. Several of the Mummies felt that this mothering was equal

³³ This idea of existence is borrowed from Judith Butler, who asserts that existence involves interacting with and interpreting gendered discourse within a social context (Butler, “Sex and Gender” 45), as opposed to simply “being”, which implies a state of passive inactivity.

to the care given to a child, and some also spoke about the big sacrifices they had made in their lives for the sake of their submissives, in a similar way that Rich's "ideal" mother makes sacrifices for the sake of her children (1995). Mistress Elizabeth, in particular, who even shared the same surname as her Boy (a chosen, as opposed to legally recognised name) always referred to her Boy almost as though he were her actual son: "I do feel like I've gone through motherhood with Scotty, I do feel as though I birthed him from my loins almost."

The first time I met Mistress Elizabeth was at a gig her Boy was playing at in San Francisco. She was considerably older than the rest of the crowd and she gave off an impression similar to that of a proud mother attending her child's end-of-year school concert. We stood for a few minutes talking about my research and about her Boy, Scotty, a young trans* man. "I first met him when he was 19," she told me. (He's now in his late twenties, and she is technically old enough to be his mother). "He's all grown up now. I'm not Mummy any more, I'm Mum. I'm not allowed to kiss him in front of his friends either, but of course I still do."

Several of the other Mummies had similarly intimate and ongoing relationships with their subs, but even more than the others, Mistress Elizabeth spoke about her Boy in a way that was incredibly similar to that of a traditional parental relationship. In her formal interview she made it clear that she viewed her relationship with Scotty as a life-long commitment, and took her maternal responsibilities, including teaching him good manners and better ways of managing his moods and short attention span, very seriously:

[...] if I said, okay, I need you to do X for me, and he'd say okay, dah dah dah, and start to run off and I could tell that he hadn't listened to me, I'd created an acronym, and the acronym was SLAR. So I'd be like, "Scotty, stop." [...] "SLAR." SLAR stood for Stop, Listen, Ask, Repeat. [...] And it worked really well. We also had time-outs. So I might be having a social function and things are going along and he has a little tantrum or something happens, you can tell he's having one of his little fits. And I can just say to him, "Do you need a time-out? [...] do you need to go to your room and sit and be quiet for a little while?" And he was really good, he would say, you know, "No, I'm fine." [...] or he'd say, "Yeah, I need a time-out," and he'd go take it.

Mistress Elizabeth also spoke of the continued connection between her and her “son” on both an emotional and financial level, regardless of the fact that Scotty had moved interstate and that they were no longer living in any kind of formal D/s relationship:

[...] no matter how much they grow and how much you grow with them, the Mummy is still, you know, always in that role of being Mummy. So for example, Scotty was just in town a couple of months ago visiting his boyfriend. [...] I said, “Oh well, maybe I can take you shopping,” cos that’s something, it’s an activity that I still do with him, right. [...] and I end up buying him a new coat and some shoes or something, he’s grinning from ear to ear and happy as a clam. [...] So that’s a responsibility. There’s a financial responsibility there that I never signed up to having kids, to have, you know, that was one of my concerns is how can I pay for a kid when I could barely pay my own bills, and yet Scotty comes to town and I immediately drop \$300 on him in an afternoon, because he’s my baby Boy.

Mistress Elizabeth regarded Scotty as her son and treated him accordingly; she had housed him, nurtured him, “brought him up”, and delivered him into adulthood, and she continued to mother him in the same way that a mother would care for an adult child.

Mistress Elizabeth’s relationship with Scotty raises a poignant question in the recurring debate over what makes someone a mother. If the leather Mummy is providing care, love, financial support, guidance and discipline, then how is her maternal labour so different from that of the parental mother? In answer, Andrea O’Reilly draws a differentiation between mothering (the chosen act) and motherhood (the institution):

The term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word mothering refers to women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women. (“Rocking the Cradle” 35)

She sees this differentiation as being integral to maternal activism, her point being that by removing mothering from the institution of motherhood and by challenging the constraints of the maternal (particularly those concerning maternal sexuality), mothering can be freed up to become, not a site of oppression, but of “empowerment” and “social change” (35). Read in this light, then, Mummy play is a practice which occurs outside of the institution of

motherhood but which involves mothering as an act, and consequently provides us with an example of what I term the empowered childless maternal.

Filling mother's shiny boots—the leather Mummy as a substitute for motherhood

“Motherhood...well, I didn't like the term... I mean that's been one of the main spaces that [...] the feminine has been able to be glorified as motherhood. And oh, “There's not a greater joy or privilege on this earth than to be a mother. Motherhood has given me an identity.” You know, well I say fuck that.” (Mistress Elizabeth)

Despite the pressure to reproduce, or perhaps *because* of it, in some cases, none of the Mummies I conducted the focus group with expressed any interest in birthing their own children. Most of the participants said they felt that being a leather Mummy satisfied their maternal urges and celebrated their maternal prowess without having to go through a drastic change in lifestyle and personal freedom, and without having to engage in the long-term monetary, emotional, or even physical (pregnancy and childbirth) commitment of having an actual child.³⁴

For me it definitely does help fulfil a want to be maternal [...] It's like I really like nurturing, I really like being maternal, I really don't want to have a child, [Collective agreement] so this is a way that I can be maternal—a way that I can be maternal without having to have a child. (Jezebel)

Cleo had originally wanted to have a large family, but found that Mummy play satisfied this desire:

[...] when I figured out Mummy was a possibility in my kink lifestyle, I started to lose all that urgency to have children, and I thought, “Wow, I am getting all my Mummy needs met in these relationships.”

³⁴ I am reminded, at this point, of another observation I made while living in the United States of America—that of the phenomenon I term “dog-sprog”. I use this phrase in reference to the treatment of one's canine pet as though it were a human child: dressing the dog in children's clothing, pushing it around town in a pram, throwing it birthday parties and taking it to the hairdressers for a mani-pedi blow-dry. In a similar vein, in the USA there is also a burgeoning market for life-like baby dolls. My friend who makes these dolls, some of which sell for thousands of dollars on Ebay, says there is even a scent you can buy to make the doll's head smell just like a human baby's. In a similar (though not erotic) way to the leather Mummy, I would argue that these dog-lovers and doll-lovers are also expressing a childless maternal.

However it is important to clarify that finding a substitute for motherhood was *not* a motivating force for any of these women—they all made it very clear that they engaged in Mummy play primarily in the pursuit of erotic pleasure.

It may seem ridiculously obvious at this point to state that, despite their similarities, parenting and Mummy play are of course very different pursuits. Miss Millie, who was one of the few Mummies who had never had the desire to have children and who also did not relate her Mummy interactions to a maternal identity, illustrates this distinction:

I don't want kids ever. They're expensive and sticky. So the thing about adult children, is you can like, first of all they're adults, and second of all, you can beat them, like really, you can put them in a closet for like thirty minutes, that's fine. These are extremely effective measures of behaviour correction and modification that I do not approve of for actual children and so therefore I don't know how to deal with them, they just run around acting crazy and if you say "Stop that" and they don't, what do you do? I'd probably have like a squirt bottle, like for cats...

The sentiments of this statement were echoed by all of the Mummies I met. There was loud consensus on the fact that being a real-life mother would be nowhere near as fun, or at least not fun in the same ways as Mummy play!

In a sense, just like the Auntie (and at times like the babysitter or the nanny, although for most women working in these roles this is an arduous and thankless task), the leather Mummy takes the fun parts of being a mother: lavishing love and affection, being adored and revered, and being the boss of everyone, and is able to leave the dull bits: cleaning up the vomit and shit, playing hide-and-seek for three hours straight, being woken up all through the night and again at 5 a.m. when they want breakfast, and rushing them off to school, cricket practice, doctor's appointments and trombone lessons. The leather Mummy gets to be the fun mum, similar to the weekend dad³⁵ who brings treats and takes the kids to MacDonald's and lets them stay up late.

Furthermore, just like the Auntie or the babysitter, the leather Mummy can *choose* when to take "Mummy" on and off, a luxury not afforded the parental custodial mother. The

³⁵ A father who only has custody of his children on the weekends.

privilege of the leather Mummy is that she is not tied to this identity in the same way that a parental mother is tied to a child in her care, with a long-term responsibility for that child's safety and well-being. Although I illustrated earlier that for some, Mummy definitely involved a life-time commitment to a relationship which included many of the less "fun" parts of rearing a child (specifically relating to life guidance and financial support), the marked difference is that in Mummy play the relationship is between two adults, where neither is literally reliant on the other for survival.

Most of the Mummies acknowledged that perhaps they would not be so attracted to Mummy play if they had also reared their own children—after all, playing as Mummy is all about fantasy, and not reality:

A lot of women do end up being mums and being Mummy is not very sexual when you are really a mummy. So I think it would be very hard to eroticise that intense emotional closeness that we're talking about, and constant availability to your offspring. (Mistress Elizabeth)

I only interviewed one Mummy who was also a parent. Velvet was the birth mother of a five-year-old, and since becoming a mother had ceased to engage in Mummy play. She said that this was partly because her current lover was not interested in that kind of play, but also because her maternal urges were now being satisfied by her daughter:

I have been out of that world for long enough that it does seem really crazy to eroticise somebody being helpless, after I've had to like, really *really* take care of a tiny helpless being, and like, nurture her, into who she is now. [...] once I actually had this little person that I felt so responsible for, there's this way that I feel so lucky, so honoured, to be called Mummy by my daughter.

Velvet said that her maternal side was now something reserved especially for her daughter, and that she didn't have the time, energy or inclination to mother anyone else any more.

Mummy play, like many sexual kinks, is a fantasy, and the fantasy often ceases to be a pleasure once it becomes a reality. A child loves to play with a toy vacuum, mimicking its mother, but the child does not want to actually vacuum the floor. As Velvet reiterated, being a mother was a lot of hard work, and while maternal labour is easily eroticised in fantasy play, the truth remains that it is not so hot in real life:

Velvet: Let's pretend I have asked you ninety-nine times to pick up your toys and you don't do it...

Interviewer: Could you eroticise that? No!

Velvet (laughing): No! No.

However as I anticipated, a large part of the reason Velvet no longer played as a Mummy also seemed to be due to her discomfort around mixing the maternal and the sexual, around being both a mother and a Mummy, which segues smoothly with the final point covered in this chapter: the fear of the sexual maternal.

Hot mama—the taboo of the sexual maternal

Friends, Season Eight, Episode 24

Scene: Rachel has just had a baby and is trying to breastfeed, but the baby won't take to the breast. Joey is overcome when Rachel takes out her nipple (not seen on screen) and tries to get her to feed. Throughout the scene he gets more and more overwhelmed by the sexual innuendos he reads into the conversation happening between the nurse and Rachel.

Rachel: (to the baby) Just open up and put it in your mouth.

Joey: Dear lord!

Rachel: Do you think my nipples are too big for her mouth?

Nurse: Why don't we try massaging the breast to stimulate the flow?

Rachel: Why doesn't she want my breast?

*Joey: I dunno. Maybe she's crazy!*³⁶

Ironically, motherhood has for a long time shared a complicated and uneasy relationship with sexuality.³⁷ While it is true that in the past ten or twenty years pregnant women have started to vamp up their maternity clothes and mummy-images in a seeming defiance of the compulsory demure, asexual maternal body (Longhurst 51, 72), continued moral outcry over subjects such as public breastfeeding and mothers who are sex workers³⁸ (Dodsworth 100)

³⁶ It was surprising how comfortably this scene engaged with Rachel's breast as being simultaneously maternal and sexual. However, while on one level this was refreshing, on another it was merely reflective of a society which consistently (and non-consensually) sexualises women's bodies and objectifies breastfeeding as a sexual act, a problem breastfeeding associations have been rallying against for decades.

³⁷ In an effort to deny the existence of female sexuality and protect maternal essentialism, in the late nineteenth century it was thought that where men had a sex drive, women had a maternal drive. The concept of a maternal instinct was reliant on the denial of female sexuality: "In the fearful imaginations of self-appointed protectors of the family and of womanly innocence, the possibility that women might desire sexual contact not for the sake of pregnancy—that they might even desire it at a time when they positively did not want pregnancy—was a wedge in the door to denying that women had any special maternal instincts at all" (Gordon 426). Similar attempts to deny (and yet in so doing, acknowledge) a connection between the sexual and the maternal can be seen in Freudian methods of psychoanalysis which view the baby as a substitute for the phallus, or as Young reinterprets it, "motherhood as a substitute for sexuality" (85).

reminds us that we still have a long way to go. With the exception of several recent phenomenon such as the yummy mummy and the MILF, and the emergence of a new genre of writing dubbed “mummy porn”³⁹ (sparked by E. L. James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey*), mothers are generally told by the media, by their peers, and by people on the street that mums and sex do not mix.⁴⁰

In fact, the notion of a sexual mother seems to elicit a level of queasiness in many, as highlighted in the musings of the author of *Real Stories of Motherhood*, a light-hearted mummy memoir:

Most people are strangely uneasy about the combination of mothers and sex—my husband doesn’t even like me to utter the two words in the same sentence, especially if I’m talking about *his* mother. It seems to have escaped his notice, at least in the bedroom, that I am now a mother. I sometimes wonder if it would be the end of our sex life if he put two and two together. (Newby 48)

Furthermore, this attitude is not restricted to the heterosexual world. In a published conversation between queer femme activists Barbara Cruishank and Joan Nestle they at one point discuss an event they both attended where there were lots of lesbian mums present:

BC: “It was so unsexy.”

JN: “You just can’t combine babies and sex.” (Nestle and Cruishank 114)

³⁸ A quick google search will bring up numerous newspaper and internet-based articles preaching about how the children of sex workers suffer. In one woman’s anonymous blog, “Because I’m a Whore”, she writes about being a single mum and deciding to go back to sex work after she and her partner split up. “Those who always knew and supported my choice to do sex work, had a different opinion now that I was a mother”, she writes. “There are people who believe that being a sex worker automatically makes me a bad mother” (“Mother and a whore”). The offensive comments posted in response to her blog entry only serve to confirm her claims.

³⁹ Channel Ten’s talk show *Can of Worms*, which raises questions of political correctness with a panel of prominent Australian figures, held a discussion in October 2012 about *Fifty Shades* asking whether portraying a female character in a sexually submissive role was demeaning to women. Interestingly, however, the discussion took an unexpected turn and instead ended up focusing on whether the term “mummy porn” was the condescending label, implying that either mothers aren’t sexual or that they require a watered-down version of sexuality.

⁴⁰ Ironically, however, the taboo of the sexual maternal is also the source of plenty of mainstream pornography, including lactation porn (Giles, “The well-tempered breast” 303, 319–322), insemination fantasies (Fetlife.com), and MILF porn (involving middle-aged women who are supposedly mothers).

This exchange reflects a common attitude in the queer community that, as far as sex appeal goes, once you have a baby you're a goner. Despite the fact that the maternal and the sexual constantly touch and merge, and despite the obvious fact that of course many many mothers do in fact have active, if private, sex lives, new mothers still feel the pressure to transform from a sexual to a maternal being (Bartlett 59–60), with little tolerance for any crossover or merging of the two identities.

Troublesome tits

[...] after having a baby, there was this way that I kept feeling, early on, that it was like falling in love, because, because my pussy was sore, my tits were sore, and I was gazing into somebody's eyes in that way, that like, newly falling in love is. [...] my body kept telling me that it was, and I kept getting kind of confused and thinking it was, it was, sexual pleasure...and it was, at times, breast feeding... I felt like I couldn't figure out who I was sexually, and so much of it had to do with nursing, because I am completely identified around my tits and those were utilitarian... (Velvet)⁴¹

Although Australia is officially a secular country, religion still plays a very influential role in both our legal system and in our code of social morals. In each of their individual works on the maternal figure, feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva and feminist maternal theorist Iris Marion Young both note that the Catholic Church has relentlessly promoted the virgin mother as both the height of femininity and the ultimate feminine power (albeit “allowed” and also restricted by the patriarchal constraints of the Church), who is exalted and favoured by God yet who forsakes her sexuality in an act of martyrdom for her child (Kristeva 1986; Young 2005). This of course is the origin of the age-old Madonna/whore dichotomy which haunts women to this day, depicting the archetypal mother as gentle, completely absorbed by the child in her arms, and most importantly, chaste.⁴²

⁴¹ In Fiona Giles' *Fresh Milk* she writes about the confusion breastfeeding mothers sometimes go through when trying to reconcile their breasts as sexual organs and as sources of nourishment: “Many women found it harder, especially in the early stages of breastfeeding, to enjoy having their breasts fondled or sucked as part of foreplay. If their nipples weren't feeling tender, they felt their breasts should be reserved for the baby.” (95)

⁴² However this has not always been the case—pre-Christian images of fertility and the maternal figure differ greatly from this vision of the passive maternal. For example in *Larousse World Mythology* (47, 120–1, 223–4, 273, 346, 384, 472), it is claimed that pagan, Aztec, Egyptian and Chinese maternal images and sculptures

A contemporary example of the schizoid maternal/erotic divide appeared in an interview with Australian model Miranda Kerr in *Vogue* magazine in 2011. The article was called “Mother Miranda”, and Kerr was photographed in soft light in a long white lace dress, holding her pregnant stomach. In the photograph she looks young, innocent, and virginal, but with a hint of naïveté sensuality. The accompanying article confirms this impression:

Even when pregnant, Kerr, 27, gives off a distinctly virginal air. It’s the same sugar-and-spice quality that has enabled the cherubic-cheeked model to pose in Victoria’s Secret’s most devilish knickers and get away with wearing angel wings. She has even found a saintly slant to morning sickness. (Woolnough 147)

What this article and its accompanying image suggest is that the big secret here is that Kerr might look virginal, but that the big tell-tale bump protruding from her stomach tells us otherwise. The contradiction is delicious. What this article is also suggesting is that Kerr has achieved the impossible—she has managed to embody the virginal expectant mother; she has reached the pinnacle of femininity.⁴³

From a physiological perspective the idea of separating the sexual and maternal bodies is even more ludicrous.⁴⁴ The severance of motherhood from sexuality filters down into the

often presented the mother as strong, sometimes angry, often warlike, and generally indifferent to the child clinging to her breast or clambering on her knee.

⁴³ It is interesting to examine the difference between this treatment of maternal sexuality and the case of “Nikki”, a young porn star in New Zealand who created a stir when she announced that she wanted to film her child’s birth for a pornographic film (Longhurst 67-80). Referencing her own earlier work, Longhurst surmises that: “‘Coupling’ pregnancy and especially birth with sexual gratification challenges mainstream notions of pregnant and birthing women as modest, ‘motherly’, and focused completely on their infant. Becoming mothers must not ‘flaunt’ their sexuality even though (or maybe, because) the pregnant, and especially the birthing body is a body that is [assumed to be] clearly marked as having participated in sexual intercourse (Longhurst 2000, 463)” (219). The difference, therefore, seems to be in the “flaunting”. While “Nikki’s” plans were heavily censored by both public opinion and a variety of legal interventions, in Kerr’s case her sexuality goes uncensored, presumably because she is not “flaunting” it, but simply alluding to it.

⁴⁴ Hrdy, a feminist anthropologist and primatologist who has concluded through her studies of primates that there is no such thing as a maternal instinct, problematises this grey area between the sexual and the maternal by questioning the way in which we define and delineate these two terms. “To classify maternal sensations as ‘sexual’, and therefore in puritanical minds to condemn them, is to privilege sexuality in a very nonpuritanical way, implying that sexual sensations are more important than equally powerful sensations that reward women for caring for babies. We might just as logically describe various orgasmic contractions during lovemaking as ‘maternal’.” (537). Hrdy puts forward the counter-argument that long before humans related sucking breasts to

way children are educated about relationships and reproduction: young children (mostly female) are instructed on how to look after a baby, but are often not taught about how the baby is conceived or even about how the baby is born (Oakley, "Housewife" 192–3).⁴⁵

Thinking for a moment only in terms of heterosexual, biological mothering, the vagina that (hopefully!) orgasms during intercourse is the same vagina that nine months later pushes out a baby; the nipples that were hard and erect during the moment of conception are the same nipples that are now breastfeeding that child (Hrdy 538).

A friend of mine who works with young, socially disadvantaged mothers once commented to me that most of her clients had chosen not to breastfeed because it made their (male) partners "jealous". As Young confirms,

The separation between motherhood and sexuality within a woman's own existence seems to ensure her dependence on the man for pleasure. If motherhood is sexual, the mother and child can be a circuit of pleasure for the mother, then the man may lose her allegiance and attachment. (87)

It is incredible to imagine that, because the male partner himself is unable to separate the sexual and maternal bodies,⁴⁶ he is resentful of his own child seeking nourishment; however the prevalence of negative reactions to public breastfeeding support this suspicion.

a sexual act, women were experiencing pleasure while suckling children, and asks why it is that we privilege the sexual over the maternal, arguing that "the feelings we identify as sexual were originally maternal" (537-8).

⁴⁵ However, in puzzling contradiction to this point, as a queer woman I have also recently experienced the opposite problem. Since commencing my plans to have a baby (using a friend as the known donor), I have had an alarming number of people, queer and straight alike, asking me in all seriousness if I will be having sex with my (very gay) donor friend in order to get pregnant. For some reason the people around me find it difficult to *disconnect* sex and reproduction, and as a result, reproductive sex between a dyke and a poof seems to be considered a much more viable option than the good old turkey baster method. Or perhaps they all just think we are both secretly straight.

⁴⁶ I would suggest that the repulsion directed at women breastfeeding older children originates from a similar space. Particularly in the case of male children, there seems to be an unspoken sentiment that once he has passed infancy and has begun his path to adulthood (and therefore to a sexual life, in which breasts will potentially feature), the mother's breast is now too easily confused with a lover's, and therefore becomes untouchable.

The tensions between sexual and non-sexual understandings of the maternal body are highlighted in the popular outcry that still occurs around public breastfeeding. Because the breast is first and foremost read as a sexual object it is “supposed” to be kept away from public space, partly because breastfeeding introduces the breast into the public gaze, but also because breastfeeding can be a pleasurable experience.

Breastfeeding entails prolonged stimulation of one of the most sensitive parts of the female body, which involves sensitive pleasure and causes the uterus to contract rhythmically.⁴⁷ In a culture which represses female sexuality, this is something to be avoided. (Oakley, “Housewife” 195)

While mothers are taught to ignore the pleasurable sensations of breastfeeding, the leather Mummy embraces it. For the majority of my participants their sense of “Mummy” was deeply situated in the breasts, using the (non-lactating) nipple⁴⁸ to soothe, calm, or smother their partners, and of course for the mutual pleasure of suckling. (Incidentally I could not help but notice that they all also seemed to have been blessed with splendidly voluptuous cleavages.)

Iris Marion Young, who is a passionate advocate of maternal sexuality, sees breastfeeding as both a site of empowerment and of rebellion. Offering as an example her own personal experience of breastfeeding her daughter, Young describes her progression from the nursing chair to the bed:

After some weeks, drowsy during the morning feeding, I went to bed with my baby. I felt that I had crossed a forbidden river as I moved toward the bed, stretched her

⁴⁷ Breastfeeding actually produces sensations in both the mother and child which are akin to erotic pleasure—when a woman breastfeeds her womb contracts and her body releases oxytocin, the same hormone released during orgasm (Harel 5).

⁴⁸ An interrogation of the lactating and non-lactating breast was the subject of a performance piece called *Curdle* which took place in Sydney in 2008. Cath Davies, a Sydney-based performance artist and maternal theorist, induced lactation over the course of two weeks while living in a gallery space, in an endurance-based installation work which I visited on several occasions. Through its erotic overtones, *Curdle* embodied an erotic, childless maternal which questioned the limits of the gendered maternal body, and in effect bridged the gap between the lactating, asexual maternal body and the sexual, non-lactating body.

legs out alongside my reclining torso, me lying on my side like a cat or a mare while my baby suckled. This was pleasure, not work. I lay there as she made love to me, snuggling her legs up to my stomach, her hand stroking my breast, my chest. She lay between me and my lover, and she and I were a couple. From then on I looked forward with happy pleasure to our early-morning intercourse, she sucking at my hard fullness, relieving and warming me, while her father slept. (88-9)

The eroticism in this scene is unabashed; the pleasure she is taking in her maternal “duties” is palpable. Young is in no way advocating for the sexualisation of children in this passage—rather she is acknowledging that “love is partly selfish, and that a woman deserves her own irreducible pleasures” (90).

Young maintains that the “nonphallic pleasure” of breasts, which can sexually arouse without the necessity of intercourse, interfere with phallocentricity— “breasts are a scandal for patriarchy because they disrupt the border between motherhood and sexuality” (75). With this in mind, Young puts forward the case for breastfeeding in public as a way for women to combine the pursuit of their own desires with the act of nurturing others, to inhabit and enjoy both sites without having to give one up to access the other. By embracing the sexual maternal, or more realistically, by *admitting* to the sexual pleasures of mothering, Young says “we may find some means for challenging patriarchal divisions that seek to repress and silence those experiences” (89).

Crashing the border means affirming that women, all women, can “have it all”. It means creating and affirming a kind of love in which a woman does not have to choose between pursuing her own selfish, insatiable desire and giving pleasure and sustenance to another close to her, a nurturance that gives and also takes for itself. (90)

Young in effect is arguing for a revaluing of the maternal as a pleasure and not simply a service. “Without the separation of motherhood and sexuality,” she says, “there can be no image of a love that is all give and no take” (87), and the ideal of the selfless mother no longer carries any weight.

Of course, the leather Mummy is anything but selfless—she revels in the pleasures of the maternal. The leather Mummy blows apart the Madonna myth by boldly declaring a decidedly non-virginal relationship to the maternal. In my interviews I spent some time questioning my participants on the sexual specifics of their play. SM does not necessarily involve sex (Weiss 66) and therefore I was interested in what part sex played in a Mummy scene. Did Mummy allow herself to be fucked, or was she stone?⁴⁹ Was sex an integral part of the play, or completely absent from the dynamic? And did Mummy identify with having a cunt, a cock,⁵⁰ or both? I discovered that, while “Mummy’s” sexuality differed from person to person, most Mummies definitely related to their bottoms in a sexual way.

Many of the women felt that their Mummy had a cock, and some had both a cunt and a cock. Some liked to be fucked, but some only liked to do the fucking. Miss Millie said that it was the *only* top-space she was sexual in (attributing this to a correlation between the intimacy of sex and the intimacy of Mummy-space). Most participants referred at least briefly to the excitement of transgressing the taboo of a sexual relationship between a Mummy and her Little Girl or Boy (a desire which is often connected to incest play), which for some was paramount:

For me it is very cunt identified and it has to do with what really makes me horny, and that is the concept of fucking that which gave you life, and so I like to be fucked when I am a Mummy. (Cokie)

and for others held little or no interest:

There were a couple of times when would I be playing Mummy-Boy stuff with someone and they would [...] make some comment, about, “Oh, Mummy I love you, I’ve loved you since the day I came out of you...” I’d be like “Ooh no.” There

⁴⁹ Stone is a term which refers, in lesbian, gay and queer communities, to those who like to give but not receive physical sexual stimulation.

⁵⁰ I use “cunt” and “cock” as opposed to the anatomical terms “penis” and “vagina” because these words imply a performative quality that extends beyond physical biology. Women and trans* men in queer communities commonly refer to their strap-on dildos as their “cocks”, implying both an ownership of, and a strong corporeal identification with, their phallus. Similarly, this same group often refer to vaginas using the word “cunt”, a word that has been used as a term of insult, but which in some feminist circles has been reclaimed and now carries with it a sense of strength and ownership.

were certain things that were a crossover into being a turn-off, I mean I can play Mummy-Boy but I don't want you to talk about giving birth to you. (Velvet)

In Cokie's case the turn-on was explicitly grounded in a perversion of familial taboos, but also, I would suggest, in perverting the concept of the virginal maternal, whereas for Velvet her attraction to the Mummy role was situated more in relation to the power of the feminine, and less in transgressing prohibited familial boundaries.

Unlike Velvet, Mistress Elizabeth was not squeamish about the topic; however she said she could only remember one time when she had had sex with her Boy in all their years together. For her, her Mummy was "sensual, erotic but not necessarily overtly sexual":

I was surprised, one of my friends who's a colleague and professional as well, I was kind of surprised when she told me that she and her Boy had sex on a regular basis, like, regular sex. I was like, "Oh, it would never cross my mind that that could be possible."

Mistress Elizabeth's admission that it had not occurred to her that a sexual relationship would be "possible" is reflective of my general thesis that, even in sexually subversive subcultures such as the queer women and trans* Mummy community, the sexual maternal is seen as, if not literally an impossibility, at the very least an implausible amalgamation of two conflicting positions.

We see this attitude played out in the way those who engage in Mummy play are received, even within the sex-positive, radical queer kink community, which ironically prides itself on breaking down and challenging "norms" and gender binaries:

It's been okay to be Daddy and to be Daddy's Girl, where it hasn't been okay for Mumma to be sexual, because Mumma⁵¹ is the whore or the Madonna, and being both is really really hard. (Momma Ruth)

There is a further discussion of the reception of leather Daddies and leather Mummies by the kink community at the end of this chapter, and Chapter Three also looks at Mummies and Daddies in relation to femme/butch theory, however it suffices to note here that there

⁵¹ Momma Ruth's first use of the word "Mumma" refers to mothering, whereas her second use of "Mumma" was used in reference to leather Mummies.

was general agreement that members of the wider community often find the idea of a powerful and sexually active maternal figure to be disturbing or distressing.

Sexual limitations and restrictions are continually placed on the maternal body through systems of approval/disapproval, the “good mother” versus “bad mother” dichotomy, and gendered and economical distributions of parental labour which see far more women than men continuing to be more physically confined to the home. As Young expounds, “woman” is split into two opposing sides: the good, who loves (her children) on a spiritual level and is therefore devoid of eroticism or bodily sin, and the bad, who is sexual and selfish and who seeks physical pleasure (87). It is important to note that this silencing of sexuality is not imposed on the paternal—there is no evidence to suggest that a sexual father is rejected in the same way.

Consequently lesbian mothering is also a no-no because of its association with sex:

“Lesbians tend to be constructed as bad mothers because, like gay men, they are associated in the popular imaginary, with sexual activity” (Longhurst 126), which clearly conflicts with the virginal Madonna ideal. The “good” mother is therefore also heterosexual (O’Reilly, “Rocking the Cradle” 36).⁵² In *Mommy Queerest*, a book which further explores the double bind of lesbian sexuality and asexual mothering, Julie M Thompson furthers this point: While lesbians are excluded from legitimate maternity because of their ostensibly reprehensible erotic desires and practices, heterosexual mothers are excluded from the enactment of a non-procreative sexuality lest such activity be construed as immoral” (6).

⁵² I have plenty of first-hand experience of this tension between the childless lesbian and the heterosexual mother. My plans to be a single mum, using a friend as the known donor, have repeatedly been challenged by people both inside and outside of the queer community. The queers are mostly either angry or uninterested, which I suspect relates to an assumption that motherhood will desexualise me and therefore make me difficult to relate to: “Are you sure??? It’s a lot of work, you know.” (No, I didn’t realise. Silly me, it was just a spontaneous idea I had while I was in the shower this morning.) My straight friends on the other hand frequently push the adoption line, as though my queerness renders me infertile or as though I, as a queer woman, don’t have the same physical maternal cravings that a heterosexual woman would have: “Why don’t you adopt instead? There’s so many babies out there in need of a loving home.” No one ever suggests this to my straight friend, who is also currently trying to get pregnant.

If it is subversive for a lesbian to become a mother, then a queer woman role-playing as a mother without even *having* a child is a two-fold slap in the face of the maternal ideal. In effect, the leather Mummy says of the maternal: “I can be this regardless of who I fuck...hell, I can even be this if I don’t reproduce.”

One of the most poignant illustrations of the sexual/maternal divide, however, was raised by Mistress Elizabeth at the end of her interview. She drew my attention to the correlation between MILF/cougar and touchable/untouchable—MILF is an acronym for “Mum I’d *Like* to Fuck”, and I have placed the emphasis on “like” because this word implies that the mum is desirable but is in fact untouchable. In Mistress Elizabeth’s opinion this was because the mum still has children in her care—she is actively maternal and therefore sexually unavailable. The cougar, on the other hand, is an older woman who dates young men—she is guaranteed to either be childless or to be too old to still have children in her immediate care, and therefore she is sexually available.

The sadistic maternal

*When the bough breaks, thy cradle will fall
Down will come baby, cradle and all.*⁵³

The final nail in the leather Mummy's coffin is her openness about her sadistic desires:

It's extraordinarily disturbing to see someone, you know, playing in this space that's extremely sexual and extremely violent, and you know it's not like the hugs and tucks into bed thing that you expect... (Miss Millie)

Sjoberg and Gentry explore the topic of women and violence in terms of terrorism and military brutality, concluding that women, particularly mothers, are not "supposed to be violent" (2); they are supposed to be "maternal, emotional, and peace-loving" (1). As the title of their introductory chapter ("A Woman Did This?") shows, violent acts carried out by women are generally met with a combination of horror and surprise.

In this light then, it is little wonder that the sight of a femme leather Mummy beating up her submissive may at times make some people uncomfortable. A mother isn't "supposed" to hit her children, nor is she "supposed" to sexually gratify herself with her Little Boy or Little Girl. In many ways this attitude is completely understandable; however this is also the point at which an interesting contradiction occurs, because very rarely do you hear the same things being said about a leather Daddy.⁵⁴ Fathers are not "supposed" to hit their children or have sex with them either, and yet the leather Daddy rarely seems to elicit the same uneasy response. In my informal discussions on this subject with fellow kinksters it appeared that with Daddies, people readily differentiated play from reality, but with Mummy the community almost seemed to forget that it was fantasy play. "Mummy's just too close to home," one lover of mine explained. And yet statistically the rate of sexual and physical abuse in the home is overwhelmingly perpetrated by fathers and not

⁵³ Some schools of thought interpret the dark content of this nursery rhyme as being an unfulfilled expression of maternal aggression (Smith 75).

⁵⁴ Leather Daddies are not only gay men, butch women or trans* men—there are also plenty of femmes, trans women, dykes, and gender-queers who also play as Daddies.

mothers. Why, then, is it the leather Mummies who make people uncomfortable, and the Daddies who everyone adores?

I propose that the distinct lack of squick⁵⁵ surrounding leather Daddies can be explained by the title of Sjoberg and Gentry's opening chapter. When a man is violent or commits sexual abuse it is not necessarily *expected* but perhaps *accepted* as being within their "prescribed gender role" (Sjoberg and Gentry 9). However when a woman (or a femme) steps outside of her prescribed gender role of benign, passive nurturer, this transgression is met with horror. "Good" mothers are supposed to be loving and gentle, not dominating and violent. Both Miss Millie and Cokie said that when they played as Mummies in public, it was not uncommon for people to walk away from their scenes in apparent disgust. While of course unable to state with any authority why this was, they were both quietly confident that it was most likely due to people feeling uncomfortable with a sadistic and/or a sexual maternal figure. This friction from within the community therefore presents a fissure in my own argument. Despite the leather Mummy providing us with an example of a space where women are able to simultaneously embrace the sexual and the maternal, she is still met with suspicion and, at times, revulsion, even from within what initially appears to be a community founded in political subversion, an incongruity which is examined in detail in the following chapter.

⁵⁵ "Squick" is a term used in the kink community to describe the feeling of being personally uncomfortable with a particular fetish or sexual practice.

Conclusion

While there are obvious distinctions between parental mothering and the mothering that is done by a leather Mummy, there are also many clear correlations between the two. For example both Mummy play and motherhood involve acts of nurturing, discipline, omnipotent power and unquestionable authority, and can at times also include an element of sacrifice. However, similarities aside, the most significant difference between raising a child and mothering in a BDSM context is concerned with erotic pleasure: the leather Mummy finds it a turn-on while the parental mother is supposed to be turned off. Where the leather Mummy is situated in a hedonistic, sensual pleasure, the pleasure of parental mothering is based on the joy of selfless sacrifice. This conflict leads us to question whether in fact it might be possible to view motherhood as a *mode* of sexuality instead of as a substitute for sexuality, as is traditionally upheld. It is this sensual pleasure which Young believes is the key to empowered mothering—by embracing as opposed to denying these corporeal eroticisms, mothers can reclaim the maternal for their own.

Mummy play also provides us with a model of the childless maternal, where this pleasure is able to exist far removed from the materiality of reproduction. Leather Mummies are living proof that the maternal cannot be contained by essentialist interpretations of the female body—the maternal is something available to *every* body, regardless of gender, age, or reproductive ability or status. For this reason I have made the case for the term ‘aternal’ to be adopted as a non-gendered expression of nurturance and protective care. Furthermore, the leather Mummy disrupts the expectation that a mother be selfless, self-sacrificing, and tied to the home and the child, and frees up the possibility that the maternal might be something more than just a birthright or a chore.

However, it is important that from here we do not leap ahead to conclude that the leather Mummy transcends issues of gender and sexuality. While I would argue that the Mummy kink provides us with a new way of understanding the maternal, there are other areas where I would suggest that the leather Mummy in fact feeds in to the dominant maternal discourse, as opposed to challenging it. The following chapter addresses these concerns through a discussion of queer theory and femme/butch politics, a comparison of the gender

dynamics of leather Daddies and leather Mummies, and an examination of BDSM practices in relation to Judith Butler's theory of performativity.

Chapter Three

Becoming Mummy

**—Performing femme, femininity, and the
maternal**

The games we play

Tommy is bossy and bold and cheeky. Tommy is sexy, Tommy is bad, Tommy makes my heart race and my cunt blush. Tommy is a big kid, a grown-up boi, a butch dyke in leathers with a set of well-worn floggers. But sometimes Tommy pouts out her bottom lip, twists her fingers together awkwardly and nuzzles into my breasts. Sometimes Tommy wants someone to look after her and praise her and tell her what to do. At these times it only feels right that Tommy calls me Mumma. Being Mumma makes me feel strong and sexy and powerful. Mumma is sometimes mean and sometimes sweet. Mumma is gentle and caring and manipulative and tough, and knows everything there is to know in the world. Mumma likes her Little Boy to make her proud by being well-behaved and by doing what she says, and in return Mumma takes care of her Little Boy. This is what I am good at—coddling, protecting, and being the boss. It is a fun little game the two of us play, but is there ever such a thing as just a game?

Introduction

This final chapter takes as its departure point the limitations of feminist maternal theory outlined in Chapter Two, employing Judith Butler's theory of performativity to move towards a queer critique of the leather Mummy as a performance of the maternal. Using this Butlerian lens I interrogate femme/butch theory and its capacity to subvert heteronormative expressions of gender, noting the influence of femme/butch politics on the queer women and trans* kink community and adopting femme activism as a method through which to reposition the maternal as a site of performed, empowered femininity. The final third of the chapter focuses on a recent study (2011) of the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community in which cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss investigates whether BDSM subverts or perpetuates dominant hegemonies. Weiss's findings, which oscillate between applying a radical feminist and a queer, post-feminist stance but which at the same time staunchly avoid advocating for either position, bring a new perspective to the social construction of the leather Mummy in relation to normative structures of power, and also in relation to the leather Mummy's standing within the queer women and trans* kink community.

Becoming Mummy—the performative maternal

“One of my favourite drag queens, Rosie True, once said, ‘I was not born in these false eyelashes’.” (Krista Smith, Femmes of Power 177)

In her landmark feminist text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir famously said “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (283), and in the last sixty years those eight simple words have become the departure point for significant developments in the way we both understand and relate to gender. Perhaps most renowned is Judith Butler’s seminal queer theory text *Gender Trouble*, in which she coins the theory of performativity, an idea reliant on the premise that there is no such thing as true or authentic gender—all gender is a performance, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (43).

Butler’s theory of performativity has been adopted widely by queer theorists, forming the basis for much contemporary gender and sexuality pedagogy. At the heart of Butler’s gender debate is the premise that by recognising the performativity of gender we are also forced to recognise the fluidity of gender and therefore its “openness to resignification and recontextualization” (“Gender Trouble” 176). Queer theory in particular, which strives to (de)classify gender as “fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming” (Browne and Nash 1) and which is concerned with “disturbing the taken-for-granted connections between particular practices of sex, gender and sexuality” (Hubbard 155), relies on Butler’s premise that there is no “original” gender, but instead that gender is in a state of “perpetual incompleteness”, involved in a “continual process of becoming that challenges essential or pre-determined bodies, identities or spaces” (Brown, Browne and Lim, 13). Queer theory therefore recognises the political impact that a fluid understanding of sexuality and gender identification can have on Butler’s phantasmic “originals” —challenging, questioning, and offering up new variations on old, seemingly static scripts.

Butler inverts the very basis of the concept of gender by asserting that all gender is a parody, a copy of a copy “*for which there is no original*” (emphasis in original) (“Imitation” 313), “an imitation without an origin” (“Gender Trouble” 175). In this case, then, far from being the “norm”, it is in fact heterosexuality which stages the *original* performance of

gender. Heterosexuality, Butler asserts, is not the “original”, as is commonly assumed, but is instead a copy itself (“Gender Trouble” 41). Butler illustrates this controversial point through a study of drag, which in its own extremely overt process of imitation highlights the absurdity of gender-based essentialism:

[...] drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. (“Gender Trouble” 174)

As Butlerian theorist Sarah Salih clarifies, through the “disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed”, that is, in the gap between what we perceive as real and what we perceive as performed, drag is able to illuminate “the imitative nature of *all* gender identities” (author’s italics) (65). Furthermore, “Once gender is seen as a *performance* rather than the natural property of people with specific sets of genitals, heterosexual supremacy is radically decentred” (author’s italics) (Wilton 84). Drag teaches us about the impermanence of gender and reminds us of our capacity to transgress gender barriers.

When I read Butler’s analysis of drag I am reminded of those yellow banana lollies you used to be able to buy for five cents at the local corner shop. The lolly bananas are more yellow, more banana-shaped, and more banana-like in taste than the most perfect banana you can grow.⁵⁶ So which is the genuine banana, and what does this say about the bananas that grow on trees, if a lolly can be more like a banana than the banana itself? If we believe that the most genuine banana is one that is bright yellow, perfectly curved and sickly sweet, then the bananas on trees are a poor comparison. They themselves are revealed to be mimicking something which is fabricated, artificial, and unachievable.

In drag the crux of the performance occurs at the moment when we shift our gaze from the performer, centre-stage, to search the wings for their original inspiration. We glance away from the shadow to look for the object that is casting the shadow, but instead we see that

⁵⁶ My analogy is backed up by the musings of Eamonn De Burca in Frankie magazine (2010): “Candy bananas: In the future maybe all fruit will be like this and that will be a good thing. I love these bananas. I wish they made them in the size of actual bananas. [...] I picked bananas in the wild once [...] and the real thing is smelly, sweaty and has probably been pissed on by rats. How wonderful it is to see science actually improve on nature” (85).

it, too, is a shadow itself, and that standing behind it there is nothing. All gender is a performance, a smoke-and-mirrors magic trick, and when it all disappears, when we realise it is an illusion, the stage is left eerily empty.

[T]here is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: “man” and “woman.” (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 186–7)

In these terms, then, male/female and man/woman are in themselves unnatural, unstable imitations of themselves. If there is no true gender then all gender is in effect produced (Salih 136); essentialism is a fairytale straw house, and Butler is the big bad wolf come to blow it all down.

Following Butler’s trajectory, Longhurst, who is interested in embodiments of the maternal which disrupt gender essentialism, maintains that the maternal too must therefore be a performance, “a set of repeated citational and bodily acts that produce the appearance of the ‘natural’ and the ‘true’” (9). What this signals, she says, is that “[i]f maternal bodies have no essence then anyone can engage in mothering and become a mother” (9). Consequently, there can be no “true”, essential maternal, biologically determined maternal bodies themselves being a performative parody. Longhurst uses this platform from which to put forward the challenge to “‘do mothering’ in a range of ‘differently’ embodied ways and to change the ‘regulatory practices’ that govern mothers’ bodies” (146).

With this in mind I return to the leather Mummy and the challenge she presents to the institution of motherhood. If performing gender “restructure[s] the limits of the body” (Rodriguez 186), that is, if a cis-gendered man is able to become a woman for the night simply by getting on stage in a sequinned dress and an ill-fitting wig, then a childless queer can become a “Mummy”. This process of “becoming Mummy” through sexual play signifies a queering of the maternal,⁵⁷ twisting and altering its definition and meaning, the

⁵⁷ This not an entirely new concept. In his Honours thesis titled “Sugar: queering fatherhood”, Grant Kennett presents the gay male sugar daddy as a performance not of gender, but of fatherhood (75–6). Kennett works to expand the definition of the paternal beyond the nuclear family unit, arguing that the care, support, advice, and

ways in which the maternal is recognised, and most importantly the ways in which it is constructed, thereby disconnecting the maternal from discourses of gender, femininity, and heteronormativity. This is the transformative power of queer—using eroticisation and pleasure in a “remarking and reinterpreting [of] the pain and refusal of social intelligibility that constitute our daily lives” (Rodriguez 286).

Reading the leather Mummy in terms of maternal drag, the Mummy top performs both femininity (through a feminine excess) and a parody of maternity, maternity in turn being the ultimate performance of femininity itself. This cyclical progression shows that the maternal is constructed, and in turn that femininity, too, is a fabrication. The question, therefore, is whether the leather Mummy is mocking or celebrating the maternal. It would appear that to varying degrees she does both. For example the strong association with a Stepford-wife-esque aesthetic (as discussed in Chapter Two) plays with a parody of the ideal mother, mocking her as a figure of idyllic femininity and effectively both contradicting and perverting the “good” mother through a sadistic and overtly sexual performance of the maternal. On the other hand the deep pleasure these Mummies gain from their maternal role-play—from embodying the sacred mother and performing her motherly duties—recognises the pleasures of motherhood and honours the maternal with a sense of deep reverence.

As already discussed in Chapter Two, but which I will briefly revisit here, the leather Mummy de-essentialises the maternal and creates the potential for a childless or masculine maternal body. To this I will now add that, applying Butler’s theory of performativity to the leather Mummy, if a queer childless trans-man can “become” maternal by smothering his adult partner in his hairy chest, stroking his partner’s hair and calling himself Mummy, what does this mean for the “original” maternal identity? The leather Mummy is not merely reproducing and reconfiguring the maternal body, she is exposing the maternal as a fiction itself. She shows us that the maternal is indeed an identity that can be slipped on or off, that it is not innate, and furthermore that the regulations imposed on the maternal body (i.e.

financial assistance sugar daddies provide for their partners is akin to the care of a father for his child. Kennett takes fatherhood and alters how we understand it, how we define it, and ultimately, who can access it, and advocates for the sugar daddy to be acknowledged as a queering of the paternal (82).

asexual, sacrificing and selfless) are unnecessary fictions that have been prescribed, constructed and enforced by societal pressures.

Butler asserts that the enactment of desire can contain within it the potential to disrupt, and sees the possibilities for a shifting or redistribution of power and meaning through the act of not simply reproducing, but *reconceptualising* the very structures that disempower us. Furthermore, Butler affirms, this can occur while working from within those structures, “rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself” (“Gender Trouble” 40). Butler offers femme/butch gender re-identification as providing one example of this opportunity for destabilisation (“Gender Trouble” 41) (addressed in detail further on in this chapter), and to this I will add the disruptive potential of sexual role-play.

However, Butler also differentiates between imitation which challenges the validity of gendered roles and imitation which merely reproduces them (“Gender Trouble” 177), acknowledging too that regardless, it is impossible for sexuality to ever exist wholly outside of hegemonic gender hierarchies. Desire is birthed in the very structures of power that are seen to limit us:

sexuality is always constructed within the terms of discourse and power, where power is partially understood in terms of heterosexual and phallic cultural conventions (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 40).

Therefore performativity does not necessarily disrupt gender norms—it is also capable of reinstating them. “There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie” (“Gender Trouble” 185); that is, you work with what you’ve got, and sometimes what you’ve got isn’t so great.

This is particularly applicable to femme and its relationship to femininity. If I as a cis-gendered queer femme walk down the street in my high heels and short skirt, I have a 99 per cent chance of being ogled or wolf-whistled at by a straight man by the time I’ve reached the bus stop. Despite the fact that I am wearing these clothes with a heavy sense of irony, feeling less like a “woman” and more like a drag queen in my sky-scraper heels,⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In an interview with renowned femme activist Amber Hollibaugh, she goes so far as to describe high femme as a form of transgenderism (Harris and Crocker 219–20): “My femininity is about irony. It is a

the ogler and the wolf-whistler are reading me as straight. While my femme-ness is a parody for myself and those who know me, parody “depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered” (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 177). It is in the gap the performance creates between perception and reality that the transformative is able to occur, but if the audience is not able to perceive that gap, then where does this leave me, as a straight-looking femme?

Walking to the bus stop in my heels I am inhabiting a dual space in which I simultaneously challenge and feed heteronormative concepts of femininity. For the man on the street I am confirming what a “woman” should look like, but for myself I am perverting that norm because I know I am sexually unavailable to him (i.e. I am queer), and also because I know I am treating this expression of femininity as a comical hoax. My heels do not “make” me into a straight woman—I am parodying heteronormative femininity with the way I look.

However, for parody to be subversive there must be some point at which the copy (of the copy) makes us question the original copy. Performativity is not subversive if it “serve[s] to reinforce existing distinctions between ‘male’ and ‘female’, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, ‘gay’ and ‘straight’” (Salih 67). Salih gives as two examples the drag performances of Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie* and Robin Williams in *Mrs Doubtfire*: these performances of “woman” did not make us question who or what a woman “is”, they merely created “identity formations which are just as oppressive in their own way” (Salih 2). The power of performativity, as performance studies theorist D. Soyini Madison affirms, is in its reminder that identities are socially constructed, that there is no such thing as a true self, and that nothing is fixed—everything can be changed or altered (164–5).

This leads me to several nagging questions. As Butler herself asserts, “Parody by itself is not subversive” (“Gender Trouble” 176); parody is only a parody if you are in on the joke. Is parody therefore reliant on its audience for validation, or is it suffice to count ourselves as our own private audience? In relation to the leather Mummy, does she satisfy Butler’s

statement about the construction of gender, it is not just an appropriation of gender. It is not being a girl, it is watching yourself be a girl” (Harris and Crocker 215).

requirement that parody “compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality ... [or] enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire” (“Gender Trouble” 177)? And does the leather Mummy expose the maternal as a lie, and maternal essentialism as a socially constructed fabrication, or does she merely mimic popular maternal discourse (“Gender Trouble” 175–6)? These complications will be discussed in detail in the remainder of this chapter, first through a femme/butch theory lens, and then in relation to BDSM and the question of its potential as a subversive practice.

The femme, the Mummy, and the peanut choc-chip biscuit

I am running late to get home and prepare for my interview with Miss Millie, a young San Francisco Mummy, and when I get back to my house I realise in a panic that I don't have any food to offer her. Luckily Miss Millie is also running late. So late that I have time to get changed and throw together some chocolate and peanut butter biscuits (this is America after all, where the idea of chocolate without peanut butter is sheer blasphemy). I think about this as I mix the dough. I also think about the pleasure I get from this scene of domesticity, the deep sense of pride I feel, knowing how fabulous I will look when Miss Millie arrives and I am standing in the kitchen in an apron with a plate of warm biscuits in my hand. But also, and perhaps even more so, I am thinking about how fabulous I will look to the Boy she is bringing along. As I grease the trays and pre-heat the oven I wonder how closely this is related to my Mummy identity. I am performing something that is not real. In reality I am a scabby queer punk who drinks too much and eats out all the time. But I love pretending I am this archetype of a straight, married, suburban mother who bakes all day and wears pearls.

Femme/butch dynamics have been a source of ongoing and at times heated debate within the lesbian community ever since the seventies, when the feminist movement, particularly radical feminists such as Sheila Jeffreys, accused femme/butch of reproducing sexist gender-roles (Linden et al. 1982; Nestle 1984; Roof 1998). (Similarly, the radical feminist movement also attacked BDSM practices as mirroring heterosexual power structures (Wilton 100), as discussed in the final section of this chapter.) However, other feminist groups saw within femme/butch the possibility to deconstruct or destabilise gender stereotypes (Wilton 63).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Another popular response to the backlash was to simply point out that whatever roles were being played in the home or the bedroom, the butch's power was not "backed up in the society as a whole. Femmes tended to be less stigmatized by society ... and therefore to have access to better jobs than butches" (Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis 26). This is not to downplay the overt sexualisation of feminine women, but merely to point out the difficulty that non-gender-conforming women face in being accepted into mainstream society, any perceived masculine privilege failing to translate from the queer to the straight world.

Recasting femme/butch as gender performativity illustrates how femme/butch identities act to contradict heteronormative understandings of power. Case declares femme/butch to be “playfully inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit, free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexual cleavage of sexual difference” (198), and Colleen Lamos describes the pleasure of femme/butch as being in its “sexual deauthorization of gender” (98). Femme/butch “stages gender” (98), but even more so, as Lamos explains, femme/butch:

reverses the supposedly obligatory derivative of sex from gender and breaks the chain that links masculine/feminine with its associated binaries: top/bottom, penetrator/ penetrated, active/passive, male/female, and subject/object of desire. [...] [B]utch/ femme always works at least two ways, to confirm and to unsettle the naturalness of gender and the heterosexual norms it subtends (98–99).

To put it simply, by selecting and emphasising certain characteristics of femininity and masculinity to perform, be this through clothes or mannerisms, the femme or the butch is both acknowledging and mocking the notion that these signifiers are essential requirements of gender recognition.

Therefore, femme/butch speaks to a wider audience than it first may appear.

Femme/butch is not just an obscure sub-category within queer sexuality, but is rather a dynamic that:

expands the vocabulary of sexuality [...] bringing into being new possibilities for bodies and their meanings, which have implications not only for queer sexual lives but for others, too (Cvetkovich 52).

Rather than replicating normative structures of gender, femme is a form of gender *play*, “a model of critical reshaped femininity and assertive sexuality”, “a femininity that is transgressive, disruptive, and chosen” (Harris and Crocker 1, 3). Put simply, femme questions, as opposed to replicates, femininity (Maya Hald, *in* Dahl & Volcano 155). This approach benefits heterosexual as well as queer women by widening the definition of what counts as subversion. Engaging with femininity can be a form of resistance, as opposed to compliance—we can be feminine and still be good feminists.

As discussed in Chapter Two, all of the Mummies I interviewed identified to varying degrees as femme. In fact, most participants felt that due to their femme-ness and their preference for topping, playing as a Mummy was the *only* option available to them.

To me, it's like it's just tied into my femme identity, and I remember hearing in my early twenties people talking about femme Daddies, but I was like, femme Daddies? Why not just be a Mummy? (Velvet)

Up until this point I have attempted to avoid a direct comparison of leather Mummies and Daddies, being conscious of the trap of creating binaries myself; however it is important to acknowledge the gendered differences between the two, in order to complicate the relationship of femme to the leather Mummy. Although a few participants said they played as Daddies from time to time, their loyalty to femme meant that Daddy was often either an inaccessible or undesirable option:

Yeah, there's femme Daddies out there, but when you see a femme Daddy sometimes they're dressed kind of butch, and if you don't feel like dressing butch and you're just femme ... it's like, which one fits the best? (Cleo)

However, although Mummy was sometimes described as being the feminine opposite of Daddy, mostly the participants were reluctant to fall back on gender dichotomies in order to define their play.

This identity with femme was a significant factor considering that, despite a strong femme presence, the vast majority of the queer women and trans* community tend to reject signifiers of normative femininity (such as feminine clothing, makeup, and hairstyles), instead favouring either butch or androgynous aesthetics. The Mummies I interviewed were markedly different to this norm. Most of the interview participants embodied an *excessive* femininity not dissimilar to femme drag, sporting scarlet lips and heaving bosoms, cleavage-revealing tops and hip-hugging skirts. Sue-Ellen Case and Kath Browne each draw links between femmes and drag queens, describing both identities as “a performance of the feminine masquerade ... [an] excess of femininity” (Case 194), “diversely (re)forming femininity both in and beyond the presence or absence of vaginas, breasts and other embodied femininities” (Browne 113).

Despite my continual insistence that the leather Mummy de-essentialises the maternal, it cannot be ignored that her excessive femininity also suggests a deliberate

performance of femininity, and even more so, indicates an essential correlation between femme and the maternal. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Two in relation to the social incomprehension of pregnant butches or trans-men, it is difficult to embody the maternal and be anything other than femme. In addition to this is the relationship between masculinity and power, and femininity and passivity. When women perform masculinity they access patriarchal privilege and power, but when men perform femininity it is ridiculed for being emasculating (Garber 9). The feminine is not taken seriously; rather it is viewed as funny (for example when men dress up in women's clothes), and consequently when men engage with the feminine in BDSM it is usually in the context of forced feminisation, as a source of humiliation. Considering that respect and power are the two elements most essential to a top, it is no surprise then that there are so few butch or male Mummies.

This is all of course not to say that all Mummies *have* to be femmes—as I have previously mentioned I was aware of several butch or trans-male-identified Mummies in the San Francisco area, but for varying reasons was unable to interview them. In my interviews I also raised the question of gay male Mummies, and although no one could actually call any to mind it was generally agreed that while they surely existed, these players would likely keep a low profile due to misogyny in the gay male community:

Mistress Elizabeth: Down the line somebody has done that for sure. But they certainly haven't written a book or made a movie or talked very loudly about it, because that would not go over very well, generally speaking, I would think.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Mistress Elizabeth: I mean the clear and easy answer is the devaluation of the feminine in society.

The complexities of butch women and trans* men who play as Mummies is a gap in my work that I would recommend be addressed in future research; however for the scope of this thesis I was satisfied that it was not necessary to pursue this issue any further.

In fact, not only did I conclude that these exceptions were not crucial to my argument, but also that they were in fact irrelevant, for the very reason that they are indeed nothing but "exceptions". There are always exceptions to the norm—there are femme Daddies and butch Mummies, there are girly femmes who play as Boys and butches who like to be Little

Girls, there are femmes who are only attracted to femmes and femme tops who play with butch subs. I know many of these “exceptions” from friendship circles and from the wider queer community; I have dated them and played with them and at times have been one of these exceptions myself. However it is not the exception to the norm that I am interested in, but the norm itself. As illustrated above there is an assumption about who plays as Mummy and who plays as Daddy, and this assumption provides us with a reference point on which to fix gender. For example, Cokie contradicted herself in the focus group by saying that, while she didn’t want to assume that all Mummies were femme, leather Mummies and femme were “so connected”. Motherhood is seen as the height of femininity, and I would argue that regardless of whether or not a leather Mummy identifies (or even presents) as femme, the leather Mummy is still consciously participating in an embodiment or performance of femininity, and is therefore also engaging with femme.

The femme feminist

*“That’s the thing about being femme; you don’t enjoy **everything** about being a girl.” — Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha, in reference to menstruation (in Fem(me): feminists, lesbians, and bad girls 215).*

While leather Mummies are not always femme-identified and Mummy play does not occur exclusively within femme/butch relationships, there are regardless many significant intersections between the femme activist and the leather Mummy, both in their positions as sites of feminist gender resistance, and in the way this resistance is either ignored or overlooked both in queer theory and by the queer community (Harris and Crocker 4). Most femme/butch theory is limiting in that it focuses on femme/butch desire and inter-relational dynamics, playing into the assumption of a heterosexual binary by failing to acknowledge that one can exist without the other. Furthermore, the masculine or butch position is generally posited as the site of resistance and the femme is cast in the supporting role as “other” to the butch. Occasionally in the queer community, but more so in the wider lesbian community, the femme is even criticised as conforming to, and therefore perpetuating, a heteronormative feminine stereotype.

In a talk given at the 2013 Sydney Femme Guild “Unpacking Femme” conference, Hannah McCann from the Canberra Femme Collective presented a paper addressing the need for femme activism within the queer community. She discussed how, while the butch or masculine-presenting woman or trans-man is revered and respected for their subversion of gender, the potential of femme as a “site of resistance to prevailing gender norms” is largely ignored. The role the femme plays in gender resistance is frequently overlooked, the outcome being that the contribution of the feminine is once again discredited, even within a community which is in other ways so closely aligned with feminism and which so adamantly celebrates radical concepts of gender.

Arguably the femme resists femininity as much, if not more so than the butch, because instead of discarding femininity as the butch does, the femme manages to take something oppressive and rework it, recoding femininity as a pleasure instead of a limitation. As high

femme Mistress Morgana declares in Dahl's *Femmes of Power*, "To me femme is about taking the things that oppressed me and using them" (30). In the same text, long-serving femme activist Amber Hollibaugh describes femme as a reclaiming of the feminine, "partially determined by our defiance and resolution that we would salvage whatever we could from the tortured terrain of the biological female" (185). In a similar way the leather Mummy reclaims the institution of motherhood. Just as the butch performs masculinity in the absence of the phallus, in effect taking an oppressive symbol and using it for her own enjoyment, the leather Mummy performs the maternal in the absence of a child, using the repression of motherhood and femininity almost as sex toys, as sources of personal gratification. The butch becomes a cis-gendered "man" no more than the leather Mummy becomes a biological mother, but the admission of this fictionalism is itself a part of the eroticism.

Likewise, the femme engages in a conscious interaction not only with the feminine, but with the *fantasy* of the feminine, and it is in this gap between truth and fiction that the pleasure of femme lies. For example, in a published conversation between femme icons Barbara Cruishank and Joan Nestle, Cruishank talks about the role *choice* plays in the difference between "femme" and "woman", describing how as she once found herself in a relationship where she was playing the part of the housewife, doing all the cooking and cleaning for her butch partner. She differentiates between this scenario and the play-acting of femme, between what is sexy and what is not: "[...] here I was again occupying the position of woman as opposed to femme" (Nestle and Cruishank 114). What Cruishank is saying is that there is a lack of choice in being a "woman", and that by sheer virtue of one's gender, women are assigned to the feminine signifiers of passive lover, home-maker, and domestic slave. Femme, on the other hand, makes a conscious choice to engage with and take pleasure in some aspects of femininity, and to discard the ones she doesn't find appealing.

Taking pleasure in something which is not supposed to bring pleasure is an act of resistance. Femininity is commonly associated with sexual passivity and with providing, as opposed to receiving, pleasure, and in the past radical feminists have claimed that femme reproduces these same sexual dynamics (Harris and Crocker 3). However, the counter-argument is that, just as the leather Mummy unites the virgin and the whore (the idolised maternal and the assertively sexual), the femme "combines a visible, seemingly proper

femininity with a female sexuality that satisfies her own desires, not someone else's. [...] [she is] sexually active yet not a sexual victim" (Harris and Crocker 99).

Following in this vein Cvetkovich makes a case for recasting traditional feminine attributes as sites of power. For example we often view femininity (and consequently femmes) as being "vulnerable", but what if, instead, we perceive this vulnerability "as a desirable and often difficult achievement" (Cvetkovich 58)? What if this "vulnerability" is a quality the femme works hard to create so that, in a sexually charged gesture, she can offer it up to her lover? A femme is not bound by the "rules" of femininity—she can choose to be sexually assertive or she can choose to take the passive role, but in choosing, she reclaims that passivity as a source of erotic pleasure (Cvetkovich 58). For example, if a femme bottom enjoys assuming the submissive role, her "position is one of receiving pleasure rather than of being receptive solely for someone else's pleasure" (Harris and Crocker 4).

Not only is the femme queering femininity by redirecting her feminine charms from men to women, but also by taking those "learned and innate characteristics" and reshaping them as sources of pleasure. Femme is about "reclaiming the attributes associated with femininity that have so often been used against us individually and collectively and using them for our own benefit" (Ortiz 92). In a bold inversion of radical feminist politics, Harris and Crocker go so far as to declare the sexually assertive femme as the true radical feminist, pointing out that by going against the feminist grain and embracing femininity, she is *following* her own autonomous desires as opposed to *obeying* a set of "politically prescribed pleasures" (4), be they mainstream or theoretically "radical".

I will admit that there were times when I wondered whether Mummy was not simply a disguised form of female oppression, a sexed-up, kinked-up adaptation of feminine subservience that on first glance appeared to subvert the norm, but on deeper examination did the converse. This suspicion was further fed by the admission by many of my interviewees that they either identified as service tops⁶⁰ or, if not, described in great detail the sacrifices they had made and the maternal labour involved with being a leather Mummy.

⁶⁰ A service top is the dominant partner in a D/s relationship, but as part of their role they take care of the submissive, providing service to them by looking after them and fulfilling their wishes and needs.

I had been disappointed to discover that, in contrast with the self-serving disciplinary Daddy, Mummy frequently assumed the role of martyr, receiving her pleasure second-hand through the provision of pleasure to others. This in turn made me speculate as to whether the leather Mummy was merely maintaining sexist norms—just as Lamos, for example, acknowledges that femme/butch identities can be potentially interpreted as perpetuating essentialism by playing out heterosexual norms (94), I privately wondered what could possibly be so subversive about a femme providing care and nurturance to butches.

However, femme theory presented me with a new perspective on power, forcing me to question my own phallogentric lens. I began to understand that by renegotiating the power dynamics of a mother-child relationship, the leather Mummy empowers both femininity and the maternal. The two factors at play are of course consent and pleasure—the leather Mummy has made an active choice to play this role, and she takes great enjoyment in it. But does consent automatically equate to empowerment, and does consent negate subjugation? I address this in more depth in relation to BDSM in the final section of this chapter.

Is femme/butch really subversive?

“Gender equality will not be achieved through erasing femininity and masculinity, but rather when we stop devaluing what is feminine” —Fat femme activist Krista Smith, interviewed in Femmes of Power (178).

Although up until this point I have argued that femme/butch can be instrumental in contributing to a radicalisation of gender, I also found a great deal of evidence to the contrary. As a brief example Sally Munt discusses the consideration that a cross-dressing woman may not possess the phallus, but may still be able to enjoy male privilege (120). As Munt explains, even if it is accepted that femme/butch is capable of subverting gendered roles,

they are not intrinsically radical forms springing perfect from the homosexual body. Nor are they naïve forms in the sense that they express a naturally good, pure and primitive desire (120).

Femme and butch draw from patriarchal structures of gender and power, and therefore are not *necessarily* radical subversions of gender. Furthermore, even if these performances *are* subverting gender, they may still be subject to gender regulation: a femme can practise a radical performance of gender but she may also still experience misogyny from both the straight world and from within her own queer community. Likewise, the leather Mummy can enact an erotic performance of the maternal while simultaneously experiencing a policing of her sexuality from within her own queer kink community.

This is not a new idea—femme activists have been speaking out about femme-phobia in the queer and lesbian communities for decades, drawing parallels with sexism and the devaluing of femininity. As renowned femme activist and scholar Amber Hollibaugh says in her afterword to Dahl’s *Femmes of Power*:

while I know the world of queerness has shifted and expanded in countless and powerful ways, the bottom line is still that femmes and femme identities don’t really count for much, aren’t valued or seen to be as truly queer as other homoerotic personas. [...] And that tells you how despised women are, even by those of us born female. Femmes are read as impostors, betrayers of the authentic queer self. (185)

The queer community often fails to appreciate just how subversive it is to be a queer femme in a straight world.⁶¹

In my interviews and casual discussions with the San Francisco Mummies I noted a general consensus that femme-phobia is rife in many areas of the queer women and trans* community. There was agreement that femmes are seen as high maintenance and are often not valued or respected, that there are statistically more butches than femmes, and that femme sexuality struggles to be recognised in any way other than in relation to butch desire (for example femme-on-femme attraction is not taken seriously because there is no butch in the equation). The group blamed femme-phobia on a variety of external and internal pressures, but largely attributed it to a continuation of the negativity directed towards femme during the emergence of second-wave feminism, which dictated that femme replicated heteronormativity by perpetuating patriarchal gender constructs.⁶²

⁶¹ In their investigation of femmes in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s, Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis note that in that era the black lesbian community received femmes far more favourably than they were received elsewhere. Their theory is that the black community socialised less in public bars and more at house parties, where the femme was often in a position of power as the host, nurturing, feeding, and taking care of her guests (21). It would be interesting to know if this is still the case today, and if so, if it is also the case for leather Mummies. In correlation with this I would also like to mention that linguist terms such as “hot mama” and “mama cita” are common in African-American and Latino-American communities. While I have no supporting evidence to confirm my hypothesis, I propose that this could perhaps be read as evidence that sexual mother is also not regarded with the same level of discomfort in these non-white American communities.

⁶² When I first wrote this paragraph I become confused—was the popular argument that butch had survived the 1970s Sex Wars because it was “gender-neutral”, while femme had fallen by the wayside because it was buying into phallic value-systems? “Didn’t butch do that too?”, I wrote in my notes in the margin. In response to radical feminist claims that femme/butch replicates heteronormative relationships Colleen Lamos highlights the irony of the argument, pointing out that the “ideal” androgynous woman second-wave feminism aspired to actually perpetuates patriarchy more than the femme. The androgynous or butch woman dismisses the feminine, and in so doing assumes a “neutral” gender position which is in fact not neutral but masculine-of-centre. As Lamos summarises, this attitude ironically served to reinforce essentialism; the androgynous dyke was: “based not on gender difference (as in butch/femme) but on gender identification. [...] Indeed, the lesbian-feminist consolidation of female gender and female sexuality [...] curiously reiterates the sexist ideal of an essential, pure femininity” (93).

The fact that the leather Mummy community is not only small but is also disproportionately less visible⁶³ than its leather family counterparts was recognised by many of the participants as being reflective of mainstream misogynistic attitudes towards women and mothers. To this I would add the problem of femme invisibility: as femme activist Lapovsky Kennedy points out, the problem in femme/butch is that the butches receive all of the public recognition while the femmes, unless on the arm of a butch, inadvertently find themselves back in the closet (16). Consequently, while the female leather Daddy has had a vibrant presence in the queer kink scene for many many years, the leather Mummy is a relatively new identity,⁶⁴ and even now, many players seem unaware of its existence. As Miss Millie commented,

Actually one of the reasons that I often play in public is to make people deal with that reality. The thing that I get most if I mention that I am a queer leather Mummy is the question “What’s that?”, which I don’t hear anyone *ever* ask a queer leather

⁶³ Visibility relates not just to the importance of peer recognition, but also to desirability. As queer theorist Jason Lim argues, the subject who is performing an identity seeks confirmation “through being recognised and desired by other subjects” (63). The leather Mummy, who is relatively invisible within her community, is therefore yet to have her sexual currency validated. In other words, leather Mummies are not seen as being cool enough to be the new hot thing on the block, and until this changes, Mummy will remain on the edge of the spotlight, playing second fiddle to Daddy.

⁶⁴ I came across a variety of information which, while inconsistent in some ways was consistent in confirming that that it has only been in the last seven years that Mummy has been assigned a colour in the hanky code. (In the BDSM community there is a system called the “hanky code”, which refers to the placing of a coloured handkerchief—each colour referring to a different kink—in one’s back pocket in order to signify what kinks the wearer is interested in and whether they play as a top or a bottom.) However the claim that “Mummy” is only a recent term being used in the BDSM community should not be oversimplified; this is also at least in part due to historical reasons related to the genesis of the leather community, which originally consisted almost exclusively of gay men. Initially Daddy did not refer to a paternal D/s player so much as to a sexual top. As Mistress Elizabeth discussed with me: “...I think that Daddy ... [is] adopted from the gay male paradigm around SM, which came from motorcycle clubs and leather groups and things like that. Daddy was not a D/s thing initially. It’s a pseudonym for a top who’s kind of a little bit older maybe and maybe likes a little chicken meat or something along those lines. It’s almost synonymous with top. A Daddy top is different from a D/s Daddy, one who actually enjoys nurturing and looking after in a Daddy role. That’s much more, I think, a straight thing, or a queer thing, or especially now with the world of transfolk and butches. But I’ve had Daddies who were primarily just sexual daddies. That’s all it was. And I haven’t actually had that many who were into the D/s dynamic.” However even with this in mind, considering that women are now very much involved with the leather community, we have not seen a corresponding surge in the prevalence of leather Mummies.

Daddy. It's like ... why would you ask me that question, as if this doesn't exist and I made this up just now?

It stands to reason, therefore, that the lack of awareness and visibility is further reflected in the prevalence of Daddies and scarcity of Mummies in the scene.

Furthermore, and perhaps most crucially, the general consensus was that as femme tops it is difficult to be respected or taken seriously. Strong femmes, I was told, are treated with unease, while butch or masculine-of-centre identities are valorised, the general assumption being that femmes bottom and butches top. The Mummies talked extensively about how difficult it was to be a femme top in a butch-dominated scene. Most of the interviewees described scenarios where they felt their legitimacy as tops was being challenged:

...I dabbled very briefly with online dating and had like a couple of experiences of butches contacting me and being like, "I can flip you, I can show you," ... you know, that kind of thing... (Velvet).

When I first came to this community I had a lot of butches who would even go as far as to send a top butch over acting as a bottom butch to see how much of a top I really was ... I was told by one person, "Oh yeah, this person is really interested in you, and they're a submissive", and I come to find out they are a double top, so trying to be flipped by butches I got some of that and really I learned quickly that it was a boys' game and it was not for femmes, and I have kind of tried to pave my own way since then. (Cleo)

I had a queer woman shove me out of the way to get to my Boy, who was standing behind me, in a collar... This butch came up, pushed me out of the way, literally pushed me out of the way, grabbed my Boy by his shirt collar and said, "Have I done you yet?" I literally picked this person up ... and said, "Did you not see me standing here? No, you have never done him and you never will. Now go away," ... but you're invisible... That's one of the reasons that I don't play [publicly], what happened to me and not respecting my space, and assuming that when we're standing next to each other that the butch is the top, which is degrading to me and then degrading to them, too, and disruptive of play space... (Momma Ruth)

As evident in the above quotes, despite an emphasis on queering gender norms, the positioning of the masculine as dominant and the feminine as submissive is frequently replicated in the queer women and trans* kink scene.⁶⁵

Of course, the examples given above were all isolated incidents and not everyday occurrences, and it is important to note that these Mummies all left a sea of ardent admirers in their wake and were deeply respected by the majority of their queer kinky peers. However the fact remains that most of the Mummies had experienced situations where their femmeness had been seen as incongruent with their top-ness, and accordingly had had their authority challenged. To my mind these incidences were reflective of a pervasive contempt for femininity, femmes, and the maternal.

While the focus of my research was on the experiences of Mummy tops, several women spoke about how the lack of respect they experienced also affected their subs, stressing that there is often a sense of shame associated with submitting to a dominant femme maternal figure:

...it's hard for a butch no matter if they're a Boy or a Daddy, to go down for a femme because the way that they've been, what's the word, programmed ... yes, socialised— and so it makes it even more taboo for the both of us almost ... we're still a little taboo if we're not submissive women, if we're not submissive femmes.
(Cleo)

⁶⁵ However in my focus group there was also some discussion around the idea that while femme dominance is viewed with some unease in the queer BDSM community, it is much more readily eroticised in the heterosexual BDSM community. As Miss Millie explained, “it is eroticised because of the whole, you know, female not being seen as powerful thing, so that becomes a fantasy”. There was speculation that perhaps this also meant that Mummy play was likely to be seen as more acceptable in the heterosexual kink community.

...I would tie that in to misogyny. Absolutely. Because Girls who are Daddy's Girls are totally playing the feminine role that one is supposed to play in this society. It fits you in perfectly, and Boys that are Mummy's Boys are considered effeminate. And it like totally kind of takes them down in stature, it devalues them, and what's worse than like you know, being submissive to femininity... I think that it is absolutely related to the devaluation of femininity. (Cokie)

Submitting to a powerful femme equates to a diminishing of masculinity, and therefore is not desirable for many players. Additionally, it appeared there was less kink-cred given to those players who chose to submit to a femme top, Daddies yet again carrying far more sexual currency. This is also an issue I experienced myself in my own private life in the course of this thesis—butch or masculine-of-centre partners of mine on several occasions expressed concern that people would assume, by virtue of my PhD, that they were Mummy subs, and that they would consequently be thought less of and would lose respect in the kink community.⁶⁶

Interestingly, however, femme-phobia and a disregard for femmes as tops were touted as being the exact reasons why these femmes were drawn to Mummy—despite being largely invisible in the kink scene, my interview participants said that they felt Mummy provided a space in which to reclaim femme power and to celebrate the mother—the ultimate powerful femme figure.

I think of how a traditional more mainstream thinking of Mummy—femininity, and for me reclaiming femininity and embracing femininity is something that should be respected and is often denigrated in our society, and we live in a really misogynistic society that hates femininity and devalues it, so reclaiming that is really powerful and important. (Cokie) [3]

Just as the femme reclaims and rewrites femininity, so too does the leather Mummy. However on the question of the maternal, the jury is still out: does the leather Mummy question what it means to be maternal, or reinforce it? As I will discuss further in the remainder of this chapter, I would argue for both.

⁶⁶ This reminds me of the school playground slur of being called a “mama's boy”, which carries an element of ridicule and is the polar opposite of “daddy's girl”, which while still an insult, carries a tone of jealousy more than ridicule, suggesting that the child is spoilt and can do no wrong.

Ironing out the kinks in the BDSM debate

I am walking through Dolores Park in San Francisco one uncharacteristically warm day when I notice two hot tough tattooed rockabilly women sitting together nursing their babies. The thing that strikes me the most about this scene is the serenity, the identical look of docility and peace on those two mothers' faces. For some reason it makes me feel pissed off; I want to rage against their smugness, rage against this image of idyllic martyrdom, grab them by the shoulders and shake them until they remember that they're tough hot bitches who don't have to buy into the maternal martyr myth. And yet at the same time I envy them.

In the same way that I have always resisted "femme" and the gendered behavioural expectations that come with it, I have also resisted (and resented) the maternal, with its requisite softness and placidity. I refuse to be that for anyone—child or lover. Yet at the same time I am drawn to it, drawn to the kitschy image of me as an unlikely madonna, drawn to the hyper-femininity and "glamorised womanliness" of motherhood (Friedan 65). My baby-lust makes me feel trapped, like the mother in The Feminine Mystique who confesses: "When I'm pregnant and the babies are little, I'm somebody, finally, a mother. But then, they get older. I can't just keep on having babies" (236). For the last four years I've been trying to figure out why I've chosen this particular thesis topic and today I have found the beginnings of an answer. I am currently grappling with my own baby plans, trying to figure out how "queer", "kinky" and "maternal" can all fit together, but when I think about Peanut and the way I like to boss her around and make her snivel and then kiss it all better, it starts to fall into place. If "Mummy" can be chosen, as opposed to assigned at birth, if Mummy can be strong and powerful and sexy, instead of devoted and sacrificial, and if Mummy's purpose isn't just to pleasure someone else, but also to pleasure herself, then this whole maternal lark starts to look a bit more appealing. Mummy play shows me a way to rebel against motherhood as an institution, and revel in my maternal urges without losing my queer feminist cred. Here is a chance to be both—to be soft mamma and hard bitch, to be the peaceful, virginal Madonna and the feisty, fuck-able whore; to have my cake, and stuff my face with it too.

Similar to the femme/butch feminist debate, BDSM has often been accused by both radical feminists and the sexually conservative of being perverse, strange, or sick, perpetuating

problematic power structures and simulating abusive relationship dynamics. Published in 1982, *Against Sadomasochism*—a radical feminist analysis (Linden et al.) labels SM as an anti-feminist practice which not only reflects, but also reinforces a “patriarchal sexual ideology” (4), and fosters an abuse culture. Around the same time SAMOIS, a San Francisco-based lesbian/feminist SM organisation, published *Coming to Power* in response to the radical feminist hysteria surrounding kink. Alongside other sex-positive feminists SAMOIS argues that on the contrary, BDSM empowers its players, pushes boundaries, subverts norms, and challenges stereotypes and binaries (Langdridge & Barker 5; Bauer 179–184; Juicy Lucy 35–6).

This debate aside, why, in a queer community that continually struggles to deconstruct the systems of power that restrict and condemn us, do we return time and time again in our own erotic play to a replication of the very systems that oppress us? Pleasure is a political tool, a way of “recoding or remaking a traumatic experience into a pleasurable one” (Weiss 147). Rodriguez furthers this idea with the suggestion that *queer* pleasure and a defiance of power are intrinsically linked:

As queer radicalized sexual subjects, control, defiance, accommodation, and violence have historically formed an integral part of our formation as social beings. Therefore these articulations of power can come to bear special meaning in our sexual practices. [...] That these narratives are often steeped in discourses of heterosexual gender and heteronormative sexuality, barely tinted or boldly coated through figures of radicalization, should not surprise us; these are the discourses, images, and performative acts that have hailed us as desiring subjects. (286)

If a person dresses up as a police officer and beats their submissive with a truncheon, this is one way of articulating (and perverting) institutionalised power. If a person calls themselves Mummy as they spank their submissive, this is in some ways similar: subverting and queering heteronormative family structures for the purposes of pleasure, drawing on authoritative roles that we have been exposed to from birth, and which have without question helped inform who we are today.

Referring once again to Butler’s theory of performativity, well-known BDSM advocate Patrick Califia, who has written widely on the subject of BDSM from both a queer and a feminist perspective, asserts that assuming positions of normative power (for example as a

Mummy, a Daddy, a police officer, or a priest) first mocks the essentialist origins of power and then, with a sense of queer irony, reproduces it (135). As with the femme performing femininity, there is a great deal of pleasure to be had in assuming these roles (Califia 135), this pleasure in itself being a site of resistance. While not necessarily agreeing that BDSM is a gender-subversive space, Herman takes up this idea of mocking as a subversive tool:

Roles can be reversed and/or intensified, but the roles remain nonetheless. BDSM thus disrupts normative heterosexuality more by taking it to extremes—or even caricature—than by contradicting it. (99)

As Califia further advocates, “S&M is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism and sexual dissent.” (130) Yet how far can this claim of “dissent” be stretched?

In her explication of lesbian desire, Elizabeth Grosz acknowledges that lesbian sexuality diverts from heterosexual, phallogentric norms, and that within the queer kinky community our practices to lesser or greater extents mirror and/or distort these mainstream values (69). However Grosz does not make romantic declarations that these practices will challenge and change the status quo; what she is more interested in is the spaces these desires draw attention to, the gaps in knowledge they highlight, the “contradictions [...] that can and should be used to strategically discern significant sites of contestation [...] to rethink, to recontextualize, to see in a different way” (69). Grosz explains this in terms of queer sex, as opposed to in relation to BDSM, stating that the mere fact that sex is queer does not provide an alternative to patriarchal sexuality. “[L]esbianism and gay male sexuality are, as much as heterosexuality, products of patriarchy” (77), Grosz contests, and I would argue that this is equally applicable to BDSM. It is impossible to create a sexual existence “outside the limits of patriarchal models” (77). Of course, Grosz acknowledges that there are varying degrees of subversion and perversion, but her point remains that all transgressions still stem from and can be traced back to normative structures of gender and power.

Cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss is similarly concerned with mapping out the overlap between internal desire and external influences, focusing on an examination of the boundary between what we consider to be normative and what we deem transgressive. The concept that sex is always subversive, Weiss purports, is reliant on the premise that sex

is private and does not participate in social norms. “On the one hand,” she says, “SM is figured as outlaw: as transgressive of normative sexual values. On the other hand, SM is dependent on social norms: practitioners draw on social hierarchies to produce SM scenes, just as such norms performatively produce subjects” (Weiss 145). Sex, sexuality, and BDSM do not occur in private—they are intrinsically linked to the public, to “social hierarchies, communities, and relations of inequality” (Weiss 6).

In *Techniques of Pleasure*, (2011) Weiss details a three-year study she undertook of the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community, where she documented certain societal norms and power structures being played out time and time again. For one, she noted that while white heterosexual male tops predominated, submissive roles were on the whole played by people of colour and women (144-5).⁶⁷ Weiss structured her study around a comparison of the radical feminist, anti-BDSM camp and the pro-BDSM, queer theory cheer-squad, using these opposing paradigms to ask whether the dynamics she observed in the San Francisco community operated as a reiteration of or a rebellion from normative culture. As Weiss summarises, radical feminists are against BDSM on the grounds that it replicates heteronormative patriarchal power structures, whereas queer theorists view BDSM practice as transgressive (Weiss 158). Weiss herself sits somewhere in between.

While she does not subscribe to the blanket approach that SM simply perpetuates heteronormative power structures, she also does not have a rose-tinted faith in SM as being situated entirely outside of existing oppressive structures. She cites as an example a slave auction she attended early on in her research. Weiss describes the slave auction as being a particularly uncomfortable experience: most of the people in the room were white, with only a few exceptions, two of whom were submissives being auctioned off by their white masters (4-6). Weiss’s subsequent research (including interviews with both white players and players who identified as people of colour) suggests a convincing connection between

⁶⁷ While I resist the impulse to draw any conclusions about the replication of heteronormativity from these findings, from my occasional forays into the heterosexual kink world and also from my monitoring of Fetlife, the popular international fetish website, I would agree with Weiss’s observations. Of course there are plenty of examples of people who subvert these gender and race norms, and in a multitude of different ways, however there is undoubtedly a majority of players who fall into the categories Weiss has identified.

the holding of racially charged events such as this and the conspicuous lack of people of colour participating in the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community.

If truth be told, I am unsure how to apply Weiss's evaluation to the leather Mummy. Weiss concludes that the San Francisco pansexual kink community perpetuates normative values, and seeing as the majority of those playing as Mummy identify as femme, it leads me to ask yet again whether the leather Mummy in turn merely validates the stereotype that nurturing, listening, and being supportive are a woman's job, and not a man's. I suspect that the Mummies I interviewed would be very angry if this thesis concluded with a grand statement to the effect that the leather Mummy feeds a patriarchal norm and reinforces sexist systems of gender. This is not at all how they see it, and I am confident that they would argue that as queer perverts, they would not enjoy Mummy play if it wasn't somehow subversive.

It is interesting, then, to remember that Weiss's argument is reliant on situations where existing positions of power (the white master, the heterosexual male top) are being reiterated in SM play. Following this trajectory then, it stands to reason that all power is situational, and that it changes in each individual scene depending on who is doing what. But Weiss is not necessarily inferring that a slave auction comprising a dominant person of colour and a white submissive would make the scene subversive, rather she is saying that it is difficult for slave play to be subverted by *anyone* while racism is still alive and kicking. What does this then mean for the leather Mummy? While the mother figure might be viewed as all-powerful by her child, motherhood itself is not generally considered to be particularly empowering. The leather Mummy is not perpetuating a system of power which is already in existence; rather she is inscribing power into a role which usually has none.

In some respects, then, perhaps the leather Mummy is the exception to the radical feminist argument that BDSM perpetuates sexist power structures. I do not wish to hold the leather Mummy up as a shining example of the liberated feminine; this would be oversimplifying a question which has no definitive answer. However, if this were true then it would also follow that by inscribing the traditionally disempowered maternal with limitless power, the leather Mummy is one of the most transgressive dominant roles in the SM world.

Does consent make it ok?

*It is a fun little game the two of us play
but is there ever such a thing as just a game?*

Criticism of the SM scene as perpetuating problematic power structures is commonly met with the response that players engage in informed consent, making the *choice* to play in these roles. Consenting to engage in a scene or power dynamic theoretically translates a scene that could be read as disempowering into a site of empowerment. For example if a woman of colour attends a slave auction in the role of slave to her white master, the process of consent means that she will have chosen to submit, she will have chosen the terms on which she will play, and she will have chosen when the scene starts and ends.

However, as Weiss argues, “free consent” is not as simple as it sounds. SM does not operate in its own bubble, “outside of social relations and social norms” (6), rather all material for a BDSM scene is produced from what we already know: therefore the players, too, enter the scene as bodies already inscribed by the pressures and pains of socialisation and history. SM isn’t necessarily as transgressive as we think (6); we cannot simply step outside of the power structures which dominate our world.

Though an understandable goal, this desire also produces an imaginary in which individual desires and actions can be separated from social systems and power. It re- encodes the safe, sane, and consensual scene as a playground of equality, SM play as “only a game,” and radicalized and sexualized gender as individually chosen and, thus, mastered. (Weiss 185)

Furthermore, Weiss warns, this idea of the consensual playground as being an even playing-field paired with the assertion that BDSM play is automatically subversive brings with it the danger of “isms” being seen as “okay”, validated under the catch-cry that it is “only play” (163).

I am inclined to agree with Weiss in that I struggle to see how, in a room full of privileged white players, a slave auction could be read as a racially empowering event, particularly considering America’s slave history and its volatile present-day race relations. While I

appreciate that for some individuals engaging in this scene may have been a positive and empowering experience, the fact that there were so few people of colour in attendance tells a story in itself. At this point I want to return briefly to the discussion of parody which occurred earlier in this chapter. I made the point then that a parody is only a subversion if everyone is “in on the joke”, and while racism is anything but funny, this criterion is also relevant in Weiss’s slave auction scenario.

Weiss interviewed some of the people who had either participated in or observed the slave auction—several of them talked about finding the event offensive, and others discussed the analytical process they had gone through to reach the conclusion that the scenario was subversive, and therefore “okay”. However, most people denied, or worse, had not even considered that there was any correlation between the auction and racist power structures. These participants were all, unsurprisingly, white. If everyone who had participated in the auction had been “in on the joke” (meaning, in this situation, if everyone had participated in the auction with the conscious intention of it being a parody of race and power relations) then would this have made the event subversive? Does intention matter, or am I merely providing a get out of jail free card? I admit that I am unsure. What I *am* sure of is that it would have still only been a parody for the insiders who had decided on this intention—most people of colour would not have seen it that way because ... well, because they weren’t there to see it in the first place, which is Weiss’s point.

The defence is commonly made that BDSM “is only play”, and therefore is too innocuous to be guilty of perpetuating normative systems of power. However it is here that Weiss catches out BDSM’s fatal contradiction—if it is indeed “only play” it must also therefore be incapable of being transgressive. In order to be transgressive BDSM needs to engage with the world, and by engaging with the outside world it is admitting it is not “just a game”, and is forced to acknowledge its relationship, however estranged, to social power structures. BDSM is not just a game; it is an engagement with the powers that oppress us and the structures that confine us—it both replicates and resists. BDSM, Weiss concludes, is not a repetition of social power; it carries and produces the complexities of social relationships, relationships shot through with contradictions unresolved—indeed, erotically and politically powerful precisely because they remain in tension. (Weiss 230)

That is what makes kink fun, but it is also what makes kink complicated.

Weiss's (inevitable) conclusion is that "There is no simple reading of the SM scene" (230). Weiss is not a radical feminist prude (while not a serious committed player herself, she is a queer woman who freely admits to being a frequent dabbler in various kinks), however she *is* a pragmatist. She rejects the anti-S/M hysteria of the radical feminist argument, but she does concede that "SM is produced through social power, that sexuality (scenes, erotics, desire, and fantasy) is always social, and that 'none of us is exempt' from this condition" (154). She is also not a romantic, and does not cling to the queer idealism that BDSM is a emancipated space where its players are able to build new worlds and identities which are free from the shackles of patriarchy. However, despite a reliance on and also a replication of social norms, just as with progressive contemporary readings of femme/butch, Weiss recognises the potential of SM role-play to illustrate the "tensions" between these social "rules" (Weiss 100).

Conclusion

I am inclined to agree with Weiss's verdict on BDSM. Simply performing the maternal is not a guarantee that you have therefore reclaimed and reinvented it, and drawing attention to the essentialism of motherhood does not mean that at the same time these essentialisms are not being reinforced. These ideas that we play with do not come out of thin air, rather they emerge from beneath structures of race, class, gender and sexuality which are more often than not problematic, and that problem is not always left at the dungeon door. Additionally, who is playing and how can also affect how effectively that power is reclaimed.

It was for this reason that I limited my research to queer women and trans* Mummies; I wanted to see the leather Mummy at her most subversive, at her most contradictory limits. I had speculated that, in contrast, heterosexual Mummy play would more closely replicate heteronormative gender norms, yet interestingly I found similar norms reflected in the queer women and trans* community, the butch taking the place of the cis-gendered man. Weiss says that "SM both requires and reproduces these social relations of inequality" (161), and while I would add that, in the spirit of femme activism, SM also resists and reforms, I will also not deny Weiss's sentiment. However, most of my criticism is directed at the wider kink community as opposed to at the leather Mummies themselves. As I have observed in the way femme tops are treated and the way the leather Mummy is received, our desires and attitudes are, if not shaped, then at least heavily influenced by patriarchal social discourses. Although we like to think that we live in a subversive rainbow bubble, as Butler herself affirms it is impossible to deny that there is no "outside" of power; the queer women and trans* community is informed by the same phallogentric values and structures that govern all of us, whether we like it or not.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to contribute to a critique of social perspectives on motherhood by providing a new way of viewing and defining the maternal, and by considering maternal sexuality as a viable and empowered space. In Chapter One I outlined my methods and methodology—I explained my research objectives and the queer feminist framework from within which I have approached the question of queer, women and trans* leather Mummies. I discussed questions of consent with regards to online ethnography, the ins and outs of conducting ethnographic research within a sexual community, and the ethical implications of researching a community I myself am a part of. The complicated relationship between being both insider and outsider played an integral role in my information-gathering as well as becoming a point of ethical debate. In closing I outlined my ethnographic fieldwork process —how I conducted my participant observation and interviews, and how I chose to present my findings.

Chapter Two focused on defining the leather Mummy in conjunction with the broader question of the maternal, pursuing a feminist reading of motherhood as a site of oppression, and of the maternal as being bound up with notions of essentialism. A main focus of this chapter was on the ways in which the leather Mummy is able to question the idea that women are innately maternal (i.e. nurturing, gentle, compassionate, self-sacrificing, smothering) and that men are paternal (i.e. distant, practical, gruff, strict). With reference to other forms of mothering such as foster mothering or mothering absent or deceased children, I made the case for a childless maternal to be recognised as a valid expression of the maternal. I also explored the power of the leather Mummy to disrupt the sexual/maternal divide imposed on to female bodies through subtle social pretexts, and discussed the significance of this achievement as a contribution towards the revaluing of nurturing.

In Chapter Three I made a shift from feminism to queer theory, addressing the leather Mummy in terms of Butler's concept of gender performativity and drawing on the subversive value of play, parody, and imitation. Kink enables players to dress up in different roles and genders and as different characters: "roles are chosen, rather than naturalized

(based on sexed bodies)” (Weiss 156). In a Butlerian reading of BDSM, play therefore challenges notions of essentialism and invites us to question the validity of a true, original expression of gender. Because the leather Mummy can be played by anyone, regardless of their gender, this performance of the maternal encourages us to question how we construct the maternal and who is able to embody it. Furthermore, despite being “too queer” and “too kinky” to fit the ideal maternal prototype, the leather Mummy is able to transgress these constraints and freely access the maternal.

Chapter Three was also concerned with examining the leather Mummy through a femme feminist lens. By understanding femme as a performance of femininity and recognising the potential of femme to therefore subvert femininity, I made a case for the leather Mummy as achieving a similar result in relation to notions of both “woman” and “motherhood”. However, in light of Weiss’s critique of BDSM I concluded with a review of the leather Mummy’s subversive limitations. The debate culminated in a contemplation of the personal, seemingly private world of kink and its relationship with publicly enforced social norms, concluding that, while I recognise that Mummy tops are able to challenge, reclaim, and reconfigure the maternal, anyone who engages in play is also unavoidably operating from within an external patriarchal power structure which it is impossible to entirely escape. In other words there is no “outside” of gender, only ways to work within it.

* *

In a way, I have fallen in love with all of my Mummies. I love them for sharing their lives, their histories, their pain and their desires with me; I love them for their fierce femme dominance, and their bravery in a butch world. I love them for paving the way for future leather Mummies, I love them for their celebration of femininity, and for their middle-fingered salute to a patriarchal world that tells us: *this is how a woman should be*. I love these women for showing me how to be femme and powerful as well as how to be femme and filthy. And I love these Mummies because they represent a re-valuing not only of femininity, but also of the maternal.

These Mummies have presented to me the ultimate hot mama role model—they have shown me that the maternal can be an object of desire, a position of power, and a source of deep satisfaction and erotic pleasure. They have also taught me that “queer” and “maternal” do not have to be contradictions. Being maternal does not have to mean being conservative, and being good at being maternal and *enjoying* being maternal does not necessarily mean you are bowing to conventional gender roles. These leather Mummies have taught me that the maternal can be something chosen, as opposed to prescribed, and that in this choosing, the maternal is revised as a site not of oppression, but of empowerment.

However, the scope of this empowerment is complicated. In Chapter Three, where I presented a discussion of Weiss’s research on the San Francisco pansexual BDSM community, I admitted to having reached a similar unresolved verdict to Weiss on the political impact of BDSM play. My findings remained inconclusive as to whether the leather Mummy perpetuates or perverts gender norms. As I have continued to reiterate throughout this thesis, I am not a radical feminist, and I am definitely not anti-BDSM. I firmly believe that engaging in kink can be a hot, liberating experience. I don’t agree with the radical feminist belief that SM is necessarily reproducing problematic power structures—I am instead confident that SM is a space where normative structures can be challenged, narratives can be rewritten, and where power can be inverted. I also do believe that by making the choice to partake in a scene, and by choosing the structure and limitations of that scene, consent plays a major role in this inversion. The players I met all took great delight in their chosen kink, and there was a strong sense of empowerment in taking pleasure in something which is generally considered to be oppressive. Perhaps this pleasure is subversive in itself. Therefore in response to the question of whether BDSM perpetuates problematic power structures and gender norms, I am tempted to reply with another question—does it really matter?

However (and this is the twist), there are elements of the radical feminist argument—that is, that “lesbian sadomasochism is firmly rooted in patriarchal sexual ideology” (Linden 4)—which I agree with. While I would challenge anyone who tried to claim that Mummy play is oppressive to women, I can also see where this argument might be coming from. Weiss introduces her chapter on “Sex play and social power” with several quotes, two of

which I will reproduce here. The first quote is from Audre Lorde: “I do not believe that sexuality is separate from living”, and the second is from the introduction to Patrick Califia’s *Macho Sluts*: “I do not believe that sex has an inherent power to transform the world. I do not believe that pleasure is always an anarchic force for good. I do not believe that we can fuck our way to freedom.” Lorde makes the argument that the private and the public are inseparable, and that it is impossible to be completely outside of gender, race, or other normative power structures. Califia echoes this sentiment with an unromantic declaration that sex and pleasure are not the radical practices we wish them to be.

The ideas and power hierarchies we play with are not themselves invented out of thin air; they are the same structures which exploit us on a daily basis, and I am not convinced that it is always possible to transcend these structures simply by creating new ones. Perhaps the leather Mummy *is* guilty to some extent of perpetuating gender norms. In any event, based on the strength of my findings, I would argue that perhaps the problem is not so much whether or not the leather Mummy perpetuates an iconic maternal archetype, but rather the way in which she is received by the queer kink community. Femme-phobia, the denigration of femme tops, the erotic validation of leather Daddies and the subsequent uncomfortable reaction to Mummies are all examples of ways in which the queer kink community is capable of perpetuating sexism and of behaving like the gender police—dictating what is cool and what is not, what is acceptable and what is othered, what is hot and what is squicky.

Weiss questions whether SM has the potential to enact social change, and while her findings are inconclusive, I suspect that privately she is somewhat sceptical. For similar reasons I did not set out to write this thesis with the romantic view that the leather Mummy was going to change the world. I simply had the hunch that she would be able to illuminate the maternal, its problems, and its limitations in a new light. Like Weiss, I tread a path somewhere between describing the leather Mummy as gender-conservative, and as powerfully subversive.

So often in the queer community the femmes perform the traditional female role of being the carers, the listeners, the ones who volunteer their time and energy to community events, and the ones who make sure everyone gets fed. If femmes *want* to play this role,

and if they can eroticise this feminine essentialism and take pleasure in it, then I applaud them. However, when it is an *expectation* that a feminine-presenting person will play this role (and this is why I fiercely refuse to identify as femme), then it becomes a problem. It also becomes a problem when femmes are *limited* in this feminine essentialism, when people express discomfort at the femme who steps outside of this pigeonhole by also being sadistic, powerful, or sexually dominant.

Early on in this thesis I attended the 2009 Perv Film Festival (a Sydney-based queer film event). In the short film competition, which included perhaps eight or nine entries, I noticed that while there was almost continuous footage of highly explicit scenes involving either gay-boy sex or strap-on cocks, there was only one scene in all of the films which included close-up footage of a cunt. This obsession with the phallus (and consequently, I would argue, with phallic representations of power and sexual currency) is not a problem in itself, and it is worth noting, too, that femme cock was represented that night. However, the noticeable absence of cunt shots in these films suggests that the only way a sexual scene could be eroticised was through the presence of a phallic representation of power—that is, a cock.⁶⁸ Making the slippery connection between a strap-on cock and masculinity is of course dangerous territory, and I am aware that there are many situations where this generalisation fails. However, my point is that the omission of cunt shots reflects an undercurrent of deep-seated misogyny within the queer community, and an over-inflation of the sexual currency of butch or masculine-of-centre identities. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of cunt shots at a queer film festival not only represents larger issues of the devaluing of femininity, but also serves to limit the permissible semiotics of sexuality and desire, resulting in an under-representation of femmes and non-butch or non-masculine-identified bodies in queer erotic dialogues.

If nothing else this thesis has aimed to take a step towards correcting this imbalance, providing a feminist critique of the queer kink community and calling for a revaluing of femininity, as well as a revising of the maternal as a potential site of eroticism. As I explained in the introduction, the reason I decided to focus my research on the leather Mummy was

⁶⁸ This omission is also reminiscent of the dismissive attitude with which femme-on-femme attraction is so often regarded.

because I had never heard of her before, despite the fact that the leather Daddy, her paternal counterpart, is prevalent in the scene. The Mummies in my study were not necessarily able to provide many outright examples of anti-Mummy animosity, however they spoke frequently on the subject of femme-phobia, the lack of respect shown to femme tops, and the need for femme unity. My own experiences have echoed these sentiments—over the past four years I have had several lovers worry that they will lose respect in the kink community if, as a result of my thesis, people think we are in a Mummy-Boy relationship. I can only assume that this both relates to a fear of emasculation and to the problem that the maternal is not generally considered as a powerful, dominant space. Submitting to a Mummy is not as enviable and honourable as, for example, submitting to the all-powerful paternal figure. I have also had several play partners respond in revulsion to the suggestion of Mummy play: “Please don’t tell me to call you Mummy when you’re flogging me. It’s not sexy, it really turns me off”.⁶⁹ All of these lovers and partners were, of course, more than comfortable engaging in Daddy play.

We revere our mothers and put them high on a pedestal where only we can reach them, so that we don’t have to share them with anyone else. We are taught that our mothers are sacred, and consequently the thought of them being sexual or being sexually desired threatens us, and makes us uncomfortable. Even within the subversive queer kink community people struggle to think of Mummy as sexy; the at times disparaging attitude towards leather Mummies coupled with their relative invisibility in the scene is in my opinion yet another example of censorship of the sexual maternal body. But perhaps the most poignant reason for the lack of leather Mummies is that the mother is not usually recognised as a symbol of power. She is assumed to be soft, gentle, and nurturing, and while there are numerous exceptions to this rule, the expectation remains.

It is little wonder, then, that in the queer kink world where the masculine is admired and patriarchal power is desired, Daddies are more common and more openly coveted. The mother’s pleasure is all received second-hand, acquired through the pleasure of pleasing

⁶⁹ Everyone has personal reasons for being squicked out by certain kinks, and of course I would never push someone into calling me Mummy. But it was interesting how few people voiced a problem with the word “Daddy”, but how many were uncomfortable with “Mummy”.

others. The father's pleasure, on the other hand, is selfish and self-possessing. If family hierarchies were a Monopoly game, Daddy would be Park Lane, bursting with power, might, and influence, while Mummy would be Old Kent Road—shabby, familiar, comfortable, and innocuous. Who in their right minds would want to be a Mummy? No one wants to buy Old Kent Road—they all want the Park Lanes and the Mayfairs; they want socially acknowledged prestige and access to privilege and power. However, the mere existence of the leather Mummy disrupts this. She asks why we have to take on a masculine role in order to be sexy, and she asks why a femme has to play as a Daddy in order to gain respect as a top. She takes Mummy's comfort and softness and she mixes it with hedonistic power, with sadistic domination, and with sex. The leather Mummy makes the maternal hot.

The constant fawning over the butch or masculine-of-centre, and consequently of the leather Daddy, would be fine if it weren't set against a patriarchal narrative which reinforces that men are sexual aggressors and women are passive receivers, that men have power and women don't, that mothers are asexual and confined to the home but that fathers spend a great deal of time away from the family and can therefore sleep around, that femmes can't be tops unless they assume a paternal role, and that the maternal body is abject, undesirable, and unsexy. We are taught that a woman's body is either the object of the male gaze, sexualised and objectified (with or without her consent), or she is the object of the child's desires, relied on for sustenance, nurturance, and protection. Furthermore, the mother is heavily criticised if she shares her body with anyone other than her child (Longhurst 103). As Mistress Elizabeth pointed out in her comparison of MILFs and cougars, the MILF is unattainable—her body is owned by the child, and it is only once the children grow up and leave home that she becomes the cougar and is once again fuckable, and not just someone to be lusted over from afar. So when can a woman's body (and her sexuality) be her own, to enjoy how and when she wishes? The sexual maternal exhibited by the leather Mummy excites me because it provides an answer to this question, even if the answer is confined to a very small and obscure group of people. At the very least it shows us that this can be possible.

My university department has been uneasy with my research project to say the least, and the most frequently voiced concern has always been to ask why the leather Mummy is important on a larger scale, and not just within queer kink subcultures. My response is to

say that BDSM is a perverted and subverted microcosm of mainstream society. We have a lot to learn from these representations of gender and power, and from the process of converting an oppression into a pleasure. The leather Mummy both reflects and revises the maternal, challenging essentialism and forging new relationships between the sexual and the maternal bodies. While I am not suggesting that Mummy play is a site that independently solves the problem of the essentialist maternal, at the very least the leather Mummy opens up dialogue around the restrictions of the maternal and questions whether maternal theory, in its current state, is able to provide us with an adequate explanation.

Furthermore, the leather Mummy makes us question the value we place on mothering. If nurturing was equitably valued, and if the maternal was not tied to femininity, then perhaps men would be equally encouraged to take part in rearing children. Testament to this claim is the fact that the division of parenting labour in heterosexual nuclear families, while it has vastly improved in the past fifty years, still conforms more or less to the same gender “rules” of the 1950s. For example in my work as a nanny I have only once, in all the families I have worked for, encountered a family where the father was more involved in rearing his children than the mother. In a sense, I could almost say that the father in that particular situation played the “maternal” role, more so than the mother, fussing over what the children ate and wore and what time they had their naps. Times have changed, but they have not reached a point where there is no longer the need for more change. For this reason I have argued that we should discard gendered terms such as “maternal” and “paternal”, and instead embrace the gender-neutral “aternal”, representative of nurturing, caring behaviour, but not connected to gender.

The leather Mummy also puts forward the challenge to read mothering as an erotic act, or even as a mode of sexuality. As Young says, “One of the most subversive things feminism can do is affirm this undecidability of motherhood and sexuality” (89). Therefore by dismantling the divide between the sexual and the maternal, by acknowledging the correlation between the two kinds of pleasure, we can begin to release motherhood from its limitations. If the sexual/maternal divide was no longer honoured and if the Madonna/whore dichotomy was disbanded, then motherhood could be separated from constraint and enjoyed for the powerful and sensual act that it is.

The majority of love songs sung by women on the radio could easily have been sung about either the woman's lover or her child. Linguistically, the way we talk about our love for a child—the yearning, the craving, the deep bond—mirrors the language of lovers. Love and desire are physical emotions, connected to the body as well as to the heart. We need to recognise that the sexual body is an important part of a whole, and that the act of mothering is capable of eliciting a pleasure which is erotic and visceral and corporeal (and which, in its pleasure, encourages us to mother more). The connection between the sexual and the maternal is unavoidable. Whether it appears in the arousal of breastfeeding, or in Diana Ross's "Baby Love" lyrics, the sentiment is the same—why disconnect ourselves from the pleasure that comes with this love? Why deny ourselves the pleasure of nurturing another? The leather Mummy knows this and embraces it, and this is why she matters; this is the "so what" of this thesis.

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Appendix A

Participant observation locations

Velvet (Mission Control)

Velvet is a monthly women and trans* sex party at Mission Control, a private space used for sex-on-premises parties, sex and kink education workshops, and sex and kink-related book launches and other related events. I attended two of these parties in my time in San Francisco. Attendees were met at the door by a host who first explained the event and checked to ensure that people were aware of what the event entailed. The host then explained the safety rules and code of conduct, asked for verbal confirmation that each person agreed to abide by the safer spaces policy, and then showed the new attendees around the space. There was a BYO bar where you could leave your drinks, and which was a social area where people flirted and mingled socially, a dance floor, an outside smoking area, a large room filled with mattresses pushed together to form one giant bed (where the orgies frequently took place), and several small rooms strewn with mattresses and cushions usually used for semi-private sex. As can be divined from this description, the party was set up predominantly for sex, however off one of these larger spaces was a small room called the “Fungeon” which was set up for light BDSM play. Most of the attendees appeared to attend these parties with the aim of engaging in casual or group sex, however the Fungeon usually attracted a small crowd of between five and fifteen people, many of them simply there to watch, but some making use of the St Andrews cross, or engaging in spanking or light bondage scenes. My participant observation at these events consisted partly of conversations I had with other players in the social spaces, and partly of participating in and observing scenes taking place in the Fungeon.

The Citadel Dungeon

The Citadel was, at the time of my research, the only permanent public dungeon space in San Francisco. It was available for kink events seven days a week, and hosted educational workshops, parties, and kink-community meetings. The workshops were generally held on the ground level, which had anchor points set in the walls and rigging strung up in the ceiling for bondage and suspension play, but which also had plenty of free space with room for tables and chairs, for people to converge in. The downstairs space was permanently set up

as a traditional dungeon—there were several small rooms and alcoves set up for specialised play (particularly those involving body fluids) and the general space had plenty of equipment (spanking horses, St Andrews crosses, bondage chairs and benches, thrones and sling chairs), beds, and first aid stations. Some of these parties were exclusively for women and trans* participants, some were only open for male-identified kinksters, and some were open events. I attended two parties here, both women and trans* only events, as well as an educational workshop run by Mistress Elizabeth. As with Velvet, attendees to the parties were required to read and agree to the safer spaces rules of play before entering the space, and there were dungeon monitors constantly roving the spaces keeping an eye on the proceedings and providing safety and hygiene information where necessary. My participant observation at the Citadel took place both through my observation of scenes and demonstrations, discussions with other players in the social spaces, and through my own participation in play scenes.

Folsom

Folsom Street Fair is an annual event which takes place during Leather Pride Week in San Francisco, attracting an average 400 000 attendees from all over the world. Traffic is blocked from the area and the Fair takes place outside in the streets, which are full of stalls selling kink-related equipment and clothes, stalls promoting local kink events and clubs, entertainment stages with music and BDSM demonstrations, exhibitions, kink-related art, and a women's area.

Dore Alley (Up Your Alley)

Dore Alley is similar to Folsom but attracts a more local crowd, numbering around 12 000 attendees. I attended Dore Alley with one of the leather Mummies and her friend, Ms International Leather 2011, and we spent most of our time socialising with their friends and acquaintances, shopping, and engaging in some light public play.

The Centre for Sex and Culture

The Centre for Sex and Culture (run by Carol Queen and Robert Lawrence) is a community space which at the time of my research was situated near the Citadel, and is used for sexuality-related community events such as workshops, fundraisers, discussion groups, exhibitions, collaborative projects, social events, meetings, and one or two MUNCHes. The

CSC also houses an enormous collection of kink and sexuality-related literature and historical archives and artefacts. During my time in San Francisco I worked with the CSC as a volunteer, helping out at events and assisting with the renovations. Here I attended writing workshops, art exhibitions and social events, worked on collaborative art projects, and attended a Littles MUNCH. The CSC was particularly useful in integrating me into the San Francisco kink community.

The Sexy Mamas' Social Club

This was a weekly social group predominantly for mothers and mums-to-be who were involved in some way with the adult sex industry, but was also open to parents of any other identity, as well as aunties, uncles, and other non-traditional care-givers. It was set up by porn actress Madison Young, through her gallery space “Femina Potens”; the gatherings often consisted of between three and six mothers and their children, ranging in age from infants to four- or five-year-olds. Usually we would all take turns playing with the children while the other mothers tried to work on writing, art, or film projects relating to sex work and parenthood, or talked about their experiences of motherhood in relation to both their sexuality and their sex work. I attended four of these groups. I volunteered to help set up “My Mommy Is a Love Artist”, an exhibition designed to speak to both adults and children about sex work, and also attended “Building Our Own Picket Fences” (October 28, 2011), an exhibition focused on the intersections between queer community and biological families, which featured works from both Madison Young and Midori (a well-known sex educator) . Madison Young’s work in particular was focused on the incongruence of the sexual and the maternal bodies—having recently had a child herself, her art in both of these exhibitions was focused on her struggle to balance her work life with her life as a mother.

Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter One—Ethnography, much of my participant observation occurred in casual social situations where I would find myself engaged in discussions with fellow kinksters either explicitly about my research, or in general discussions and conversations about kink. I frequented the local leather shops, ate at Wicked Grounds (the local kink-positive cafe), and attended one or two workshops at Good Vibrations, the local sex-positive, women-oriented sex shop. I became friends with my “key informer”, the person I had observed on Fetlife as being highly involved in the San Francisco leather Mummy scene, and through him was introduced to several Mummy friends of his,

either at social events at his house or out at brunches, art exhibitions, dance parties, storytelling nights, and music gigs. I also lived in his guest room for a month, during which time we frequently discussed the ins and outs of the local leather scene. Most of my San Francisco social network were people who were either loosely or heavily involved in the local queer women and trans* kink community. Therefore I was constantly discussing my thesis topic with people who understood the local scene, and the discussions around me were frequently about BDSM.

Appendix B

The interview questions

What do you think makes someone a Mummy?

What does your Mummy look like/wear?

What kind of Mummy are you?

Describe yourself (ie nagging/embarrassing/smothering/gentle/teasing/mean
/kind/soft/tough)

Do you think it is possible to be butch and be a Mummy, or to be a cis-man and be a Mummy?

Does Mummy have to be femme?

Can Mummy be “he”, or are they always “she”?

What names do you call yourself and your sub?

Does Mummy change for you depending on whether you’re topping a babygirl or boy?

do you ever switch and play as babygirl/boy/little?

Does Mummy ever get bored of having to be the carer/irritated by the Little’s neediness?

Why are you attracted to this role? What do you feel you personally enjoy about it?

When did you first hear of Mummy as a role? Was this before or after you started playing in this way? Why was this when you first heard of it?

What is the difference between the role of Mummy and Daddy?

Do you ever play as Daddy? What are the differences for you?

Why do you think there are more Daddies than Mummies?

Have you ever felt that people are less embracing of Mummy than Daddy?

How do you think the wider community views Mummies? Do you think this is different to general attitudes towards Daddies? Why do you think this is the case?

Are any of you parents?

How does Mummy relate to your biological maternal body/life/instincts/desire/situation?

Does Mummy play satisfy your maternal cravings/side? Is it the same or different?

Appendix C

Participant consent form

UNSW



HREC 10369

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

Playing Mummy: the sexual, childless maternal body in Mummy play.

You are invited to participate in a study of queer, women and trans-identifying, Mummy play. I hope to learn more about the restrictions and freedoms of the maternal identity, as well as investigate the concept of the sexual maternal as a social taboo. This research will be largely used to inform a creative work, an erotic verse novel I am writing as part of my PhD. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because I am interested in what you have posted about queer, women and trans* Mummy-play in the online forums and discussions.

I have the express permission of Fetlife to conduct this research, provided I gain consent from all relevant parties. If you decide to participate, I will use some of your online comments in my research. I may directly quote you, or paraphrase your words. I will check with you before recording anything you have written on Fetlife's forums and message boards, so that you can choose what you do and don't want me to use. You are under no obligation to agree to me using anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, and you may withdraw consent at any point in my study. This study aims to increase the visibility of queer, women and trans-identifying Mummy play, and to generate discussion and open dialogue within the community about this relatively marginalised subculture. However, we cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any direct personal benefits from this study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission, except as required by law. If you give me your permission by signing this document, I will quote or paraphrase some of your forum postings and/or comments and then analyse and present the results in my PhD, in an ethnographic discussion of Mummy play. In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. I will not use your online name, and will create a pseudonym to provide privacy.

Complaints may be directed to the Ethics Secretariat, The University of New South Wales, SYDNEY 2052 AUSTRALIA (phone 9385 4234, fax 9385 6648, email ethics.sec@unsw.edu.au). Any complaint you make will be investigated promptly and you will be informed of the outcome.

I aim to post updates on my research findings on my blog, up until the date of submission of my PhD project. I invite you to both read my posts and respond to them as you see fit. I especially invite any critique or debate on my findings. Once my work has been completed I will also email you a PDF copy of the document.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with the University of New South Wales. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. Any information gathered up to that point will also be destroyed if you request.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me. If you have any additional questions later, Dr Katherine Albury, 61 2 93858533, will be happy to answer them.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM (continued)

Playing Mummy: the sexual, childless maternal body in Mummy play.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that, having read the information provided above, you have decided to participate.

.....

Signature of Research Participant

.....

Signature of Witness

.....

(Please PRINT name)

.....

(Please PRINT name)

.....

Date

.....

Nature of Witness

REVOCATION OF CONSENT

Playing Mummy: the sexual, childless maternal body in Mummy play.

I hereby wish to **WITHDRAW** my consent to participate in the research proposal described above and understand that such withdrawal **WILL NOT** jeopardise any treatment or my relationship with The University of New South Wales.

.....

Signature

.....

Date

.....

Please PRINT Name

The section for Revocation of Consent should be forwarded to Katherine Albury, Journalism and Media Research Centre, University of NSW, 1-3 Eurimbla Ave, Randwick, NSW, Australia, 2031.

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Hello! If you are getting this message it is because you have spoken to me at some point about Mummy play. I have chosen you because in the past you have spoken freely about these or similar issues, but if you are not ok with me contacting you again please let me know. I have started up a blog as part of my PhD research into queer, women and trans-identifying Mummy play, and I would like it if you wanted to have a look, or pass it on to someone who you think might be interested. I do not play as a Mummy myself, and so I am very interested in inviting the Mummy community to provide feedback and engage in discussion with me and with each other, so that I can check and test my assumptions and ideas. I am hyper-aware that so many researchers enter a community they are not a part of, make assumptions and then leave, without ever asking the community what their thoughts are, or whether they agree with the findings of the researcher. Nothing you post on the blog will be used in my final project unless you provide written consent, and all names will be changed to respect privacy. If you are interested in taking part in one-on-one interviews in the future, or if you have any questions or concerns, please email me:

mintgreenmommies@hotmail.com If you would like to speak to my supervisor, you can contact Kath Albury: k.albury@unsw.edu.au

And the blog: mintgreenmommies.wordpress.com

Thank you!

Holly Zwalf

Lolly Poppins

(a novel)

Prologue

“Just thinking about her makes me wet.” She is naked, straddling my hips, and to illustrate the point a trail of thin white juice begins to dribble down her dark skin. I crane my head and lick it off. It tastes close and sweet, like vanilla soy milk and secrets whispered in the dark. She lifts up my head with one hand, clamping my mouth tight to her chest. I wrap my lips around her nipple and suck deep, my tongue coaxing out more of her secrets. She holds me harder to her, urgent now, my nose pressed firmly into her flesh so that I can’t breathe. I can only suck faster, furious, desperate for air but breathing only milk. My mouth is full of the hot liquid, excess leaking out and running down my chin in a sticky mess. She moans, an earthy rumble that grows and fills the tent as my own cunt clenches and my hands grab at her hips, pulling her down hard onto my cock as I grind up into her at the same time, thrusting hard. Lilith stirs next to us and automatically I turn to check, but she is still asleep, eyes gently closed. “Don’t stop,” Mahla orders, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look back at her. Her expression is a mask of single-minded resolution and the tautness of her jawbone, the sinews straining in her neck, tells me she is close. I wriggle my right hand under her belly, down till I find her clit, flicking as fast as my cramped wrist will allow as she holds me down with one hand wrapped around my throat and begins pumping faster, faster on my cock. Her moans change to cries, strange open-mouthed sounds that make me worry that I am hurting her. I lighten my touch but she squeezes my throat tighter and tells me fiercely to do it fucking harder, “do it fucking harder,” and her cunt is so slippery that I am struggling to keep my fingers in the right place but I know that I must, everything depending on my index finger rubbing with the right pressure at the right speed for as long as it goddamn takes, otherwise the last half an hour will have been wasted and she will drop back behind the crest of the wave that she is now determinedly riding. My hand begins to cramp but I push on, push on, come on, Meg, come on, and she is slamming down on me so hard now that I know I will be sore tomorrow as her cries grow harsher, louder and the baby wakes up and joins in but it is too late to slow down now, Mahla and I a frantic vicious tangle speeding towards annihilation and then, abruptly, Mahla stops, throws back her head, mouth open wide and silent, Lilith’s cries taking the lead, taking over. Shaking violently Mahla lets out three high

ascending notes like a kettle no longer able to hold in its steam. Thin spurts shoot out of her nipples and spray me in milk and for a moment she remains suspended in the air above me, every part of her tensed in the clutches of her orgasm. Then she collapses limp on my chest. I hold her tight for a moment, my hand stroking her springy hair, but by now Lilith has worked herself up to a scream so there is no time for quiet contemplation. Mahla rolls off me and scoops up the baby, latches her onto a nipple, the same nipple my lips were wrapped around moments ago, and then, finally, there is silence.

Part One—Summer

Chapter One

Eggs

In my usual all-or-nothing style I've gone from vanilla to filthy in a very short space of time. Only six months earlier I'm standing in my kitchen in Sydney, cracking eggs into a frying pan and getting excited about trying out the pair of fluffy handcuffs that are wrapped up in a bow on the coffee table. I'm making a special birthday breakfast for my girlfriend while she has a bath. A breakfast that will never be eaten, though I do not know this at the time. If I knew, I would not be so concerned with picking out the bits of shell, the brittle flecks that have slid into the pan along with the eggs, their whites slippery and gelatinous like the evidence of ovulation I'd found in my knickers earlier that morning. There is other evidence too. Excessive randiness, the desire to have anyone inside me, or anything. Ova. Eggs. Over-easy. I bat the words around in my head. I doubt I'll ever get over being easy, I think to myself.

So I am making a special breakfast for Carmen and I am excited because we have the whole day together to play with her present, and also because the wee-test has confirmed what I had suspected—I am indeed ovulating. As a surprise I've already texted her friend Malcolm, the guy who's agreed to be our donor daddy, and he is poised to drop round in an hour or two with a fresh delivery of sperm-in-a-cup. I figure that will give us enough time to eat, open the presents and fuck, before doing the insemination. I hear the sound of the plug being pulled and quickly slide the eggs onto two plates, arrange the toast on one side, slip off my dressing gown and go and stand by the bathroom door holding her breakfast in one hand. I'm naked except for the words 'happy birthday' written across my breasts in body chocolate that I've picked up at the sex shop along with the handcuffs. She emerges from the shower wrapped in a towel, her hair fluffy from where she's rubbed it dry, and my heart lights up like a pokie machine that's just hit the jackpot.

‘Happy birthday!’ I trill. ‘Eggs, just the way you like them. And me,’ I shimmy my breasts at her for effect, ‘for dessert.’

‘Oh. Wow.’ The expression on her face isn’t quite what I’d hoped. ‘Umm, ok. I’m...can I go get dressed first?’

‘Actually, I was thinking we could have breakfast in bed,’ I say with a wink.

“Yeah...I’ve just had a bath, hey. I’m kinda ready to get the day underway. And besides, you don’t want to mess the sheets up. You only washed them yesterday, remember,” she says, looking pointedly at my chest.

I peek down at my breasts. Maybe it is a bit too much; the chocolate does look a bit like shit. I put the plates into the oven to keep them warm and then hover in the lounge, still naked. I contemplate wiping the chocolate off and putting my dressing gown back on, but it seems like such a waste. Maybe she can just lick it off me in here, then, I think. I position myself as casually as I can manage on the edge of the couch, being careful not to get chocolate on the cushions.

“Hurry up! It’s getting cold,” I call, referring more to myself than the eggs. For February it is an unusually chilly day. “Don’t worry about clothes. Just throw on my spare dressing gown.”

But when Carmen comes back in a few minutes later she is fully dressed: jacket, shoes and socks, the lot.

“What’s going on?” I ask, all trill gone from my voice.

“Meg, can we talk?”

Nothing good ever follows a line like that.

When I open the door to Malcolm two hours later I am the only one left in the flat.

“Special delivery for the birthday girl. Where is she?” He cranes his head, looking for Carmen over my shoulder. Malcolm is cradling a Garfield mug in his arms. “Ew, honey, what happened to you? Skin peel gone wrong?” He gestures at my chest.

The chocolate has dried up and is slowly flaking off like bits of brown dandruff. Then he sees the look on my face and stops laughing.

“She said she doesn’t love me. She said she feels suffocated by our baby plans.”

We are sitting on the couch cradling cups of coffee I’ve somehow managed to make, mine heavily spiked with whiskey, and I am chewing my nails and trying valiantly to stop crying

for long enough to tell Malcolm the full story. As I put my cup down on the coffee table so I can blow my nose for the thousandth time I see Carmen's present sitting there, still wrapped, next to the Garfield mug full of Malcolm's sperm. I burst into a fresh round of tears.

Malcolm pats me awkwardly on the back. "Maybe things are just moving a bit too fast. Carmen is an ambler, you gotta go slow with her."

"She also said she's met someone else."

"Oh."

I pick up my mug again and wrap my hands around it, trying to leach some of its warmth. It feels like a giant snowball has rolled itself up in my stomach. "Somehow while I was busy making appointments at fertility clinics, she was busy with someone else."

"So what are you going to do?" he asks.

"Get drunk. That's all I've got so far." I raise my mug by way of illustration. "Cheers." I enthusiastically tilt the cup towards my mouth and a salty lukewarm glob lands on the back of my tongue, slightly sour and with a vaguely familiar tang.

"Oh fuck! Meg, I'm so sorry," Malcolm calls after me as I run to the bathroom, gagging. I've just picked up the wrong mug by mistake, and swallowed some of his cum.

After getting drunk my next instinct is to run, run as far away from Sydney as possible. I can't bear the thought of bumping into Carmen and her new girlfriend, and short of avoiding every single queer event in Sydney and never setting foot on either King Street or Enmore Road, I have no other choice but to leave. It's my mum who suggests London.

"Why don't you buy one of those year-returns?" she says. "Twelve months away will do you wonders. You've got to use your working visa before you're thirty-one, and you're not getting any younger, darling."

"And other than New Zealand it's the only other place where they speak English," Gran chips in.

I don't bother to correct her, I just start trawling the web looking for cheap flights.

Chapter Two

Pashing On

I've been in the UK for almost two weeks when I finally drag myself away from L-Word reruns and decide to stop crying and get a life. I've got a handful of contacts for friends of friends who are also living in London, but being a big city no one is free to meet up for at least a month, though one of them, Sam, a refugee lawyer I went to uni with, tells me about a big refugee rally that's happening on the upcoming weekend. "I can't go myself because I'm representing one of the men who's being deported," he says, "but you'll find the queers there."

I'm starting to think it might be time for a rebound root, so on the Saturday I get up early and spend a couple of hours trying to figure out how to look sexy in three layers of thermals and coats. My flatmate, a sweet but conservative Polish woman named Ola, looks relieved to see me up and dressed in something other than my pyjamas.

"Winter's all about accessories," she advises me as I fiddle with my hair, "and the most important accessory in London is an umbrella."

A skinny woman at the bus stop asks me if I can spare some change so I give her 50p and ask her how to get into town. Somehow I navigate a couple of red buses and make it to Marble Arch where I join the sea of placard-wielding protestors and follow the sound of the drumming. Sure enough, sandwiched between the samba band and the anarchist black bloc are the queers, a colourful quirky bunch of strangers who somehow still feel familiar. Being queer means that you have family scattered right across the world—we even look as though we're somehow all related with our home-job haircuts and our tattoos, and our political patches declaring: "I've got a radical activist feminist environmentalist anarchist fist, and plenty of lube." I blend into the group feeling more at home than I have for weeks, and then someone asks me if I've got a free hand and I look up into a face that makes me feel like the ground's falling away beneath me.

"Quick, we're about to march. Can you help me with this?" She unfurls a giant "Love Without Borders" banner and hands me a corner to hold.

Her name's Stevie and she has a black butch ponytail and long legs, and she lopes along taking long strides like an easygoing cowboy so that I often need to trot to keep up. When we reach Trafalgar Square we perch together beneath one of the famous lions to listen to the speeches, and even though we're not touching I can feel her heat through my clothes. After about an hour it starts to rain. Actually, that's not entirely true—it never really stops raining in London, but at this point the rain changes from a mist to a drizzle so she invites me to join her and her friends as they take refuge in a nearby pub. It feels good hanging out with this bunch, and it feels even better with Stevie pressing her leg against mine. Carmen can go fuck herself, I think to myself. I'm already having way more fun without her.

Stevie's friends seem pretty cool, and except for my accent I fit in easily. Despite the fact that half of them are first-generation Brits from migrant families who probably have accents far thicker than mine, the way I talk soon becomes the focus of the conversation.

"You sound jus' like you's on Neighbours," Shaz says. "'Ave you ever been there? To Ramsay Street?" Despite her chav accent and the fact she dresses like a brickie, Stevie has informed me that Shaz is in fact trained as a classical trombonist.

"It's not a real place, Shaz, you twat," says the short skinny blonde sitting next to me. I could be wrong but she seems a little put out that it was me who'd slid into the booth after her, and not Stevie.

"And wot about Ky-lee? 'Ave you ever met her?" Shaz continues.

I look at Shaz blankly. "Who?"

Monika, the skinny blonde, rolls her eyes. "Yeah, Shaz, Kylie Minogue is her aunty, Rolf Harris is her dodgy Uncle, and she rides a fucking kangaroo to work every day. Now shut it."

I try to catch Monika's eye with a friendly "thank you" grin, but she ignores it and leans across me to talk to Stevie about a plan to occupy the immigration minister's office next week. The woman sitting across from me introduces herself as Jita, and asks me if I'm a friend of Charlie's. I shrug in confusion and she gestures for me to follow, and then ducks her head under the table. I duck my head down too and she carefully passes me a rolled-up five quid note and a credit card with a little white line of coke precariously balanced on it.

"What, right here?" I hiss.

"Welcome to London," she grins. She's a plump woman with an Indian lilt and beautiful long wavy hair, and something about her makes me trust her. It's not the easiest thing to do, snorting a line with your head bent under the table in a crowded pub. When I sit up again

the blood surges in my head, and the first tingle of the drug kicks in. I feel good. I feel really good. I also feel like I need to take a shit.

Jita grins at me conspiratorially. "So what made you come to this shit-hole?"

"I'd run out of hot people to pash in Sydney so I thought I'd give the UK a go," I say.

"You wot?" asks Shaz.

"Pash. You know, kiss. Don't you use that word here?"

Jita and Shaz shake their heads.

"Ow about you giv me a demon-strayshon?" Shaz grins at me with a flirty glint in her eye and I can't quite tell if she's serious or if she's pulling my leg. She has beefy shoulders and a thick neck, and long chunky dreadlocks — "black power," she says, flicking them proudly, when she catches me admiring them. She's already my favourite out of the bunch, other than Stevie of course. She too ducks her head under the table for a moment, and comes up grimacing.

"Fookin hell, Jita. That shit's rough."

A trans guy in his early thirties with a quiff and a black leather jacket weaves his way towards us from the bar and plonks down a round of lager on the table.

"Finally bloody found you lot. This place is packed. What did I miss?"

"Jack. You're jus in time, me lad. We're interrogatin' the foreigner," Shaz gestures at me, "and tryin to translate her answers into proper English, like."

"Fuck is the international language." The new guy gyrates his hips provocatively in Shaz's direction. "Forget the small talk, Shaz." Shaz slaps him on the arse and then hands him the credit card, and he makes a half-hearted attempt to hide behind her open jacket as he, too, snorts a line. When he lifts his head there are tears in his eyes, and everyone laughs as he hops around pinching his nose. "Jesus pigging christ, Jita. What is that, Ajax?"

After Jita's coke has made another trip round the table Stevie announces that the next shout is hers, and I offer to give her a hand with the glasses.

"How long are you here for?" she asks me at the bar.

"Oh, just til my ex gets run over by a bus. Then I can go back to Sydney," I say breezily, and raise my glass. "Cheers." She gives me a long look and then grins.

Several pints later Stevie and I wind up hard against an alleyway wall with our tongues in each other's mouths. Whatever you like to call it, pashing is also a universal language.

Chapter Three

Frozen Peas and Mushroom Sauce

A couple of weeks after the refugee rally Sam finally makes a solid plan for us to meet up. “Sorry Meg,” he says on the phone, “things have just been so hectic lately, what with planning the wedding and all.”

Sam is one of the few friends of mine who is delighted by the changing laws allowing same-sex partners to get married. Most of my friends would sneer at the suggestion of a state-sanctioned relationship, but then Sam’s a human rights lawyer with an annual Oyster card and a flat in Shoreditch, and is in a slightly different category to Stevie’s anarchist squatter crowd. He invites me to dinner with a few of his friends, mostly Australian ex-pats of course, at a trendy little wine bar near his place, and for once I’m early and we’re the first two there. We sit gossiping about old uni friends and catching up on each other’s lives, me circumventing the big break-up story in favour of a juicy tale involving our old gender studies tutor and the uni chaplain, and then out of the corner of my eye a woman walks in the door and time freezes. Sam’s stood up and is calling her over—“hey, Kate, over here!”—and in an instant all I can see in that room is her gleaming clavicle and that sweet stretch of skin bridging shoulder and neck, and I am undone. I sway in my seat, suspended mid-breath until, as she reaches our table, time slowly starts to move out from us both in ripples like a coin sunk in a wishing well. Only once the ripples have reached the edge of the room and started to break against the walls am I able to stand.

“Meg, this is Kate Harvey. Meg’s just landed in the UK for a year.”

“Welcome to the mad-house,” Kate says in a broad Aussie accent, leaning over the table to offer me her hand.

“Meg and I were ratbag anarchists back in our uni days,” Sam tells her. “We got arrested together once for occupying the Premier’s office.”

“I’m afraid I usually try to keep Sam on the right side of the law,” Kate says. “We worked together on the Afghani refugee case that was in the press a lot last year.”

“Ah, I see. You’re the good influence, I’m the bad,” I wink, trying to be simultaneously charming and flirtatious. Sadly my wink comes out more like an over-exaggerated blink. I’m

losing my nerve in front of this woman—she’s hot, left-wing *and* clever. I wonder if she wants to have kids.

“Try to keep Sam out of trouble at least until he’s finished the briefing he’s two weeks late on. I’m leaving him in your capable hands.” From the length of her fingers, I’d say *she’s* the one with the capable hands.

“You’re going away?”

“I’m heading back to Sydney for good on Monday. I’ve given this place four years; it’s time to go home.” Her jawline is exquisite and the way her throat moves as she talks makes my own gulp in unison. She turns to look as a handful of new arrivals bustle in the door in a flurry of coats and umbrellas, and I admire the sinews in her neck as she cranes her head to see who it is, raising her hand in a wave. Her duties of small-talk with the new girl fulfilled she excuses herself to say hi to her friends. I watch her walk away with a lurch in my heart. Why do the good ones always leave?

I drift around the group hovering on the edge of other people’s conversations, constantly aware of where she is in the room. Even from a distance I can see how she captivates everyone’s attention, alternately charming and cheeky and clever, and I wonder wistfully what it would feel like to have all of that brilliance focused directly on me. I busy myself downing two glasses of wine in quick succession, even though I can’t really afford them. Somehow, despite the fact that everyone is vying for her attention so they can say their goodbyes before she leaves the country, when we finally sit down to eat I find myself seated on her right side. I can’t pass up this chance to start a more intimate conversation, but the meals have just arrived so I have to either talk with my mouth full or let my food go cold. I’m starving, so I go for the first option.

“Can I steal some of your mushroom sauce?” I ask. I hate mushrooms.

“Sure.” She pushes the ramekin towards me without looking up.

“Thanks,” I say. She nods, and keeps chewing her steak.

I bask in the afterglow of this little private exchange, but the glow is quickly surpassed by the challenge of somehow managing to swallow the mushrooms without gagging. Even sitting right next to her I am too nervous to look her way. I spend a good five minutes daring myself to turn my head in her direction so I can take her in properly—those strong arms, that elegant neck, and those fingers that look like they’ve been places—but each time I get close I chicken out. Defeated, I try to join in the conversation about immigration policies and

neoliberalism happening to my right. The majority of the group are either environmental lawyers, human rights barristers, or people with high-up positions in NGOs—these are the middle-class lefty uni graduates I spent my twenties marching with at rallies, but who went on to other things. I am pretty confident that I am the only nanny here tonight. Although the undergrad voice in my head is muttering that these people are all sell-outs, reformists as opposed to revolutionaries, it is kind of refreshing to be around people who are doing something concrete to change the world instead of just yelling about it in the streets and drinking. Not that there isn't plenty of drinking going on tonight, but it's from proper, bourgie glasses, in a stylish, sophisticated bar. These are people who have their shit together, I think to myself. These are people who have long-term monogamous relationships, and who will soon be buying houses and starting families. There's no cider at our table, nor are there any dreadlocks or vegans, and I can bet that they all have proper beds to go home to and that, unlike Stevie, none of them are living on their friend Jack's floor.

Unfortunately when dinner wraps up, Kate is one of the first to leave. She announces that she has packing to get home to, and my mood sinks as she goes around the table saying her goodbyes.

"Probably see you back home sometime, hey," she says when she gets to me. She gives me the obligatory friendly hug and I pull her close for just a fraction of a second longer than a casual farewell, and hope she gets the message.

"Yeah. I'll be back in Feb next year."

While the bill is being settled, Sam suggests that I come back to his place for a joint.

"Jorge hates it when I smoke, but when the cat's away..." I get the feeling that for Sam a large portion of the pleasure of a joint is the way it makes him feel naughty, a little bit wild and a little bit reckless, like he used to be back in his uni days. We sit on his couch bitching about the Labor party and whinging poms and the lack of decent coffee in London, and then we get the munchies and end up standing in his kitchen laughing about nothing in particular and eating ice cream straight out of the tub. He's got the obligatory tin of milo in the cupboard so I add that to the mix and Sam sighs as though he's just had an orgasm and then collapses on the kitchen floor, giggling.

“That,” he declares loudly, spoon brandished in the air, “is better than being arse-fucked by George Michael in a loo with a heated toilet-seat.” And then he crawls off to the bathroom to be sick.

After putting poor Sam to bed I set up his fold-down couch in the lounge and do a little bit of internet detective work. She uses a fake name online but eventually I track Kate down through Sam’s “Lefty Lawyers” facebook group. She’s called herself “Harvey Wallbanger”, a play on her surname I suppose. Unsurprisingly we already have almost eighty friends in common. That’s the world-wide-lesbian-web-of-death for you. We probably even share an ex. I worry briefly if it will look too keen sending her a friendship request at two in the morning, but then I decide that for precisely that reason it is actually a smart move—*because* it shows that I’m keen. The only other clue she’s got so far is that I ate her mushroom sauce.

Sam’s fiancé Jorge gets in at about 6 a.m., straight off the plane from an overnight flight back from LA where he’s been for his nephew’s christening. I say hi and then go back to sleep for a few more hours, checking facebook before I do, just in case Kate’s accepted my request. She hasn’t. At about eleven Sam drags himself out of bed groaning and flops down next to me on my couch-bed.

“I hold you completely responsible. This sort of thing only ever seems to happen when you are around.”

I suspect he is secretly pleased with himself. Sam, Jorge and I all go for a late breakfast in a little cafe book-ended between an industrial bakery and a row of empty factories. The place is decorated with old rusted bits of machinery and smells deliciously like warm yeast. I am also nursing a fairly decent hangover and by rights should be feeling pretty sorry for myself today, but instead I feel deliriously high. High like I’ve just had a really good line of coke, high like I’ve just won a prize, high like I’m standing in a room at the top of a really high high-rise building and it’s a stinking hot day, and someone’s just thrown open the window and the cool wind’s rushing in like a chorus and I feel like I could be sucked out at any moment if I only let go of my grip on the sill, and so high that letting go doesn’t seem like such a bad idea. High like I’m falling in lust.

“So how was the dinner?” Jorge asks.

“The food was interesting,” I say. “One of those fusion menus.”

Sam snorts. "More like wanky crap." I'm relieved to see he still has a touch of the Aussie bogan in him.

"I had the guacamole gnocchi," I say.

"And how was it?" Jorge asks politely.

"It was nice, different, unusual."

Sam giggles, but the reference is lost on Jorge. While Sam gives him a quick briefing in Australian culture 101 I try to compose myself enough to raise the topic of Kate without giving my crush away.

"That Kate is quite a character," I finally drop into the conversation as casually as I can manage, and then sit back to see what bites.

"She's great, huh. Really impressive barrister. Oooh," Sam suddenly sits upright as something occurs to him, "she's single, you know."

"Oh gawd, yes, you and Kate. What a brilliant idea!" Jorge claps his hands together excitedly. I summon up every last inch of my acting skills and try to pretend as though I haven't already picked out the dress I'll be wearing at our wedding.

"Yeah but what's wrong with her? Anyone over thirty who's single has to be so for a reason," I say dryly.

"Her last relationship ended over the great baby-divide," Sam says. "I.e. she wanted one but her ex didn't." Now I'm listening. "So that's why she's going back to Australia. To find a woman, settle down, and start popping out little brats."

"It'd never work between us," I say breezily. "She eats meat, and I'm a vegetarian."

When we've all consumed enough coffee to mask our respective hangovers and jet-lag Sam offers to drop me at the tube, "but do you mind if we go via Kate's first? I have to pick up the blender she's promised to give us when she leaves."

Do I mind?! I try to not show my excitement as we drive through the wet streets to her house, but when we arrive I am instantly crushed. She's not there.

"Shit, you guys are up early. Kate's gone out," the housemate yawns, her jeans slouching halfway down her arse-crack as she slowly moves around the kitchen turning on the kettle and matching up cups with teabags. Sam says not to worry, he can look for the blender himself, and while he starts rummaging through the boxes dotted around the floor I wander around assessing the house, trying to figure out whether, once she's asked me to move in with her, we will agree on levels of cleanliness or fight about what kind of soy milk to buy.

Although the flat is half packed up by now there are still enough traces of her around for me to do a bit of detective work. There's some interesting contemporary art on the walls which I like, and a few postcards from the Women's Bookshop stuck up in the toilet. The furniture's disappointing though—expensive versions of the blank Ikea look—and I am fairly certain I can smell one of those plug-in air-fresheners that automatically pumps little clouds of artificial fragrance into the room every fifteen or twenty minutes. I've never known anyone my age to use those before. The bookshelf is more promising. A few of the earlier Jeanette Wintersons, a John Pilger, and something titled *Ferment Your Way to Freedom*. The only fermented things in my world are beer and the hummus that's gone off in the fridge. Then I find a photograph of her propped up on the shelf next to an Eiffel Tower snow-dome and our differences are instantly forgotten. Fuck she is beautiful. The picture is of her down at Clovelly, standing on the cliffs looking out across the ocean. It's been taken in profile, catching her top lip as it twists in the most excruciatingly sensual curl, and of course I desperately want to taste that smile, but more than that, in the gap between heartbeats something clicks and in an instant she becomes familiar, she becomes solid, she becomes someone I could come home to. I'm gazing into her eyes thinking how sexy it is that she has a job and wants babies and wondering what her thoughts are on immunisation when there's the sound of the front door opening, interrupting my thoughts, and suddenly the real Kate is in the house. She's walking into the room and I don't know where to look and I don't know what to say, and I am scared that I'm blushing and giving it all away, and she looks at me and says:

"Hi." She seems pleased, albeit surprised, to see me.

"Sam's in the study looking for the blender," I blurt out by way of explanation, and quickly put the photo back on the shelf. She avoids making eye contact as she moves around the kitchen, her actions suddenly clumsy. I hope that this is because she, too, has been thinking of nothing but me for the past twelve hours.

"How did you shape up after last night?" I ask her. *I have been a mess ever since. All I can think about is you. I don't want to go home today because you won't be there. I don't want to ever leave this room, because wherever I go when I leave it you won't be there with me.* For the first time since meeting her I'm managing to look directly at her. I was right, I think morosely. She really is as devastatingly gorgeous as I'd thought.

"I feel fine. I wasn't that drunk, not like some." She chuckles. She's referring to Sam, who had spilt his glass of red wine on her sleeve as he was hugging her goodbye. "Been a

crazy day though, trying to organise a million different things and say goodbye to everyone as well.”

“It must be hard, packing up four years of your life.” *I want to kiss you so fucking bad.*

“Hard, but also liberating, getting rid of so much stuff. Flushing the ex out of my life, ya know...”

“Yep, I know. I even threw out my colander before I left Sydney, because it reminded me of mine.” Nice move, I congratulate myself. Now she knows I’m single.

“I’m intrigued. A colander, huh.” She gets some frozen peas out of the freezer. When she opens the packet they spill everywhere and she looks around quickly to check if anyone other than me has seen, and then kicks them all under the couch. “Ooops! Let’s not tell anyone about that!” I quietly relish the pleasure of having just become her secret accomplice. I wonder if she drops the peas because she’s as nervous as I am, but then surely, I reason, I am reading far too much into this. I have been obsessing over her constantly since meeting her last night and I’m sure she hasn’t even given me a second thought.

“So for months facebook’s been suggesting that I become friends with this strange person I don’t know called Harvey Wallbanger, and today I realised that it’s you. So seeing as I know who you are now, I’ve friended you,” I say awkwardly. *So I can stalk you obsessively from the other side of the globe and flirt with you shamelessly and ‘like’ all your comments and tag you in my updates and amass a database of useless information about you such as what events you attend and what your star sign is and how many friends we have in common.*

“Yeah nice one. I don’t use facebook much, though. It’s not my kind of thing.”

“Oh, totally. I hate how addicted everyone is to it.” *Fuck. How the hell will I convince you to fall in love with me if you don’t believe in facebook?* Sam walks in at that point, triumphantly holding the blender aloft.

“Bon voyage, sweetie,” he says, giving her a big hug. “Say hi to the sun for me.”

“Yeah, have a safe flight,” I add. My high spirits gutter in the breeze of the door as it closes behind us.

Chapter Four

Toys

True to her word Kate is disappointingly neglectful of her facebook account. Other than accepting my friendship request there's nothing to suggest she's even logged into her account in the last three months, and a close inspection of her wall turns up little more than a few group photos she's been tagged in and the knowledge that she likes kayaking and thinks that GM food should be banned. There is, however, one photo of her where she's holding someone's baby, at Christmas a year or two back. She looks good with a child in her arms. Some people hold babies awkwardly at arm's length as though they might bite or have something contagious, but she looks comfortable and confident, and she's smiling in a way that makes my heart lurch. I briefly entertain a fantasy that it's our baby she's holding, that it's me she's smiling at and not the camera. I click "like", and hope that she can read between the lines and realise that I want to have babies with her. In the meanwhile however I am getting a comprehensive sex education from my new London friends and learning a hell of a lot about kink in a very short space of time. Under Stevie's guidance I quickly graduate from fluffy handcuffs to leather restraints, and Jack lets me tag along with him down to the Brighton Leather Fair, which is a total eye-opener. Stevie also tells me about this big queer festival happening in Spain in July where there'll be plenty of kink-play and parties. "I'll be meeting up with Ingrid in Berlin for the summer, but heaps of other crew will be there. You'll have a ball." Stevie and Ingrid have been together for three years, polyamorous and mostly long-distance but still very seriously committed. Stevie tells me there's plenty of room in her heart for more than one person, and I tell myself that I'm cool with that.

Within a month of landing in the UK I've spent all my savings. I resist for as long as possible but in the end I'm struggling to cover next month's rent so I cave and become the cliché I've always scorned: I become one of the hundreds of Aussies in London looking for work as a nanny. It's my only option, really—I've got plenty of babysitting experience and until I finish my degree I'm not qualified for much else. A quick search on TNT brings up a list of local agencies. I pick the one with the sexiest website—it has a black silhouette of a woman pushing a *Rosemary's Baby*-style pram on the home page, which I'm hoping means that it

attracts the posh families. I want to be that silhouette, parading an old-fashioned, hooded, upright pram through the park in my black high heels. I want a cute little uniform that strongly resembles a French maid outfit, and a car with a driver in a cap to take me and the children to watch the changing of the guards. I want to work for a woman who has a husband who doesn't understand her needs, and who sometimes shares a bottle of wine with me on Friday nights and brushes my leg with her knee. I want to work for a dad who tries to look up my skirt when I'm bending over to tidy up the toys. I want to get my tough dyke girlfriend to come over and fist me on the couch one night when I'm babysitting, while the kids are sleeping soundly upstairs. If I have to become a cliché, I'm going to be a hot one.

However the problem with nannying is that you can't *look* hot. In my early twenties I lived in a big crazy lezzo sharehouse with six other women, one of whom was a stripper, and it was a running joke watching the two of us get ready for work. While she was strapping on high heels and a wig I'd be donning sensible shoes and a sunhat. We used to joke about switching places, me turning up at the strip club in my frumpy clothes and her tottering off to babysit in her heels, but of course that would have been breaking all the rules.

The Mary Poppins Checklist

*The nanny **must not** be:*

- 1) Pretty. Pretty girls are the mistresses, and no woman in her right mind is going to invite the mistress into the family home and pay her an hourly wage to boot. And besides, pretty girls get boyfriends, get pregnant, and have to quit their jobs.*
- 2) Butch. Butch women are trying to be men, and men are not maternal. Butch women are also always gay.*
- 3) Gay. No one wants a gay nanny (see #2) because if she's gay it means she has sex with women, which means she has sex.*

- 4) *A slut. No one wants to have to think about their nanny having sex (see #3). They want a wholesome, asexual martyr, not a horny tart who has fifteen years' experience with children but who spends her free time fucking.*

*The nanny **must** be:*

- 5) *Girly (without being pretty). Girly girls are straight. Only butch women are queer (see #2).*
- 6) *Heterosexual. Asexual. If she is asexual she won't be distracted by boys. Instead she will be some kind of virginal Madonna, completely devoted to the children (see #4).*
- 7) *Fat. Fat women don't have sex. Everyone knows that (see #4).*
- 8) *Dowdy. No one wants to root the girl in the sensible shoes with the grey woollen cardigan (see #4).*

I get called in for an interview with the nannying agency, which in keeping with the Australian backpacker stereotype is located across town in Shepherd's Bush. They check my references and suggest that I "do something" about my hair. So I take my feminist badges off my handbag, hunt out some frumpy clothes from the local op-shop, cover the shaved strip on my head with a daggy purple scarf, and transform into "Nanny Meg". "Nanny Meg" is dull as fuck. She certainly isn't fuckable.

Not long after that I have my first interview, a stiff family in Marble Arch with three little girls. I'm crawling around on the floor with the children pretending to be a train when the mother asks me if I have a boyfriend.

"No, I'm gay," I say, smiling to keep it light.

She looks uncomfortable, as though I've said something inappropriate in front of the children. I guess "I'm gay" is just a polite way of saying "I like to lick pussy", when you think about it. The stupid thing is, she should be pleased that I'm queer—at least that way she

doesn't have to worry about me having sex with her husband, and from the way he looked me up and down and leered at me when I arrived I'd say that's something she should be worrying about. I wouldn't mind betting that with three children under five, it's been a while since they banged. Of course, I doubt he likes the idea of a queer nanny either. This is his chance to have a hot, young, fuckable girl in the house, someone straight who he can flirt with, someone he can fantasise about bending over the kitchen bench and sliding his fat little cock inside, quietly, so quietly, while the children play happily in the next room. He wants white knickers and firm young thighs. He wants someone he can run off with, even if it's just in his dreams.

On a Sunday morning I turn up for my fifth nannying interview with a raging hangover and a bag full of sex toys. Unlike the others, this interview is a private referral from a friend of Stevie's--apparently the mother is big in the kink scene, so homophobia will hopefully be less of an issue. I've come straight from Jack's place where I'd crashed with Stevie after a play party in Brixton the night before. Luckily I'd had the foresight to pack some suitable interview clothes, because my outfit from the night before is...well, it wouldn't have been appropriate to start with, but now it is also covered in wax. I'm feeling nervous, partly because after last night's festivities I'm now down to my last twenty quid, and partly because Stevie's friend has warned me that the mother has a reputation for being a bit of a bitch. So I am grateful when I realise I know her. Well, perhaps grateful is the wrong word. Speechless is a far more accurate adjective. She opens the door wearing her trademark slash of red lipstick painted over juicy bow-shaped lips, black fishnets, and sexy high-heeled boots. She's a "yummy mummy" and a MILF all rolled into one. This woman has given me multiple orgasms over the years, but we have never actually met. She's Chastity Cummings, a semi-famous submissive porn star of the kink world with her own adult movie distribution label, and I'm fairly certain from some of the things I've seen her do with the women in her movies that I won't need to hide my sexuality in this house.

"Hi. I'm Yvonne," she says. Somehow knowing her real name makes her human enough for me to be able to scrape myself up off the floor, tell her my name, and hand her my resume and my list of referees. Fuck I want this job. She takes me through to the play room where a chubby little toddler named Mona is banging two blocks together in her hands, and Donald, a shy curly-haired boy of about three, is watching *Dora the Explorer* on the tv.

“She has your lips,” I say, nodding to her daughter. Probably not the best line, but I quickly redeem myself by dropping to my knees. In this position my instinct is to lick the high arch of Yvonne’s boot, but I resist and instead pick up a block and stack it on top of two more. Mona delightedly knocks them all over, I make a giant O with my mouth and gasp theatrically, and begin the game again. Before long she’s sitting happily in my lap playing with my hair and I’m reading her *Spot Goes to School*. Five minutes later Donald is standing next to my forgotten shoulder bag holding up my riding crop and asking if we can play horsey, and the next thing you know I’ve got the job.

Working for Yvonne does not turn out to be as exciting as I had hoped. I don’t so much as glimpse her getting changed the entire time I work there, and I don’t get roped into any spontaneous orgies with her and her husband after the kids have gone to sleep. I’m not normally into men, but I’d go there for Chastity Cummings. I shouldn’t really be surprised, though. It’d be like minding the CEO of Ferrari’s kids and expecting a free car along with your pay cheque, or like working for the Beckhams and expecting David to be head-butting balls round the house all day and Posh to be singing “I’ll tell you what I want, what I really really want” in the shower. I could just as well be working for the manager of a motoring magazine. I rarely see Randolph, her husband. He usually gets home just before the kids’ bedtime, comes in and says hi, interrupts the story, rolls around on the ground with them for a few minutes until they’re hyped up, and then heads off to the tv room with a can of lager leaving me to try and resettle two rowdy, overtired kids. Even in families where the mum is a strong empowered woman, the dads are usually fucking useless.

Whenever it’s fine I take the kids to the park to try and wear them out as much as possible. The mums at the playground are friendly at first, until they find out that I’m just the nanny. Then they mostly ignore me. I can’t help but think it’s something to do with not wanting to mix with the “hired help”, and also because I’m younger and skinnier than most of them. The dads on the other hand are always excited to meet a real-life nanny. I put their fascination down to the fact that I’m the only woman in the park at that time of day who is single and doesn’t have any stretch-marks, but who is also safe and comforting in a nurturing motherly way. It’s like they think that I’m a portal to their former lives, and that by flirting with me they can somehow return there. I remind them that there are people in the world who can go out to the pub and stay there till it closes,

without having to rush home to relieve the babysitter. I remind them of being young and irresponsible. I remind them that once upon a time they used to have sex.

Meanwhile I've got my own fantasies going on. I can't stop thinking about Kate, and even though I've got plenty of distractions right now she's on my mind more often than not. My best friend Em does a bit of detective work for me and reports back that Kate is definitely single and definitely cute. "I saw her out last week with Bek and Rebecca at a queer performance night. She was drinking Coopers green, she has good taste in shirts, and she's not much of a dancer. Oh and she left early, and alone." I make a mental note to be friendlier to the two Beks in the future. I also stalk Kate religiously on facebook, but she uses it so rarely that there's not much to learn and there are even fewer opportunities to flirt. Even worse is the fact that she's never "liked" a single thing I've said, so as far as I can tell she doesn't read my posts. She's missing all my witty updates about the London weather, and the photos of me in Brighton looking hot in my sailor outfit. If she never goes on facebook how the hell is she going to fall in love with me? However, despite the silence at her end I am somehow even more smitten than before. In my mind she's perfect, and so far there's been little evidence to suggest otherwise. I press Sam for more details and he sings her praises in the court room, explains the volunteer work she was doing in London with the local refugee legal services, and recounts the time last winter that she tried to give a young junkie her jacket but was rudely rejected because, "no offence, babe, but it's totally minging". Nothing like a bleeding heart to get my own heart thumping in my chest, and besides, strong morals are essential when you're bringing up a kid.

At the same time as maintaining this long-distance fantasy I also have Stevie playing out plenty of fantasies right here in the flesh. Stevie's got a pretty face and a boyish charm, and when she doesn't think I'm looking she watches me with an expression as though someone's just hugged her and whispered an amusing joke in her ear. She makes me feel warm inside, warm and gooey like the sticky date pudding she nicks from Selfridges for me one night. "I'm a freegan," she explains as we both hoe in. "I only eat animal products if they're stolen or skipped. Although I do make an exception for my grandmother's sheer khurma. No one says no to her cooking."

I have to come clean and admit that I am an ardent lover of cheese. “I don’t cook with dairy at home, I swear, but if someone puts a block of triple cream brie in front of me I cannot be held responsible for my actions.”

She shakes her head in mock disappointment. “I think we might have to stop seeing each other.”

“Oh we’re *seeing* each other now, are we?” I tease.

She takes me to see the new exhibition at the TATE Modern and drags me into the toilet, pulls up my skirt, and cuts off my knickers with her penknife. Then she fixes on nipple clamps underneath my shirt and orders me back into the gallery. I’m so turned on that by the time we get to level three I’m too distracted to even notice the art. Thankfully it’s a Tuesday and not yet the school holidays, so we manage to find a quiet room housing an installation of glowing egg-box jellyfish and wait until we are alone. The black light makes her teeth glow like the opening credits of *Mulligrubs* and when I start cumming I throw my arm up into the air, instinctively searching for something to hold on to, and somehow get tangled up in a set of luminescent tentacles. Stevie is laughing so hard she only just manages to untangle me before the next wave of tourists starts wandering in through the door. Thankfully the exhibition isn’t alarmed.

This first public fuck turns into a minor obsession incorporating as many of London’s landmarks as possible. Being gay certainly has its advantages when it comes to public sex—the ladies’ toilets at Harrods are a piece of cake, and the same goes for the Victoria and Albert Museum. Westminster take a little more manoeuvring and the Whispering Gallery at St Paul’s has us stumped, but the Circle Line becomes a bit of a favourite—it’s warm, the noise of the train drowns out the groans and moans, and if you pick your time right and can find a carriage to share with just one or two passed-out drunks then you can both open up your coats for a bit of privacy and hold on to the hand-loops for support while doing it standing up, jostling together like two milk bottles as you rattle through the dark.

Chapter Five

Pants on Fire

My favourite day of the week is Friday, because Yvonne usually has some of her industry friends who have children of their own over for a Sexy Mamas morning tea, and while the kids race around together the mums discuss who they have to fuck for their next photo shoots, or swap reviews about the latest public dungeon to have opened in town.

Occasionally I get the chance to sit down for a moment and join in the conversation and pinch a couple of slices of cake. Regular attendees in this gossip-group are Miss Lucy, a hot professional dominatrix with two little boys, and a high-end stripper who much to my amusement uses the name Bambi both on and off the stage and who has her first baby on the way. Whenever these two are around talk usually settles on the topic of how to juggle motherhood and sex work successfully. Bambi is walking up and down the room in a long cheesecloth skirt, Tibetan beads round her neck and one of those irritating anklets that have tiny little bells on them, bemoaning her loss of income since falling pregnant.

"I mean, let's face it, I'm not really the body-type they want any more."

She's got a point—she's only a couple of weeks off her due date and it's become really difficult to imagine her sliding sexily up and down a pole.

"I *tried* to work all through mine," says Yvonne. "It was easy in the first trimester, coz I barely showed. After that I was looking forward to capitalising on all the pregnant fetish work, but in the second trimester no one wanted to employ me because I just looked fat, not pregnant."

"Body fascism," Miss Lucy mutters. "It's my biggest gripe with the porn industry."

"Tell me about it. Anyway in the third they all wanted me again, but by then I was so exhausted I wasn't really in the mood, and then..."

"I need a career change," Bambi cuts in. "I'll be out of stripping action for ages, what with the breast-feeding and what-have-you. It's not like there's maternity leave in my line of work, or the option to work from home for a bit."

"You *could* work from home," I pipe up. "You could employ me as your nanny, get a pole installed, and dance in the lounge. You'd just need to push the couches back against the wall and take breast-feeding breaks in between lap dances."

“Yeah, and charge extra if the punters want to watch. It could be like the hourly lion feedings at the zoo.” Bambi runs her hands slowly over her belly, stroking herself as she talks.

“Working from home is tricky, anyway,” says Yvonne. “I just don’t feel like editing porn or writing kink when the kids are around. That’s why I go into the office now. I always swore I’d be down with it, but in reality it’s not that easy. When I first had Donald I’d do a bit of editing while he was having a suck, but it just didn’t sit right for me.”

“Have you done any lactation porn?” Miss Lucy asks her.

“No, but I’ve watched plenty. You know, I think part of the problem of juggling ‘Chastity’ and ‘Mummy’ is that Chastity is a sub—that’s her whole trademark, right. But Mummy is a top—she’s the big boss, she calls all the shots, and she’s responsible for everyone smaller than her, so to switch between those two spaces, to go from being the top and running the show to going into sub space for a bondage scene, all in the same day, is really really tricky.”

As if to illustrate the point Yvonne gets off the couch and kneels next to Mona, who has started to whinge, puts a finger-puppet on her pointer and starts dancing it around and singing “Mary had a little lamb”.

“I worked as a pro-dom all through my pregnancy. And I still work now. I wonder if I’d find it harder to do if my work required me to submit.” Miss Lucy lifts her teacup to her perfectly drawn pale pink lips. She has the most flawless figure I have ever seen and is always immaculately dressed in any number of well-cut pin-up-style dresses, full knee-length skirts complete with petticoats, tight bodices that force her breasts to bulge over the top, waist-length glossy hair carefully coiffured and tied up with ribbons, and a mouth-watering array of stilettos in every shade and style imaginable. Somehow she manages to breastfeed Tiger, who is about eighteen months old, read a book to Finnegan, her four-year-old, and maintain an adult conversation, all in six-inch heels. “I figured that if I got morning sickness I’d just turn it into a bonus—give all my clients Roman showers and then charge them extra for the privilege.”

Bambi laughs so hard she has to sit down on the edge of the chesterfield, one hand supporting her back as she gingerly lowers herself down.

Miss Lucy cracks a small smile. “And when my clients got a bit funny about my changing shape I’d just say, ‘Are you here to goddess-worship or not, you little shit?’, and invariably they’d be fawning over my belly in an instant.”

"I was in your belly, wasn't I, Mummy? And Tiger too. But not at the same time. There wasn't enough room for me *and* Tiger." We've all forgotten that Finnegan with his big ears is still playing on the rug.

"That's right, darling. You were in my belly. Can you go and find Donald, and take him a biscuit for *his* belly?" Miss Lucy gives him one for Donald and one for the road, and he scuttles off.

Bambi looks slightly horrified. "Isn't he going to have some tricky questions about what he just heard?"

"I want my kids to know what I do, to be proud of it and respect it," Miss Lucy replies.

"But how do you explain flogging-squeals and bruises to a six-year-old without child services getting involved?" Bambi asks.

"Finnegan's already started asking. I didn't expect to have to deal with it so soon. But I just say, 'You know that good feeling you have when you get a hug? Well, Mummy gives people that good feeling for her job.'"

I laugh. "And what about when they get a bit older, jump on the net, google you, and find pictures of you tied up with a dildo up your arse?" I can't believe I just said arse in front of my employer. I have the coolest job ever.

"That reminds me of this episode of *Weeds*," Yvonne says. "You know that American show where the mum's a drug dealer?" Bambi and I nod but Miss Lucy is too busy pulling her breast out for Tiger to suck on. I am totally down with public breastfeeding and I deeply admire Miss Lucy's dedication to feeding Tiger until he's ready himself to give it up, and I know that it's really inappropriate to be sexualising something that involves her son eating his lunch, but fuck her nipples are exquisite, and fuck I wish it were me instead of him, sucking away at her tit. I drag my eyes away and try to focus on Yvonne, who is still talking about *Weeds*.

"So the son finds a sexy picture of his mum from when she was younger, and keeps it under his mattress to jerk off to every night. And when the mum realises, she has to talk to him about it, which she finds really tough. Like, way tougher than when she has to tell him she's a drug dealer." Yvonne pulls a piece of fluff out of Mona's clenched fist and replaces it with a rusk.

"Oh my god, what if my sons wank over your movies when they get older?" Miss Lucy squeals.

“Hopefully they’ll be too vanilla. Or be into foot fetishes or something else I don’t cover.” Yvonne tickles Tiger’s bare foot and he pauses in his feeding to look up at her adoringly. “It’s so ironic how people say sex and kids should be kept far apart, and yet...isn’t that how the kids got there in the first place?”

“Either that or from a turkey baster,” Bambi reminds her, looking at me pointedly. I laugh politely, because I’m expected to, not because I want to. Even when everyone around you is really queer-friendly, sometimes straight people still suck.

* *

Despite these frank conversations Yvonne has the characteristic aloofness of someone who is used to other people liking them merely because they are famous. I never feel particularly close to her, but Mona is a different story. Every afternoon while Donald is hypnotised for a blessed half an hour by his favourite cartoon, I sit in the nursing chair with Mona feeding her a bottle of formula. She lolls in the crook of my arm, half-strangling the teat with her large mouth, which will probably one day be painted bright red like her mother’s. I can’t help but notice how she sucks the bottle as though she’s giving head. I know that this would be taken the wrong way, I know that even Yvonne with her sex-positive parenting and her collection of lactation porn would freak out and call the cops if she ever heard me saying this, but it’s true. The satisfied little noises she makes, the hungry hollowness of her cheeks as she sucks, the frenzied eagerness of her movements all remind me of the way Carmen’s mouth used to look, wrapped around my cock. She pulls away for a moment and smiles up at me and then returns to the teat, draining the last of the milk from the bottle. Every last creamy white drop.

Afterwards, as Mona lies in my arms, I stroke her hair with a tenderness usually reserved for the bedroom. I’ve fallen in love with this child; I am completely under her spell. The way she looks up at me through her long eyelashes makes my chest swell and ache. When I am not with her I crave her with a yearning that is physical, painful, lustful. She stirs a physical hunger in my heart. Usually after a feeding she falls fast asleep within the first ten minutes, and I know I can put her into her cot at this point and sneak off down the hallway and

watch tv with Donald, but I never do. I stay in the chair with her warm heavy body in my arms and pretend she is mine for a while. I do the same with Kate on the nights I fall asleep next to her facebook page. Everyone has their dirty fantasies. Mine are just a lot cleaner than you'd expect.

I've started lying at work. In the park I now avoid mentioning that I am the nanny. When I'm asked which ones are mine I proudly point out Donald on the slide and jiggle Mona on my hip as though I have known them all their lives. I don't mention that they're only mine on a short-term loan. Strangers admire them both as though their cuteness and their cleverness is a direct reflection on me. It reminds me of the way Stevie's chest puffs out proudly when she parades me on a leash in front of her kink friends. The other mums and nannies all defer to me on whether Donald is allowed a ride on the scooter, or whether Mona can have a peanut butter cracker. I call all the shots because I am the sole person responsible for the kids' safety, and in a way I find this a turn-on. Not the kind of turned on where I feel wet, but the kind of turned on that comes with the pride of something being yours.

As spring slowly seeps into the grey fabric of London I take the kids more and more often to the park. The weather's still cold but I've learnt the hard way that if I don't get us all out of the house at least once a day, we'll all be covered in green play-dough and crying by the time Yvonne gets home at four. There's a park a short walk from the house which has a few swings and slides as well as a sandpit for Mona to crawl around in, and recently it's become our local fair-weather haunt. I usually bring a little picnic for us to eat in the pale sun, and Donald always insists on bringing his current favourite toys—two furry Easter bunnies he won't let out of his sight, even when he's having a bath.

"Bad boy," he scolds one on this particular day, "you been bery bad." He buries it in the sand and shakes his finger menacingly. Then he turns on the other one. "You didn eat your sandwish. Naughty bunny." He picks it up by the ears and tosses it out of the sandpit. "You're not allowed to play any more." Donald bosses these two poor bunnies around happily for the better part of fifteen minutes as I look on in amusement, intrigued by how similar this game of punishment is to a topping scene in a dungeon, though with more Furries and less leather. I guess Donald and I both know that being the boss can be good fun.

When the weather's bad, which is more often than not, being the UK, we sometimes go to the local shopping centre. There's an indoor playground attached to a tacky burger shop that usually kills at least forty minutes and sometimes I can squeeze in a few chores of my own while we're there, especially if I use ice-cream as a bribe to keep Donald happy. On one of these rainy days I stop in at the bank to order a new card—I lost mine along with my purse and camera when I was dancing on a podium at "Quinces and Queers" last week, and had to jump the train all the way back home.

"Wot beau'iful hair," the bank teller says to Donald when we reach the front of the queue. "He gets it from his dad," I reply automatically. It's true—Randolf's Jamaican and he has gorgeous thick dark dreadlocks down to his waist. My own hair is currently cropped and dyed bright pink, and the teller looks at me and chuckles.

"But ee's definitely got Mummy's eyes, 'asn't ee."

I hold my breath nervously, waiting for Donald to pipe up indignantly with: "She's not my mum," but thankfully he runs off to play with the toys stacked up by the window and so I seize the opportunity and play along, hoping desperately that he doesn't call me by name or tell the nice lady that he misses his mum. Kids seem to have a habit of saying that to strangers, as though they're kidnap victims appealing to any adult they see to rescue them from their evil nanny and take them back home to mum.

"He sure does. Hopefully he'll have inherited my brains, to go with the eyes." Ah, the joys of banal small talk with strangers. It's like the password to a secret hetero breeder's club, this kind of banter. I take a strange pleasure in going undercover and dabbling in it from time to time.

"And wot's your name, littl' angel?"

"This is Mona. My little masterpiece," I throw in, in a fit of corny self-indulgence. Mona, being the outrageous flirt she is, obligingly gives her a wide gummy smile, and the teller ooohs and ahhs a bit and says, "What an 'appy child, and what a beaut'ful name," and I accept the compliment as though I made her myself, and it feels good to have this stranger buying into my fantasy, being fooled by my cameo performance as Mona's mum.

"My two don't look nothing like me 'usband. Lucky, too, coz he don't 'alf 'ave an ugly mug on 'is shoulders," the teller cackles.

"The sun is smiling now!" Donald yells from the window, and sure enough the clouds have parted for a weak stream of lemon-yellow light. "Park! Park! Comeonhurryup." He runs back

to me and starts pulling on my arm. The bank teller and I exchange weary smiles, two mothers sharing a sympathetic moment.

“Does Mummy mind if you ‘ave a littl’ sweetie?” The teller looks to me questioningly at the same time as Donald looks at me, frowning. My heart jolts with a sudden rush of adrenalin as I realise he is about to blow my cover. I’m going to look so stupid. As I am frantically searching for some kind of explanation to explain why I’ve been lying, I absentmindedly shake my head “no”, the teller gives Donald a toffee, and he stuffs it in his mouth and is silent.

We leave the bank with my mummy image still intact and once we are out of view I swoop him up into a big hug.

“You’re such a good boy, Donald. Such a good boy. I’m so proud of you. Would you like an ice-cream before we go to the park?” He doesn’t know why I am saying this but he nods eagerly, with an air of self-importance. I am so grateful to him for allowing me to become his mummy for a moment, even if it was just because he was too distracted by sugar to say anything. Sometimes I worry that I’m a weirdo, borrowing other people’s kids like this. It’s like window shopping, and it’s also kinda like shoplifting, the way I get a thrill of exhilaration when I manage to pull it off. But what kind of a shoplifter returns the stolen goods at the end of the day and gets paid twelve quid an hour for her troubles?

Chapter Six

The Other Woman

I never used to think of myself as a jealous person but London is teaching me about more than just my kinks. I am constantly haunted by the Other Woman, her name a reminder of everything I'm not; she is always there beside me, in one way or another. Sometimes I overhear her on the other end of the phone declaring her love, or I catch the tail-end of her name as I'm entering rooms. She comes to the house if I go away, taking my place as though I was never there. It hurts that I am so easily replaced. We pass each other unseen but observed. I find traces of her in the bedroom—books with an inscription written in her hand, Christmas cards, birthday cards. Her ghost haunts me—the way she buttered toast, the way she made the bed—she is a constant benchmark that I am measured against, and although I am told that I am loved I know I will always come second to her. I work harder to be more fun, more exciting, more desired, but I am always going to be the substitute, treading in her steps. I know she would be chosen over me, if it came to it. After all, she was there first.

She is the nanny who came before me, the nanny who everyone still misses. And because she is a student and the summer holidays are coming up she has enough spare time to look after Donald and Mona while I am in Barcelona for the queer festival. But this arrangement makes me uneasy. Ever since I started working for Yvonne it's been a constant stream of comparison: *Donald liked it when Alanna read his bedtime story this way, or: Alanna always sang Incy Wincy Spider while giving Mona her bath—maybe you could do the same?* I am terrified that she will enjoy being with the kids so much that she will change her mind and want to come back full-time. I am also terrified that she will steal Donald away from me. Mona I am not so concerned about—she is too young to be that discerning—but Donald thinks the world of Alanna and still talks about her all the time. I wonder if he'll talk about me like that when I am gone.

There is another Other Woman too, lurking in the corners of the house. This one however is a permanent fixture, and I don't even bother to try and compete against her. If we are all in

a polyamorous relationship with the kids, then Yvonne is the primary partner. Sometimes I resent her. I can pretend and daydream all I want but I am not actually the children's mother. I can give Mona her bedtime bottle when Yvonne isn't home, but only Yvonne can give her the real deal, the boob action she prefers. And no matter how much fun Donald might be having with me playing skittles in the garden, when he hears Yvonne's car in the driveway I am instantly forgotten. I do all the crap jobs: feeding, washing, cleaning up the mess, dealing with tears and arguments and tantrums, organising, dressing, getting everyone out of the door, getting everyone back home. And then Yvonne and Randolph come home to clean, fed, and ready-for-bed children. They read to them, kiss them goodnight, and walk down the stairs feeling proud that they have produced such beautiful, sweet little offspring. I do all the behind-the-scenes work, the painting of sets, the moving of props, the learning of lines that makes this little production a success. But I have no permanent place in the family. Donald even reminds me of this from time to time. "You can't make me. You're not my mummy," he scowls, when I ask him to pick up his toys. His words have a sting—I am nothing but the casually employed surrogate mother, a prostitute parent to keep the children satiated when the real thing isn't there.

Chapter Seven

Mother Material

Just before Stevie leaves for Berlin she invites me along to a party at a club called Shackles, the kind of place where the dress code is definitely “less is more”. Shackles is a monthly kink event that happens in the quiet end of Kentish Town in a rambling building that has plenty of things to be bent over or tied to, and plenty of soft corners to droop in. There are already people making use of the equipment, but it’s early so the busiest space is currently the dance floor, which has a stage at one end for scheduled performances as well as a small bar and a snack table. There’s a dirty industrial beat playing and the lighting is subtle and murky, perfect for those who want to feel invisible and also perfect for those who want to watch.

Stevie finds me at the bar. She looks me up and down appraisingly and then leans in close to be heard over the music.

“I’d like to top you tonight.” It’s definitely not a question. I bow my head in acquiescence and she cups my face in her palm, stroking my cheek with her thumb. “I have something for you.” She wraps a collar around my neck, the leather soft from years of use. As she tightens it she looks me in the eye. “Would my little Girl like to try something new tonight?” she asks me. I have no idea what she might be suggesting but the answer is yes, regardless. She kisses me on the forehead. “You look beautiful. You’ve made your Daddy very proud.” She clips a leash to my collar and leads me through the warren-like building til we reach an empty side-room that’s more brightly lit than the rest. Inside are a few metal tables of varying sizes and heights. She sits me down on one and proceeds to unpack her medical bag, lining up needles on a nearby bench in order of gauge from thin through to thick. I blush when I realise that I’m about to get pierced. It’s something I told her weeks ago that I wanted to try out, but I’d assumed that she had forgotten. My eyes follow her as she prepares the space, every move deliberate and heavily charged. It’s delicious to watch her like this—she has become more still, somehow, more focused and more refined.

“BDSM is my religion” she tells me when she is ready.

“I thought you were Muslim,” I retort cheekily.

“They don’t have to be mutually exclusive.” She motions for me to lay down on the bench.

“Spirituality is all about escaping the body—” she pauses as she restrains my left arm to the frame with a leather strap— “by unshackling the mind.” She fastens my right arm to the bench and I am held firmly in place. “I have the power to make you bleed, and I have the power to make you stop. Do you trust me, Little Girl?”

“I do,” I whisper, spellbound. She gently unbuttons my top, removing it along with my bra, and then pulls on black latex gloves and wipes my breasts with an alcohol swab.

“Are you ready?”

I nod.

“Do you trust me?”

I nod again, more firmly this time.

“Now listen to Daddy and breathe when I tell you to.” She pinches the skin at the very top of my left breast between two fingers and holds my gaze. “Breathe in.” I breathe, letting go of my tension, and she slides the first needle in and through, smooth as a hot knife through butter. I barely feel a thing, but after a moment I start to buzz inside. “Good girl.” She pierces me twice more on the left and then moves to my right side and repeats the same process. She takes her time, paying close attention to geometry and symmetry, and I begin to feel as though I have disappeared—as though I am nothing but a canvas for her art. She moves to a thicker gauge and this time the needle burns deeper, a solid stab that draws all of my awareness sharply in to that one point on my skin, and then just as quickly releases me. I feel my pupils dilate and she registers my response and grins.

“Having fun there?” she taunts.

I relax my head back on the bench. “Mmhmm.”

“Are you ready for more?”

“Please.”

The tracks of needles climb slowly down my breasts, two even lines like silver-pointed train-tracks leading towards my half-forgotten nipples. Before each new needle she waits until I have landed back on earth before sending me up there again, our eyes locked together. Her intention and care make me crumble; her tenderness is exquisite. In her hands I have become something precious, and when I go still with the wonderment of it all she whispers in my ear: “Are you ok?” and I almost want to cry. When she has put the sixteenth needle in place she admires her handiwork for a while, running her fingers greedily over the raised

flesh that hides each slender metal pin waiting quietly beneath my skin. “You are beautiful,” she tells me, and my chest throbs.

She begins to undo the spell, pulling out the needles as though they are tricks from a magician’s hat. I feel myself unravelling, bleeding hot dark dribbles that run along the curve of my ribs and drip wet red tears on the paper sheets beneath me. Somehow, though she works carefully to clean it all up, when she holds me to her at the end some of my blood finds its way on to her starched white shirt.

I hadn’t realised it at the time but a handful of people have entered the room during our scene, and when Stevie takes my hand and leads me over to an empty couch five or six pairs of eyes follow us admiringly. I rest with my head in her lap and watch as another couple takes our spot, marvelling at how quiet my world has become. Nothing is able to touch me. I bury my face in her jeans as my eyes well up, and Stevie strokes my hair. After all that she’s just done to me, this final gesture is my undoing.

When I have stopped trembling she gets us both a drink and we wander through the rest of the house. Some of the warm fog from earlier has lifted and when we run into Jack I am able to joke and flirt like I usually do, but I still stay close to Stevie’s side. To remind me of my place she occasionally strokes my neck while we’re all talking, looping her fingers under the collar and then pulling it tight. Each time she cuts my breath short I fall abruptly silent, my knees melting beneath me and my heart and cunt clenching like eager, anxious fists. No one other than Stevie touches me tonight—even Jack refrains from hugging me when he says hello. It is clear to anyone who looks that she owns me, and I bask in this security.

We leave the party not long after that and go round the corner for curry and chips in a tiny takeaway shop with steamed-up windows and plastic chairs. The place is packed with drunk teenagers singing football songs and, like a little girl separated from her daddy, I feel a surge of panic when I lose her for a moment in the crowd. When I find her again I hold on tightly to her shirt as she orders for us and then pushes her way through the crowd to some empty seats. I finger the rusty stain greedily, enjoying the guilty pleasure of seeing myself smeared so boldly on her sleeve for anyone and everyone to see.

We go home to my place because she is still living on Jack's floor, and she makes me a cup of tea and brings it to me in bed. "You were so brave tonight," she smiles, and kisses me on the top of my head. Gently she unbuckles the collar and takes it from my neck.

"Thank you," I say. I feel like a little puppy, all wriggly and bursting with exuberance, and when she gets into bed beside me I squirm around excitedly and tangle my fingers up in her hair.

"Show me your cutting scars," I beg. I've seen them plenty of times before, of course, but now they hold a new meaning for me. She takes off her binder and traces my finger along a thin raised scar that spells out "freehold", starting above her heart and wrapping right around her ribs.

"I was with my Daddy for four years," she says quietly. "I was sixteen when we first met. This was her farewell gift."

"Why did you break up?"

"She said it was time for me to become a Daddy myself. She taught me everything I know. It broke my heart."

I rest my fingertips on the letter "e" positioned directly above her heart, mesmerised by her strength, her elegance, and her formidable history. Something about those thin puckered pale brown lines excites me, something to do with the fragility of skin and the vulnerability of being opened up, the thought of her being pulled apart at the seams and then stitched back together. Stevie turns out the light and wraps herself around me in the dark, spooning me from behind. "I'm going to miss you this summer," she whispers in my ear. We lie quietly until I feel her breathing even out and her limbs relax against mine, the fingers of her right hand fluttering in her sleep. I whisper the word "Daddy" to myself, stroking the word wetly with my tongue. Then, holding her limp hands against my stomach I try out "Mummy". I've not used this word since Carmen but it feels warm and familiar in my mouth. Stevie twitches in her sleep and twists away from me, dragging the quilt with her as she turns. I roll over and fit myself against her and reclaim some of the quilt with one hand. The glowing numbers on the alarm clock tell me that we have less than four hours left together before she has to get up, go home, and pack for Berlin. I lie still, breathing in time with her and playing my left fingers gently across her scars, watching the minutes drop one by one through the clock.

* *

With Stevie gone my social life shrinks somewhat. Other than Jack I don't know any of my new friends well enough yet to hit them up for a mid-week pint, and Sam is always too busy with work. I realise I need more adult company when I notice that I'm talking about myself in the third person to Ola, my flatmate: "Meg's going to go to the off-licence now. Can she get you anything while she's there?" I start to organise play-dates with other nannies at the park so that Donald and I can both have some company closer to our own ages. I even stoop to internet dating, posting an advert on TNT looking for other nannies in the area who also have young kids in their care. Ming, a middle-aged woman from Taiwan, answers the advert, and we end up having a weekly Wednesday date. We meet at her house because her employers both work long hours, which means the house is always empty, and because the family have a weekly delivery of cakes from Fortnum and Mason's. Most of the nannies I encounter are from overseas, lots of them working illegally and consequently for very little pay. It's almost laughable how little monetary value people place on someone taking care of (and in a lot of cases, practically raising) their most precious possessions. On our first "date"

Ming tells me that she lives in the granny flat next to the children's rooms, and has done so since the eldest, who is now seven, was three weeks old.

"They mum and dad don't even take children on they holidays. Last summer I take children to Disneyland and parents go Maldives. The children think I their mother. I see they first steps, I teach they first words, I put to bed every night, and when have bad dreams, children come to Ming."

"Do you wish you had kids of your own?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "This my family."

Chapter Eight

Mother Fucker

I make my way from Barcelona airport to the festival along with a bunch of others I meet at the baggage carousel. They're easy to spot because one of them is wearing a shirt that says "Fuck the pope (but use a condom)", two of them have haircuts that my dad would say look like they were done with a lawnmower, and they're all covered in tats. The festival is being held in an old squatted abattoir on the outskirts of Barcelona, which has freaked out the vegans but delighted all the kinksters who are wasting no time in making use of the meat hooks and stainless steel benches. Everyone is pitching their tents in what used to be the holding yards, and with all the colourful outfits and crazy hair the place looks something like a cross between a medieval fair, the backyard in *Steptoe and Son*, and a Sex Pistols photo shoot. I've met up with a few Aussies who I have loose connections with through some mutual friends from back home and together we claim a corner for our own. Unicorn Bruce and I tie a sheet up for shade and scatter around some cushions that someone found in in the bins out the back of a homewares shop, and Anni, a cool woman with a full-body leopard-print tattoo, sets up her decks to do a bit of dj-ing. People keep wandering over to check out the space and have a drink and by the end of the first day our camp has become the unofficial chill-out space for the festival: the go-to place for a massage, a smoke, or a make-out session.

As the week rolls on the make-out sessions morph into a slow, continuous orgy that seems to gather and discard people at a steady and sustainable rate. It's fun, but it makes it hard to sleep. The constant traffic is good, though, because it distracts me from missing Stevie and from thinking about her and Ingrid. July in Spain is hot and most people soon have their tops off and stay that way for the rest of the week. The unofficial dress code is flamboyance— plenty of tulle, leather, feathers, and studs. One older German guy spends the whole week wearing nothing but a leather chest harness and a spangly pink top hat. We loll around camp for most of the first day and then Unicorn Bruce gives me a line of coke and paints my tits with silver glitter and we walk up to the main shed to sign up for our volunteer shifts. The premise of a grass-roots festival, Unicorn Bruce has explained, is that

there is no one particular group in charge—everyone who turns up helps makes the event happen themselves. Consequently there are rosters for cooking, cleaning, workshop facilitation and even police liaison (the owner of the abattoir isn't entirely delighted that we've descended on his property, despite the fact the land has been unused for years). As we are picking our way through the tents I nearly trip over a baby capsule sitting next to a little dome tent.

"Fucking weird, bringing a baby to a fuck-fest," I whisper to Unicorn Bruce. He snorts.

"No fun for mums! No fun for mums!" he chants, punching his fist in the air and miming someone marching with a placard on a picket line as he stomps.

We sign up for kitchen duties because Unicorn Bruce figures that statistically it will give us the best opportunity to flirt with the greatest number of people in the shortest space of time. He's smart like that. While we are there we go for a wander around the different spaces that are being set up. There's a makeshift cinema where activist films will be shown every night, a first aid station run by a tall woman with a chiselled jawline, a beehive, and a nurse's dress splattered in fake blood, and seven or eight workshop spaces for discussions on refugee rights, squatters' rights, HIV activism, queer feminism, BDSM skill-sharing, DIY sex-toy workshops, and whatever else people decide to put on. But the most interesting space is the dungeon, which is being constructed in preparation for the Thursday night sex party. The dungeon has (predictably) been allocated to the room where the pig slaughtering used to take place, back when the abattoir was functional. People are busily nailing together wood for spanking horses and St Andrews' crosses, rigging up slings, laying down sheets of thick black plastic on the floor and setting up cables for the sound system and extra lighting. There are topless butches and lipstick-lipped fags everywhere with hammers and drills, a diesel-femme in thigh-high boots straddling a beam with a saw in her hands, two short bears in leather harnesses testing out the strength of the sling-supports, and a Daddy with a leather cap and a booming voice directing it all from the centre of the room, sitting on a fold-out camping chair breastfeeding the baby in her arms.

My heart does a floppy little somersault. Unicorn Bruce races off to say hi to some Radical Faeries he's spotted painting a mural on one wall so I offer to help Elin, an older Swedish dyke with a crewcut, to sand down some benches, so that I can drool at the Daddy from across the room. I keep hoping to catch her eye but she's too busy directing everyone and feeding the baby to notice. She's insanely hot. Her short hair is tightly restrained in

cornrows, accentuating the thrust of her jawbone and the steady glint in her eye. She's wearing black jeans torn off at the knee and a sleeveless waistcoat with tails, which hugs her snugly from the back but which bulges open at the front to reveal big brown breasts, ripe and taut like grapes that have sucked up too much water and are threatening to burst their skins. She's sitting with her legs planted firmly apart, one tit pulled free, baby held to her chest. Not what you'd normally expect from a butch. I spend far more time staring than sanding. After about half an hour she saunters over to see how we're doing but she either isn't interested or is deliberately choosing to ignore me, because I don't even get a second look. While she's discussing carpentry techniques with Elin, the baby in her arms stirs. Still talking, she pulls out a breast and squeezes, massaging the milk down towards the nipple, persuading it to flow. A spurt shoots out unobserved and lands on my arm but she is too distracted by the baby to notice. Surreptitiously I look around to make sure no one is watching and then lick it up. My guilt makes it taste all the sweeter.

It's not till the second day, when she is waiting in the queue for lunch and I am serving the salad that she holds out her plate for me to fill and I get the guts up to talk to her.

"At your service, Sir. Would you like quinoa salad or chickpea?"

She raises one eyebrow. "At my service, huh. In that case I'll take both."

I fill up her plate slowly, trying to think of something else to say. "Would you like extra tomato?"

She nods. "Say, what's your name, girl?"

"Meg, Sir," I say, handing back her plate and trying to keep the weak-kneed tremble from my voice.

"As in Meghan?"

"As in Nutmeg. My parents were hippies."

She runs her eyes over me as though she is sizing me up, trying to make a decision. I stand there blushing while the queue behind her shuffles impatiently. Eventually she holds out her hand.

"Mahla," she rumbles as I kiss her knuckles, head bent over the skipped salad greens, "named after my musical orgasms." I look up at her blankly. "You know, Mahler, the composer."

I don't know, but I nod anyway.

"And this is Lilith. So named for her wrath." The wrinkled little bundle in the sling hanging

around her shoulders opens her mouth and lets out a tiny whine, one small fist finding its way out of the blanket and waving aimlessly in the air as she squirms.

“Nice to see you,” I say, transfixed by them both. I can’t think of a single other thing to say.

Mahla finds me after dinner and orders me to follow her to the dungeon. She’s left Lilith sleeping with a friend and has an hour or two to herself. By the end of the evening she has *me* to herself as well, collared and wearing her marks. The next few days I am by Mahla’s side constantly. I gratefully line up for her in the dinner queue and sit at her feet in workshops, holding Lilith when she isn’t busy feeding. When she needs both hands free to demonstrate bondage techniques or to make floggers from old bicycle inner-tubes I take the baby for walks round the campsite, singing to her as I bounce her gently in the sling. I feel a bit like I’m cheating on Mahla, but I can’t resist fantasising that Lilith is mine and that Kate is waiting at home for us, all sleepy and warm in our bed. Kate with her curling top lip and her floppy fringe that I’ve been drooling over obsessively on facebook. People smile at the two of us as we pass, admiring Lilith’s cuteness but also, I imagine, my saintly maternal devotion. I have left behind the fun of the workshop to take care of this little creature and any acknowledgement of my masochistic sacrifice fills me with pride, and also kinda turns me on. I have become not only Mahla’s sub, but also Lilith’s willing slave.

On the second evening Mahla and I sneak off to the dungeon again while Lilith sleeps in Mistress Modra’s arms. While Mahla uncoils her hemp ropes I take my clothes off and then wait, naked and nervous, under a metal ring which hangs suspended from the overhead beams. She begins with my chest, wrapping the rope around me two, three times, encircling and separating my breasts so that they protrude obscenely—tight, engorged, and slowly darkening deep red. Then she restrains my hands behind my back, secured with a series of intricate knots to the rope harness she is slowly weaving around my chest. As the first wrist is tied I feel the panic set in. I’m claustrophobic and we have already discussed my fear of confinement, but she wants me to try and push through. I tense myself, fighting the urge to try and pull my wrists apart, and my heart accelerates rapidly. She notices the change in my breathing and stops, moves in front of me and lifts up my chin till I am looking her in the eye. “Breathe with me. Follow my lead.” She breathes deeply in and out, her warm hands cupping my cheeks. I force myself to breathe in time with her, steady and deliberate, eyes locked together, and gradually my panic subsides.

Eventually she nods. "Good girl." She takes her palms from my cheeks. I surrender to the warmth of her hands as she works, a warmth which bleeds into all of my corners as the edges of my world turn soft. Time disappears and is replaced with a feeling of being held; her arms become ropes that twist and loop around my limbs, holding me fast, holding me tight, promising to not let me go. I disappear inside myself, I disappear inside her, and my universe simultaneously merges, expands, and contracts, like a kaleidoscope.

As she works she occasionally connects the ropes to the ring above my head, and piece by piece my body is secured and then gradually hoisted up until I am standing with only my left foot still on the ground. She lifts my chin again and through the fog I try to focus on her eyes. She is telling me that it is time. I nod. I can smell her, smell the heat of her cunt; she is as turned on as I am. I sink into my hemp bindings as the ropes tighten and strain against my flesh and my leg slowly lifts off the floor, so slowly that it is almost a surprise to me when I realise that I am gently swinging more than a metre above the ground. It feels like flying while held tight in someone's arms. Mahla smiles. "Your first suspension," she growls, and runs her fingers roughly through my hair. I close my eyes. I have no words left to offer. She brings her face close to mine, our foreheads touching, and again she breathes in deeply and I follow. We share two, three long slow breaths and then she tilts her head to mine and the very tips of our lips lift to touch. The kiss is almost as light as I feel, and I begin to hallucinate black feathers falling and rising in the air, as weightless as light itself. We hang together in the moment, sharing each other's breath, until in a sudden shiver of lightning we are split painfully apart. For a moment I am confused, and then like the thunder which follows on the heels of a flash the room fills with the sound of screaming. Mistress Modra comes rushing in with a red-faced Lilith and Mahla snaps her head away and I am instantly forgotten. I come crashing back to normality, sounds and colours crowding me as my adrenaline surges and I start to shake from the impact as reality hits me with a cold slap. Mahla takes Lilith in her arms, frantically pulling out a nipple and aiming it into her red gaping mouth, Lilith screaming hysterically and Mistress Modra fretting by her side. Mahla makes soothing sounds with her mouth, jiggling Lilith gently in her arms trying to calm her down. The magic that we had carefully woven between us has been instantaneously dissipated and I want to get down, I want to get out, and the idea makes me panic and I have to fight the urge to join in and start screaming too. I try to breathe as Mahla has taught me but the panic surges as Lilith's screams get louder until my breathing matches the fast pace Mahla sets as she strides briskly

around the room. “Sir?” I say, but she doesn’t hear me. I clear my throat and try louder, “Sir!” but she is already heading for the door, followed closely by Mistress Modra. In my panic I start to scream, twisting and turning frantically in my restraints, hysteria engulfing me. It takes a moment for the two women to untangle my voice from Lilith’s but when Mahla registers she halts mid-step and whirls around and stares through me in annoyance. She issues terse instructions to Mistress Modra to get me down and turns immediately back to Lilith.

Mistress Modra lowers me down and unties me deftly, and as soon as the last knot is untied my hysteria disappears, replaced with a deep exhaustion. I want to cry and I want to be held, but my top is busy submitting to her *own* insistent and demanding top, and who can blame her, really—Lilith is undeniably much cuter than me.

An hour or so later Mahla comes and finds me in the chill-out space, where I’m sharing a joint with Unicorn Bruce and Anni and taking bets on which one of the four women currently writhing around in the orgy cushions will be the first to cum.

“Meg, I’m so sorry,” Mahla says, crouching down next to me. “Are you ok?”

I nod and offer her the joint but she shakes her head, gesturing at Lilith who is fast asleep in her sling.

“Can we go somewhere a bit more baby-friendly?”

Reluctantly I leave Anni and Unicorn Bruce with the joint and follow Mahla back to the quiet, smoke-free end of the camp. Mahla settles Lilith in their tent and then we sit outside and share a glass of wine.

“You know, I helped organise the first ever Barcelona Queer Festival,” Mahla tells me.

“Eight years ago. We squatted an old theatre for the first one, and I stayed on after and lived there with a bunch of Spanish anarchists. It was the best year of my life.”

“What happened to that squat?”

“We held an animal rights fundraiser during the running of the bulls. The neighbours called the cops when two drag queens in full flamenco regalia ended up on the neighbour’s lawn being fucked up the arse by a bull with dildos for horns. We got kicked out not long after that.”

I laugh so hard red wine spurts out my nose. “Fuck I love my queer community.”

“Yeah. I’m really going to miss it.”

“What do you mean, miss it? You turning straight or something?” I joke.

“I’m a mum now, sweetheart. The queers want Daddies, not mummies.”

“Can’t you be both?”

“I thought I could, but this week has made me think I can’t. Not unless I can have somewhere quiet to sleep, clean nappy-changing facilities, and six or seven people who are not off their faces signed up for a childcare roster.”

The adrenalin rush from my rope suspension has left me feeling shaky, so when Mahla offers for me to snuggle with her in her tent I readily accept. Lilith wakes up early the next morning and Mahla holds her to her breast until she is full and then falls back to sleep exhausted. I’m already wide awake so I take the baby outside so that Mahla can get some more rest. The sky is criss-crossed with streams of grey cloud slowly dissipating in the milky-yellow dawn, like soy milk curdled in lemon juice. There are snores coming from some of the tents, music still playing quietly from the dining hall, and I can see a mohawk and several shaved heads moaning in a pile outside my own tent, proof that the orgy has now achieved perpetual motion. Three faggy punks have fallen asleep sitting up in a row against one of the holding-pen walls, heads in each other’s laps as though they have given up on waiting for a bus. The last one in line is still clutching a wine bottle limply to his chest, the way a little boy cuddles his teddy. Lilith squirms in her shawl and I hold her tighter to me, sharing my heartbeat and the warmth of my skin. The soft little body feels so right in my arms, and I’ve begun to find myself craving her when we’re apart, a physical yearning that aches like a bruise. I stand with her facing the dawn, surrounded by sleeping queers in the middle of an abattoir pen, somewhere in the suburbs of Barcelona. There are fresh bruises aching quietly on my inner thighs, my cunt is sore and satisfied, and the air is filled with patchouli and beer and the cold air of a new day. As the sky lightens my heart follows suit, filling like a hot air balloon rising far up above the camp as I hold Lilith to my thumping chest.

All week I ricochet between safety-pins in nappies and in noses, between white powder on bums and *up* noses, between warm bottles of formula and cold bottles of beer. When I’m woken up at three a.m. by a screaming Lilith I feel as though life has fast-forwarded in my sleep. Other nights, when I’m still dancing at six a.m. wearing little other than a pink feather boa I feel like I’m living in reverse. On Thursday everyone spends the day cleaning and decorating, getting the space ready for the sex party. The whole place is buzzing with

excitement: costumes are being constructed, drugs are being snorted, and negotiations are taking place about who's going to fuck who, at what time, and in what room. I leave Mahla at her tent in the late afternoon and go back to my camp to get ready. The party's started early there and Anni is spinning the decks while a few boys dressed as unicorns with dildos on their heads dance about half-naked in the dusty dying light. Unicorn Bruce and I do a few lines of coke and fix each other's false eyelashes and then I go to the toilets to use the mirror and put together my outfit for the night, which pretty much consists of gaffa tape, black tulle, and a piece of PVC. Mahla has been talking about tying me to the plinth in the middle of the dungeon and overseeing a gang-bang, and I have been instructed to not wear any knickers. But when I make my way to her tent at 10 p.m., just after sunset, she is fast asleep with Lilith beside her. I don't have the heart to wake her. I go inside to the party for an hour or so and have a dance and then go back to check on her again. This time she stirs when I unzip the tent.

"Shit. Have I missed the party?"

"It's just getting started," I whisper. "But there's a problem."

"Don't tell me the sling supports broke."

"No no, that's in use as we speak and it's holding up fine. The problem is your babysitter.

The last time I saw Mistress Modra she'd just stuck half a bag of MDMA up her nose and was undressing some baby butch in the middle of the dance floor."

"Thank god for that," Mahla says, and lays back down on the bed. "To be honest a sex party is the last thing I feel like right now."

I sit down next to her on the mattress. "Are you ok?"

"Stupid idea to bring a six-week-old to something like this. I wanted to prove that I can still do the things I love, but the thing I love most in the world is making the other things I love less possible."

I tentatively reach out and start to knead her shoulders. She moans appreciatively, rolls over and stretches out naked on the sleeping bag and all of a sudden the tables have turned—she is in my hands, soon my hands are in her, and soon after that I am fucking her with my cock and learning first-hand how she earned her name.

Later, as the baby lies suckling, I go to the kitchen and get her a cup of tea.

"I hope that wasn't too vanilla for you," I say shyly as I hand her the mug. I'm painfully aware that the sex we just had was way more "lesbian" than "dirty queer". She rolls her

eyes. “What is it with you newbies and thinking it all has to be chains and whips? Pink really did the scene a disservice with that bloody song.”

I blush painfully in the dark. She turns her attention back to Lilith, rearranging both of their limbs and checking she has latched on to the nipple properly. She holds her close, skin to skin, cradling her head gently in one large hand, the two of them lost together in their own private world. Mahla notices my look.

“You’re not jealous, are you?” she taunts.

Lilith lies between us, mouth possessively covering Mahla’s nipple, making coy flirty eyes as she sucks. The muscles in my chest contract sharply, unexpectedly. She’s right; I am. But not in the way that she thinks.

On the last morning Mahla slips her hands around my neck and unbuckles my collar. She kisses me on the cheek, thanks me for being a good Girl, and releases me from her service. There’s been no talk of seeing each other again in London and in a way I think it’s probably for the best. Mahla and I are two lovers vying for the same person, but it’s not an equal fight. I am nothing but the unnecessary third wheel, and the last week has made me realise that I no longer want to be playing second fiddle, restricted to a part-time casual role. I want to be full-time all the time, signed up to a permanent contract with long-term rights and responsibilities. I want a baby of my own.

“So how did things pan out with you and Daddy-O?” Unicorn Bruce asks as we’re saying our goodbyes.

“I guess I’m just not looking for that kind of game,” I say. By which I mean I want to be the mum, now, instead of the nanny.

I say my farewells to the Aussie crew, pack up my tent (which I’ve barely slept in), hoik my backpack onto my back and make my way to the airport. I leave Spain heartbroken. Lilith has stirred a longing in me, and the craving is visceral and fierce. I go to bed thinking about her and I wake up missing her; I catch glimpses of her face on buses and in shops, babies on the television remind me of her, and at strange times of the day I find myself idly wondering what she is doing. I am obsessed. I fantasise about holding her while she sleeps, curled up safely in the crook of my arm, snuffling like a little pig. But even in my fantasies I know that when she wakes up mine will not be the breast she turns to. I will always be nothing but the other woman—her mother’s lover, and never her mother.

Chapter Nine

Mamma-Cita

My first day back at work is chaotic. When I walk in the door Yvonne is frantically tapping away at her laptop, texting on her mobile and talking on the home phone, while Mona crawls around crying at her feet. She barely acknowledges me when I say hi and scoop up the baby, which isn't particularly unusual but it would have been nice for her to have at least asked how Spain was (though I'm not sure where I'd start, to be honest). The doorbell rings just as I am carrying Mona towards the playroom, and Yvonne looks up at me imploringly. "Hi. Sorry, Meg. Can you get the door? How was France?" She goes straight back to her phone call. I bounce Mona on my hip as I open the door to Miss Lucy, minus the kids for once.

"Is Yvonne ok?" she asks as soon as she's in the door. She looks exquisite as usual in a pinstriped pencil skirt and cherry-red blouse.

"I just got here," I say over my shoulder as I walk ahead of her down the hall, wiping the dribble off Mona's face with her bib.

"So you haven't heard?"

I shake my head.

"There's been an uproar about a photo of Yvonne that went up on her Mamma-Cita blog last week. She's scared child services are going to get involved." Mamma-Cita is the blog Yvonne's been working on ever since Donald was born. It's all about negotiating being a sexual icon and a maternal figure at the same time, documenting her journey into motherhood and problematising the work/home balance. The blog also acts as a virtual extension of her Friday morning teas, helping to create a forum for sex-positive parenting and providing a space for kinky mothers and sex worker mums to talk. As Yvonne puts it, it's for the mums who are too hot for playgroup.

"Yvonne put a few photos up last week from a photo-shoot of her breast-feeding Mona," says Miss Lucy.

"I know breastfeeding pics get taken down off facebook all the time, but what's the problem with them being on her blog?"

"People are accusing her of sexualising Mona. The whole point of Mamma-Cita is to talk about how even porn actresses are real people who have babies, right? So she writes the blog under Chastity Cummings, not Yvonne, to make that point. And now it's gone viral, all over twitter and facebook and fetlife and everything, and people saying that her name is a porn brand and that because of that the photos of Mona are porn too, because they've been released under the 'Chastity' brand name."

"Jeez. So what they're really saying is that because she's well-known in the sex industry, she can never be seen in public with her child, because people are incapable of seeing Yvonne as anything other than a sexual object? Christ."

Yvonne hangs up the phone behind us. "I never want to have sex ever again," she declares.

There is more chaos when I turn up at Ming's house for our next weekly morning tea. It's been a while since I saw her, because while I was in Spain Ming went home for a couple of weeks to Taiwan. I've walked there with Mona and Donald in the double pram and Mona's fallen asleep, so I position her in the quiet front study and leave the door open so I can hear her when she wakes. Ming has retreated to the kitchen in tears.

"Karen say she fire me," she tells me when she eventually manages to catch her breath. Karen is the children's mother, and Ming's boss.

"But you're the best nanny I've ever seen. Your whole life is devoted to those kids."

"She say the children love me more than love her. While I in Taiwan Millicent cry herself to sleep every night, and so they call me for bedtime every night so we say goodnight on phone. Nothing else calm her, my poor baby."

"So the kids adore you. Where's the crime in that?"

"She jealous."

I sit down slowly, the idea sinking in. What Karen's saying is that Ming isn't supposed to replace her; she's supposed to be the stand-in, not the lead role.

"She want me to leave," Ming says, her voice flat and defeated. "But they my babies—I have care for them all their life. And now no more. Will never see again. My heart break, Meg." She dissolves into tears, and although neither of us are English and we both prefer coffee, the only thing I can think to do is make her a cup of tea.

Five weeks later Karen announces that she's decided to start working part-time so she can spend more time with the kids. Ming's given a month's bonus pay, thanked for her time with the family and sent on her way. She has no rights to joint custody and no visitation agreement, just a glowing letter of recommendation to help her to find a new family. In a way, watching Ming's grief has cemented my own baby plans. Having someone else's children is not enough if what you really want is your own. No matter how real it might feel, you are the nanny and not the mother at the end of the day. Though try telling that to poor Millicent, who'll be crying herself to sleep each night until she's old enough to forget that Ming ever existed.

I had thought that my baby plans had been well and truly shoved into the back of the deepfreeze section of my brain, to be thawed out in a few years along with my broken heart. However, since being away the heartache of losing Carmen has somewhat faded into the background, eclipsed by the excitement of London. The problem with London, though, is that it's like a holiday from my real life, treading water until I can swim. I can't stay here forever and if I want to have a baby then I need to make a home somewhere, put down roots and stay put. And I need to stop having all these wild flings with people who don't fit my plans. I need to be with someone who also wants a family, someone who has a job and a home and a car. Someone like Kate. Kate is compatible with my plans. She screams stability. She even has a plug-in air-freshener for fuckssake. And she is ready for a family. Not after she's done all these other things, not after she's travelled and worked and fucked her way around Europe, but ready right now. I daydream guiltily, fantasising about me and her naked in her bed, my pregnant belly swelling between us. I fantasise about her fist inside me, her arms around me, her mouth, her breasts, her neck. I fantasise about her getting up early on a Saturday morning and taking the baby for a walk so that I can sleep in, I fantasise about family holidays and BBQs on the beach, and sharing the school pick-ups and drop-offs. The bigger my infatuation with Kate grows, the more I feel like I've hit pause until I can be with her. She doesn't know it yet but we are destined to be together.

Part Two—Winter

Chapter Ten

Single Mums

Summer is drawing to a close but the remnants of it are still curled up in my bed. My recently acquired friend Chanelle, a squatter who I met at a Free Palestine fundraiser, has been crashing in my room for the last few weeks while she looks for an empty building to open up. The problem is that by the time we get over our hangovers each day the next evening's events are usually beginning, so her search for a new squat keeps getting delayed. Chanelle's got that kind of look that makes me want to stick her in the shower, give her a good scrub, and then put her out in the sun to dry. She's pasty in the way that all Londoners are, her DIY dreadlocks are ratty and have a lingering musty smell, and I'm pretty sure she only owns the one pair of boxers. I know this because the only pair I ever see on the clotheshorse have blue stripes and a distinctive hole right on the crotch. She's ten years younger than me, she's cocky and loud and constantly horny and she drinks too much even by my standards, but I love her in that annoying little-sister way. She's the kind of person who'd never remember your birthday but who'll turn up on your doorstep with a handful of stolen daisies just when you need a hug most. And she never says no to a cider or a night out on the town. So the company's been fun but I'm looking forward to a good wank once I get my bed back to myself again.

On this particular morning, in my cramped East London bedroom with a view out the window that could easily be either concrete or sky, I'm lying under two feather quilts and the heating is turned up as high as it will go. The air is almost warm enough to convince me that it is in fact still (just) summer as the calendar says, but I know that outside will be a different story. I'd hoped to have a lie-in this morning but Chanelle's snoring has made that impossible. I roll over and turn on my laptop. There's an email from Stevie—she's finally coming home, having extended her time in Berlin twice. She tells me she'll be home in two

weeks “and can’t fuckin wait to see you, babes!” I’m not really sure how I feel about her any more, though, partly because of Ingrid and partly because I’ve decided to have a baby, and Stevie’s just a baby herself. I’m irritated by her cheeriness and decide to punish her by not replying straight away. Instead I log in to facebook for a bit of a perve on Kate. Things have developed on that front, thankfully, and have now progressed to the point where we sometimes both “like” the same posts or comment on the same things, and it is the closest I can get to flirting right now, so it means so much when I comment on her post and then she “likes” my comment. Today my heart soars because there’s a red notification informing me that she has “liked” my most recent update wishing that global warming would hurry up and get its hot arse down to London. Granted, eighty-eight other people have also liked my post but Kate’s “like” is the only one that matters. I take as much encouragement as I dare from the moments we electronically brush against each other. Facebook is the modern-day substitute for a living, breathing lover; facebook is what single people snuggle up with, though I guess I’m not technically single. Stevie’s still theoretically in the picture of course, but our situation has an expiry date that has loomed closer with every extra day that she’s decided to stay on in Germany.

* *

Two days before Stevie returns I bully Monika and Shaz into joining me, Chanelle and Ola to go see the changing of the guard. Shaz and Monika are Londoners born and bred and Ola’s lived here for ten years but none of us have ever actually seen it before, and despite the fact that we’re all anti-monarchy everyone’s keen to be doing something that doesn’t involve the pub, for once. Thankfully it’s a weekday and the lunch rush hasn’t started yet so the carriages aren’t too full—one of the blessings of us all being either unemployed or casuals. Everyone’s joking about how I’m a secret monarchist and not an anarchist at all, and I’m trying to ignore them by reading a poster advertising the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, when Monika jabs me in the ribs.

“Check her out, Meg, to your right in the blue top. What a honey,” she whispers.

Chanelle and I both crane our necks as inconspicuously as possible, trying to catch a glimpse.

“Oh wow. Gorgeous. I wanna take her home with me,” I gush.

Chanelle is still craning her neck, and looks a bit confused. "Who? Where?"

"The toddler with the Jemima Puddle-Duck shirt," I whisper, pointing across the carriage.

"Christ," says Chanelle, turning back around sulkily. "You know your friends are getting old when you catch them making eyes at the babies instead of the ladies." She makes a vomiting motion with her finger.

To be honest, I *am* feeling old. Ever since Barcelona I've been re-evaluating my life and thinking about how it would all work if I threw a baby into the mix, and the truth is that none of it would mix very well. I'll need a complete lifestyle change, a social life that doesn't revolve around late nights and 18+ venues, and I'll also need a lot of support. Watching Mahla struggle with Lilith made me realise how hard it is to do it on your own, but at the moment I don't exactly have a choice. I can fantasise about Kate all I want but the reality is that we barely know each other, so at this point I'm making these plans by myself, which is fine but kinda lonely. It's also making me miss Carmen. Being single is great when you're partying hard and having plenty of hot sex, but now that I want to have a kid it puts it in a whole different light. You can't even go to the corner shop after dark when you have a baby, let alone hit the town for a night of drug-fuelled fun. The benefits of singledom are much harder to appreciate and the drawbacks are all too apparent. The problem is, even if I met someone right now it'd have to be a good six to eight months before it would be acceptable to even start talking about starting a family together, and I don't want to wait any longer. I want a baby *now*.

Outside Buckingham Palace gates we stand together stamping our feet to keep warm in a crowd of trigger-happy tourists all waiting for the show to begin. A loud American tourist next to us is relaying bits of random information to her son from a guidebook.

"See that flag, honey? That means Her Majesty is in residence."

"Mommy, what does residence mean?"

"It means she's somewhere behind one of those windows right now, sugar, watching us all down here."

The kid looks slightly terrified at the idea of a peeping queen and clutches at his mother's leg. That could be me, I think to myself, looking at the two of them. Lately I've been worrying about the whole single mum thing, which is pretty terrifying if I'm honest, but I can see how it could have its advantages. No one to negotiate with, no one to answer to, no one to argue with about what to call the baby or what to feed it or where to send it to school. We'd be

free agents with no one to answer to. I start drifting off into a romantic vision of me and the kid travelling round the world, busking for a living or selling crocheted bookmarks or some shit, not that I can play any instruments or know how to crochet. I'm starting to get a little misty-eyed at the thought when Shaz interrupts my vision by singing the opening bars of "Land of Hope and Glory" loudly while gyrating against the palace fence. The guards look over at us nervously.

"Shaz, git down, girl," Monika hisses in embarrassment, and tries to pull her away.

Shaz twirls round and starts gyrating against Monika instead, switching to "God Save the Queen" in her best breathy phone-sex voice. Monika bats her away laughing. I'm too distracted by the thoughts racing round in my head to join in. The label "single mum" sounds so lonely and pathetic: it conjures up someone to pity, someone who's having to do it all alone because her boyfriend was an arse or because she got knocked up by a one-night stand. I wish there was a term for women who make the choice to go it alone from the very beginning, a term that conveys agency as opposed to misfortune. Shaz moves on to me, grabbing my hands and leaping around singing "Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport" at the top of her lungs, till I trip over and we both end up lying on the ground pissing ourselves laughing with a guard telling us to "Quieten down or move on, please."

"I'm just lying back and thinkin' of England, guv'na. I'm feelin' so patriotic, wot wif Lizzie being so close an' all," Shaz apologises, and pulls me to my feet and dusts me off. The ceremony begins and we all crowd forward, cameras held aloft, and I get sandwiched next to the American woman and her whiny pre-schooler. The kid is moaning that he can't see anything so Shaz leans over me to talk to his mum.

"I can lift him up if you'd like."

The kid eyes up Shaz suspiciously, taking in her large frame, overalls, crewcut and knuckle tats, but the mother jumps in eagerly.

"Oh would you? We've been so excited about today. We've been reading all about your royal family in preparation for this trip. It's better than a Disney film, isn't it, Ryan, honey?"

The kid opens his mouth and I steel myself for what's coming, but before he can ask Shaz whether she's a boy or a girl she hoists him up on her shoulders and gives me a wink.

Suddenly a murmur sweeps through the crowd and shouts of "There she is!" can be heard, and people are pointing up to where a vague figure can be seen at one of the windows. I cast a sideways glance at the mum as we get swept forward in the crush. She doesn't seem lonely; she's jumping up and down excitedly waving a little Union Jack and grinning up at her

son who's yelling, "I can see the old lady, ma! I can see her." When I used to think about having babies I had always assumed that it would be something I would plan with a lover, that it would be a romantic gesture, a declaration of our love. The baby and the partner had always been a package deal in my head, a two-for-one, family-sized meal. But unless I snag baby-hungry Kate it looks like I am being downgraded to a single serve now and it's hard to get my head around the idea of "partner" and "baby" as being two entirely separate, unrelated quests. The new model looks less like a threesome and more like two mutually exclusive monogamous relationships, running simultaneously side by side.

As a finger of sunlight struggles free of the clouds the figure in the window is briefly illuminated, wearing a bright orange safety vest and looking suspiciously like a window washer. The crowd drops back disappointedly, redirecting its attention towards watching the men in toilet-brush hats marching around poker-faced in the cold. Shaz returns the kid to his mum and gives me a big bear-hug to warm me up, and I squish myself against the softness of her belly and try to stop thinking ahead so much. Once the show's over Chanelle suggests that we go to the pub for a pint. We all agree, seeing as we feel like we've earned it now, having stood in the cold for so long. There's nothing affordable in the area so we leg it back to Hackney, collecting Jack and a couple of queers who he has staying with him on the way. One of them is Marlene, an old drag queen from Berlin who has a beard and a hairy chest and who does Marlene Dietrich impressions for a living. I don't catch the other one's name but he has a dirty bad-boy look about him that makes me go weak at the knees.

At the pub I give Chanelle a tenner to get us both a pint and grab the group a table near the fire. The new boy slides into the booth next to me.

"Hi, I'm Meg," I say.

"Yes, I know. We met in Barcelona."

"We did?" He has the kind of face I'd usually remember, but I guess I'd been pretty distracted by Mahla that week.

"I helped gaffa-tape your breasts up when you were getting ready for the sex party. I'm Ramon." He rolls the r casually between his teeth and his tongue and I know it's cheesy but I can't help but think about that tongue between my legs.

"How sweet of you."

"I only did it so I could have a chance to touch your breasts. I'd been admiring them all week," he blurts out. He grins cheekily and ducks his head in embarrassment. He's wearing a baseball cap and despite the fact he's pushing thirty he has soft blond bum-fluff on his chin and a squeaky voice that keeps cracking adorably like a teenage boy's, which makes me think he's probably only been on T for a year or so. He's endearingly awkward and forward at the same time, and having the upper hand is quickly turning me on.

"Charming," I say disdainfully and then proceed to ignore him, although of course I'm secretly delighted. It feels fun to be the one in charge for a change, and I want to make him squirm.

The rest of the crew arrive with pints and bags of crisps and squish into the pews, and Ramon and I are pressed up closer together. I'd been planning on just having a quick drink and then going home to start working on a list of potential sperm donors, but that plan's gone completely out the window now.

"So where's home, Boy?" I ask him.

"Barcelona. I go home tomorrow."

"And where are you staying tonight?" I look him in the eye as I ask him and then pointedly glance at the bulge of his jeans. I wonder if he's packing hard. He blushes obligingly and bites his bottom lip.

"Ummm, hopefully with you, Ma'am."

Smirking I raise an eyebrow and then turn to join in the conversation happening across the table, leaving Ramon to fidget beside me. My clit throbs hard in my jeans.

The next morning while Ramon's in the shower my phone pings with an email from Em, my bestie, responding to my announcement that I want to have a baby by gently suggesting that she's worried I'm just trying to fill the void left by Carmen. *I see what you're doing here, Meg, she writes. You're scared of getting hurt again so you're looking for love elsewhere. But christ, a baby is a long-term commitment, not a band-aid solution for a broken heart.* She can be a bit OTT at times but she kinda has a point. Love is so unpredictable and unreliable. At least with a baby you're guaranteed a good twelve, fifteen years of monogamy before the child stops needing and adoring you, and no matter what you will always be their mother. In a way, then, motherhood is the ultimate co-dependent relationship, with a bucketload of narcissism thrown in the mix. So there might be some truth in what Em's saying but right at

this moment in time there's nothing further from my mind. All I can think about right now is sucking Ramon's cock and fucking him with mine. I slide my laptop back under the pillow and position myself facing my bedroom door, one finger slowly flicking at my clit as I wait for him to return.

It's not till Monday, when I'm shivering on the overland on my way to Yvonne's and lust has been replaced by the back-to-work blues, that the baby-cravings start to return. It's worrying how quickly I can drop one plan for another—it's almost as though there's not enough room for babies and hot sex to co-exist in my brain. And it makes me wonder—if I had a serious lover perhaps I wouldn't be this desperate to have a baby. Perhaps I wouldn't want a baby at all. On the other hand, if I had a baby taking up all of my energy and love it's highly possible that I wouldn't have the time to think about wanting a partner. Perhaps there isn't enough room inside me for both, but in that case, which craving negates the other? The desire to be a mother or a lover?

* *

A week or so later I wake up from a dream that I am holding my child, and all day my arms feel empty. I find myself in a baby-clothes shop standing in front of a fifty-quid coat that I cannot afford, for a baby who does not exist. Still, I take it down off the rack and am about to take it to the counter to buy it when the realisation that I don't have a baby hits me square between the eyes, and I walk out of the shop in tears.

"Hormones," Ola says, as though that is somehow enough to dismiss it.

Since Stevie's been back in London I've also started looking at her differently, wondering how she'd look with a baby in her arms and trying to figure out if she'd willingly get up to change nappies in the middle of the night or if she'd stubbornly stay fast asleep. If this is all just my hormones then they're really fucking with me now. They used to make me want to fuck, and now they make me want to get married and have a baby and stay in on a Friday night. Baby-lust has possessed me like a thunderstorm, like a fever, like a craze. I feel like I'm in love—I fantasise about it, I daydream about it, and it's the last thing I think about

when I fall asleep and the first thing I think about when I wake up, other than Chanelle's snoring of course. It's my happy thought, my warm pocket to stuff my hands into when I am cold.

It's all I can think about. I need a baby and I need one quickly. My whole body knows it—my cunt growls hungrily with labour-lust and I start thinking obsessively about sperm.

Specifically, how to get some. My first option, obviously, is Malcolm. Sure, he was Carmen's friend first, but I've known him almost as long as she has now. Plus his colouring is similar to Kate's, so our kid would look a bit like her, which would be cool. I flick him a casual email, testing the waters. It takes about six hours to compose:

Hi babe, how you doing? London is great, fucking freezing though. Been thinking about you and that Garfield mug...whaddy say we give it another go when I come home?

His reply a few days later is warm, sweet, and takes a long time to get to the point but eventually he breaks the news:

...maybe in the future, when you and Carmen are friends again and you've got to know Jess, we could all talk about that as an option, but I'd need to speak to them about it first, seeing as it would kind of be a brother or sister for their little one....

"Fucking lesbians. They've barely just met, and they're already planning a family?" I seethe to Em over skype later that day. A painful thought suddenly occurs to me. "They're not pregnant already are they?"

"Not that I know of. They're just u-hauling. Carmen's talking about giving up her room coz Jess lives on her own and has got heaps of space...do you really wanna hear this, Meg? Let's focus on what you're doing. Fuck Carmen."

"Yeah. Fuck Carmen."

"What about a sperm bank?"

"Ew. No way. I don't want some stranger's jiz inside me. I dunno, I just think that using an anonymous donor would be a bit like the shorthand version of a blind date. You know, you get matched up because you have a few things in common, a mutual friend convinces you you'll like them, and then you have a baby."

"Ha. Except for it bypasses the bit where you actually meet. I getcha."

"Yeah, you skip the date bit of the blind date. You skip the dinner and drinks and the awkward conversation, you even skip the sex. But you still get the baby at the end. Ta da."

“Someone should invent sperm speed dating. Or make it into a game show like Perfect Match, where you get to ask a line of men useless things like ‘What three things would you take to a desert island’, and then based on that you pick one to be the dad.”

“Except more likely it’d be the other way around—three desperate dykes all vying for some sperm, and one donor deciding who’ll be the lucky girl.”

Chapter Eleven

Licence to Fuck

“Meg, I need you in the lounge. Just you—don’t bring the kids!”

I put down the cupcake I’m icing, strap Mona into her highchair, and give Donald the mixing spoon to lick. That should distract him for a few minutes at least. When I get to the lounge room the curtains have been drawn, the lights are dimmed and soft music is playing. “Can you see me ejaculating properly in this light, or does the room need to be darker?” I inspect a close-up of Yvonne’s cunt, projected across the far lounge-room wall. It is definitely dark enough. We watch in silence together for a few moments as someone, face off-screen, pounds her with their fist, thin streams of fluid spurting out of her cunt and down the disembodied arm in a rhythmic pulse. When a second hand appears in shot and starts fingering Yvonne’s arsehole I feel a responding throb in my clit. My eyes flit away from the screen uncomfortably and settle instead on the real Yvonne, standing right next to me, pillowy red lips slightly parted as she stares, mesmerised by her own multiple orgasm. “Meggy, Mona just hit me!” Donald’s wail breaks the moment and Yvonne switches off the DVD player and turns up the lights.

“Hang on a minute,” I yell back. I give Yvonne a hand moving the couch and grab a few stray toys off the floor.

“The girls are going to love the double-fisting scene that comes up next. It’s totally fucked up,” Yvonne says gleefully. She’s organised a special Sexy Mamas group to celebrate her latest self-directed movie, “Cumming for Mummy”, which from what I can gather works with the basic storyline of Chastity Cummings accidentally fucking her own mother in an orgy at a swingers party. By making sure there are only ever close-ups of one of them at a time Yvonne’s managed to play herself as well as her own mother. It’s a Freudian wet dream. “How’s the food prep going?”

“The titty-cakes are almost done, the pastries are in the oven, and there’s a chips and dips platter ready to go.” The titty-cakes were my idea—cupcakes with alternating strawberry and mocha icing, and a little red fruit-jube nipple in the middle of each one.

“Ok great. I’m going to go get changed then. When the mums start arriving can you show them through to the lounge? The babies can stay, but you’re right to keep the rest of the

kids busy in the garden, yeah?” It’s one of those freak warm afternoons you occasionally get in London in September that trick you into thinking that perhaps summer hasn’t quite said goodbye, so the plan is to keep the kids busy outside while the mums watch porn in the lounge. Not an easy task.

“Sure, no problem,” I lie, and Yvonne hurries upstairs and I return to the kitchen to two squabbling children with pink icing all through their hair.

It’s a good turnout: almost a dozen industry mums have shown up along with an assortment of nappy bags, children, personally labelled drink bottles, and of course plenty of little boxes of “bribery” raisins to be used for anything from stopping tears to rewarding a successful trip to the potty. The newborn and several babies, way too young to notice a double-fisting scene, disappear into the lounge along with the mums. I am left with a handful of toddlers and a few children ranging from three to six years old. The ratio of adults to children is not only illegal but is also logistically impossible, and I’m cursing myself for not requesting the help of another nanny. I’ve set up a plastic sheet on the ground with plenty of playdough, bricks, trucks, and dollies laid out, and for a brief moment the children are all briefly distracted. However one of the toddlers soon realises her mother’s not there and starts calling out “mumma” with a wild look in her eye. Crying kids are like leaking roofs—if there’s just the one leak you can get a bucket under it quickly, mop the floor, and then all you have to do is empty the bucket into the bathtub whenever it gets full. However if there’s a lot of leaks the floor gets wet before you can find enough buckets, you can’t leave the buckets for a long enough to mop the floor, and by the time you’ve emptied one bucket into the bathtub another two have already overflowed. While I’m busy distracting the first toddler with a kangaroo hand-puppet the kid next to her has caught on that his mum is also missing, and the next thing you know I’ve got a chain reaction of hysterical children on my hands, two of whom are at the “I’m crying so hard that it sounds like I’m choking” stage and one who’s crying because she’s somehow managed to get hold of a container of baby wipes, pulled the whole lot out and proceeded to get her hand trapped in the box. And of course right in the middle of it the three-year-old tells me he needs to do a poo, “Right now, quick!”. I can’t send the six-year-old in to get someone to help because by now they’re probably up to the double-fisting scene, and I can’t leave the kids alone while I get someone myself, so I do the only thing I can think of and pick up the urgent shitter and the kid with the container stuck on her hand and try and herd the rest inside ahead of us, aiming my

flock towards the toilet. The racket brings the mums running, I manage to get the three-year-old onto the toilet in time, and as the mothers all reclaim their other halves the crying slowly subsides.

Fifteen minutes later the cupcakes have been devoured, everyone's playing happily again and the mums have snuck back inside, minus Miss Lucy, who has stayed to give me a hand. "To be honest, I'm not really into porn. I'd choose a historical romance any day," she tells me. Coming from the woman who wears leather corsets to the park and beats up men for a job, it's somewhat surprising to hear this. "The last thing I want to do when I get home from work is watch someone else doing a hard day's work on my telly. I mean, you don't go home and turn on *Super Nanny*, do you?"

I laugh guiltily.

"You do, don't you," she accuses, laughing too. "God, you really do love kids, huh. Why don't you take mine off my hands. I'll do you a two-for-one special." She's only half-joking. "I don't know if I could handle two," I tell her.

"The only reason I had another one was so that Finnegan would have someone to play with him. I mean, seriously? Hide and seek? Finnegan hides in exactly the same place every time. It's so fucking boring." She whispers this last bit but several kids still prick up their ears suspiciously at the sound of the forbidden F-word. We both giggle, but this is a side of her I haven't seen before. She usually presents as the perfect perverted Stepford wife. She looks tired today. Tired and over it. Tiger's teething at the moment and the sleepless nights seem to be taking their toll. "So, super-nanny, do you want any of your own?"

"I do," I say, "though on days like today I wonder why."

"You should just keep looking after other people's brats. At least you get paid that way." We pause to break up a fight over a headless Barbie and then I get roped into a game of "mermaids, fairies, and princesses", so our conversation is momentarily suspended. Later I'm making playdough snakes with two sweet little girls whose mother is the current pole dancing champion of Great Britain, and also the only bonafide queer in the group. Miss Lucy settles down beside me to s breastfeed Tiger and questioning me about the logistics—if I've considered co-parenting, what the legalities of same-sex parenting are in Australia, how I'm planning to get hold of some sperm.

"Ideally I'd like a known donor. I want my kid to know who its dad is."

"Our donor-daddy's a firefighter!" the youngest girl pipes up.

“No he’s not, he’s a dancer,” the older one corrects her.

“You’re both right, girls. Your donor-dad has a very big hose and dances in a firefighter’s hat.” Miss Lucy winks at me over their heads. “So have you got anyone in mind?”

“I did, but he’s offering it to my ex-girlfriend now, and she sure as hell won’t be sharing.”

We both laugh, and the girls join in giggling, though they don’t quite know why.

“Our mummy’s got a girlfriend. Can she give you some sperm?” Usually I try and set straight any confusion over where babies come from but this time it’s tricky, because their mother’s new girlfriend is actually a trans woman, so that could be a possibility. But at three and five that conversation’s still in the too-hard basket, so instead I say “Who wants to make a snowperson?” and start rolling balls of playdough in my palms.

“And how soon are you thinking, babe?” Tiger’s stopped sucking and is craning his head to see what’s going on behind him at the playdough station, and Miss Lucy’s nipple is just hanging there, within my reach, dripping wet and shyly pink.

“Soon, actually.” Shit, that feels scary to say out loud. “But I’ve always had really irregular periods, and so with home insemination it could take a long time to happen, if ever.”

“You’re young. You’ve got plenty of time to sort it out.”

“Try telling my hormones that. Some days the craving’s so intense I almost consider stealing one.” I grab one of the little girls as I say this and start tickling her, and she squeals delightedly in my arms.

Later on, as Miss Lucy is leaving, she hands me a card from her purse. “Go and see Mrs Chen, if you’re serious. She’s a miracle-worker—she could get the queen pregnant if she wanted to. I saw her for both my pregnancies. She’s a witch. She knew I was having boys just by feeling my pulse.”

The card is for an acupuncture clinic that specialises in fertility and IVF support. Miss Lucy has called my bluff. Now? See her right now? I’d have to stop drinking. And taking drugs. And I don’t even have a donor yet (of course, in her heterosexual haze she’s forgotten there’s not just some man in my life I can bonk until I get up the duff). And yet, an hour later when I’m crammed into a busy Friday night tube on my way across London to meet Stevie at another refugee rally, the idea stops feeling so crazy. If I got my act together I could have a little baby growing inside me by Christmas. I could really do this. On my own, right now, I could make this happen. I mean, this is what straight people do all the time, right? They get drunk, shag some guy, the condom breaks and then if they decide to keep it, hey presto,

they've got a baby nine months later. Other than the bit about shagging some random guy there's nothing stopping me from doing the same, from taking the leap from thinking about having a baby to actively *trying*. The idea is so exhilarating that I want to jump up and down and squeal, but Londoners are likely to lock you up if you so much as crack a smile on public transport so I stay seated and instead get the acupuncture card out of my purse for another look. The card sports several affirmations of Mrs Chen's success and a Primrose Hill address. Even a pint of milk costs more in Primrose Hill. Of course Miss Lucy could afford it: she earns two hundred quid an hour to force men to wear frilly knickers and nappies while she spansks them with a wooden spoon. But on my wage Mrs Chen is way out of my league.

The next time I see Miss Lucy she asks me if I've gone to see the miracle-worker yet.

"I called her, but I just can't afford it. Not on this wage."

"Well maybe you need to look for another job." She says this quietly, eyes on the door in case Yvonne walks in.

"I'm not qualified for anything else."

"Honey, what are you talking about? You've got a licence to fuck, right here." She leans across and cups my breast briefly. It all happens so quickly I don't have time to react, but I feel myself going bright red. And getting wet. "Come do a job with me. I've got a client who wants a scene with a girl who doesn't shave. I'm assuming that your underarms match your welcome mat." She winks. "We can do a double, ease you into it."

It's like a fantasy come true, it's like the moment when I went for a job interview and Chastity Cummings walked straight off my laptop screen and opened the door.

"He's an adult baby," Miss Lucy tells me. "There won't be any actual fucking, he just wants to be mothered a bit, jerked off without cumming, and he wants to be able to touch your pubes. It's an easy seventy quid."

I've considered sex work in the past but it's never been anything more than a far-off idea to toy with and then throw away. I never actually thought I'd go through with it but now, standing in Yvonne's kitchen in broad daylight holding a cup of tea, it all seems so suddenly easy.

"We'll baby him and give him a bottle and sing a few lullabies. You'll be fine—not that much different to what you do here, except this guy will have an erection."

I'm not sure I'm comfortable with the comparison.

"How do you deal with the similarities between work and being a mum in real life?"

"It's work, babe. Do you think you'd find it weird being a nanny if you had your own kid? You separate the two. There's a switch that flicks as soon as I put on my latex. Though not everyone sees it that way—I get tonnes of hate mail about it. Irate do-gooders getting hysterical and accusing me of being a bad mother to my boys."

"Do you get those sorts of clients much?" I ask.

"You'd be surprised. And most of them are high-flying businessmen or politicians. I guess everyone just wants their Mummy, once in a while."

I ask Stevie how she would feel about it and she thinks about it for a day or two and then get back to me saying that so long as I'm being safe she figures it's none of her business what I do with my body.

"But won't you feel jealous?" I ask her.

"I wouldn't get jealous if you were a masseuse, stroking and rubbing naked bodies all day." "True. But sex work is a bit different to that."

"At the end of the day, a job's a job. And if you can put up with having to touch penises and make a load of money at the same time, then my hat goes off to you, my darling."

A couple of days later finds me at Miss Lucy's dungeon, a space she rents upstairs in a quiet warehouse in an industrial backstreet not far from Yvonne's. We've agreed not to tell Yvonne for now; she's not the kind of woman who'd like her nanny being poached by her friends. It's a smaller space than I anticipated and not quite what I imagined a professional dungeon to look like. I was expecting something dark and scungy but the space feels more like an empty office than a dungeon; the floors are uncarpeted but the walls are painted a muted green and it is, thankfully, warm. Hanging on the walls are all sorts of intriguing contraptions and instruments, some I am familiar with, such as the row of floggers, riding crops, and canes lined up in progressive order from "light slap" through to "this will draw blood", and some which I can only guess at. There is a bed covered in a plastic sheet in the middle of the room, a St Andrews Cross in one corner, a pommel-horse that reminds me of gymnastics lessons at the PCYC, a bath tub with black plastic sheeting all around it, and of course a sling chair. Miss Lucy is wearing a pencil skirt and a red latex top with a frilly apron over the top. Her hair is done up in curlers. I am in a sexed-up housecoat with nothing on underneath, and we both have on pink lipstick.

“So I’m Mummy, and you’re Mummy’s friend come to play with the cute little baby,” Miss Lucy briefs me. “That’s pretty much it. You’re a nanny already; this’ll be easy.”

The client has requested a bath scene. Miss Lucy undresses him and he gets in the bathtub, which she has filled with warm water and plenty of bubble bath. The client, a pale flabby Glaswegian office worker who is in London for business, splashes around with the bath toys, laughing and babbling in baby-speak. After they have played with the squeaking yellow duck for a while I enter the room and offer to soap him up while Miss Lucy sees to the dinner. As soon as she leaves the room I dive my hand below the bubbles and tug on the client’s cock. “Hush, little one, I’m just cleaning you properly. Be a good boy, now.” It feels wrong, but in a good way, reducing a grown man to such a state of complete vulnerability. He gives me a grin of encouragement and wriggles around delightedly and the harder I tug the harder he gets, till I suspect he’s about to cum. I stop abruptly and take my hand away. “Miss Lucy,” I call, “I think your baby’s ready to get out of the bath now.” Miss Lucy comes back in and we towel him dry, pat him all over with baby powder, and wrap him up in a giant nappy. Miss Lucy blows raspberries on his tummy while he giggles and then we both read him a bedtime story. When it’s lights out I tell him it’s time to say goodnight to me properly, and I guide his hand under my dress and he strokes my pubes gently for a little while, like I am a shy kitten. Then I kiss him goodnight on the forehead and we both creep out of the room.

“Now what?” I whisper.

“That’s it. You’re done. I have to go back in in half an hour to check on him, but basically he just wants to lie there for a few hours knowing I’m nearby. Sometimes I turn the vacuum cleaner on for a while or bang some pots and pans around...it’s the domestic fetish he’s into.” She hands me a roll of cash. “You did well tonight. You’re a natural Mummy.”

As I’m leaving I call Mrs Chen to make my first booking, and then skip excitedly round the corner to the bus stop thinking about how I have just taken my first step towards having my own baby. I’m well aware that I’m jumping the gun somewhat, starting fertility treatment before I’ve even found a donor, but I’m just so eager to set the wheels in motion that any start is better than none. As I round the corner a man with a red face lurches at me out of the darkness and grabs vaguely at my breasts. “Allo darling!”, he breathes hot in my ear. I shove him away and tell him to fuck off and thankfully he does, winding his way down the street, already forgetting what has just happened. I feel most ripped off by the fact that I

just got paid seventy quid to let a sweet gentle man stroke my pubes while he sucked his thumb, but that this tosser just felt my boobs for free.

* *

The trial run with Miss Lucy gets me thinking about my employment options. I need a higher income to pay for Mrs Chen and I also need to start saving for the baby fund. The set-up costs to work as a pro-dom are high but as Miss Lucy said, as far as fucking goes I already have everything I need right between my legs. And if I can get a few adult baby gigs thrown into the mix who can BYO-nappies then I'm laughing. Miss Lucy gives me a few tips on screening and soliciting clients from the TNT personals, gives me the name of some cheap hotels that rent by the hour, and suggests that I buy a few wigs. My hair's too short and dykey for nannying, let alone for sex work. That night I start looking through the TNT personals for the code phrases Miss Lucy's tipped me off about: "Need help with your bills this month?"; "In search of a \$pecial babysitter"; "Intimate ma\$\$age wanted". It's an eye-opener to realise how easy it can be.

"Shit, I need a sexy working name."

We're lying on my bed listening to Metric on my iPod and Chanelle's painting her nails black while I trawl the net.

"Make it something ordinary, but spell it in an exotic way, like Jessika with a k, or Rubee with a double e," suggests Chanelle. "Ya know, to match your cup size." She motions towards my chest, which is a joke because I'm more like a small C than a double E.

I stick my tongue out at her. "What about something classy, something French-sounding? Ooh. Like Renee Risqué."

Chanelle snorts. "Or something nice and British. I've got it—Shagging Sharon."

"Very funny. Come on, seriously. I need something that makes me sound like I deserve to be showered in gifts, something that makes me sound young and helpless, like I need some older gentleman to come along and take care of me and pay my rent and all of my bills."

"Lolita."

"Ew, gross. I'm not twelve. And besides, I wanna attract the adult babies as well as the sugar

daddies.”

“Ok, how about Lolly. Last name Pop.”

“Tacky.”

But there’s something appealing about the blatant honesty of sex work that I am beginning to like—everyone’s here to fuck and there’s no pretending otherwise. Maybe I need to embrace the cliché, just like I did with nannying. I walk out to the kitchen for more cider, mulling it over in my head. “I’ve got it,” I yell at Chanelle from the fridge. “I’m like a secret double-agent, right? Nanny by day, hooker by night. So how about ‘Lolly Poppins’?”

Reading the TNT ads is entertaining and I’m excited by the idea of a job that pays well and is over in a short space of time. It’s the ultimate low-level commitment relationship—I waltz into the client’s life and play the glamorous girlfriend for an hour or two and then waltz out again before he tries to introduce me to his mum or get me to iron his shirts. Just like nannying there’s an immediate intimacy, but with none of the washing up or wiping of bums. Sticking fingers in bums, more like it. I also quite like the idea of being adored and worshipped for a change, as opposed to being taken for granted in that way that the English upper-middle class seem to do so well. And not that I’m interested in men in the slightest, but it could be fun to play wife with a hottie every now and then. There’s one particular ad which catches my eye that’s been listed by a professional musician who actually sounds really cool. He describes himself as adventurous and creative, a vegetarian who grows his own veggies and who has a passion for poetry and politics. He sounds like the kind of guy I’d date, if I wasn’t gay. I write him an enthusiastic email and send a few pictures and then wait eagerly for his reply. I can’t help but feel a bit hurt when he reposts the same ad a week later. Did I somehow sound unattractive in my message?, I stress. Too clever, or not clever enough? It’s hard not to take the rejection personally.

Chapter Twelve

My First Trick

I am, as always, running late. I haven't got enough time to either paint over or remove my peeling blue nail polish. I haven't got enough time to cleverly disguise my hair in a more conservative style. I haven't got enough time to get the tube so I waste fifteen quid getting a taxi instead. As I am racing out the door I realise my big toes also have scrappy bits of blue all over them and I freeze and start to panic. My client has told me he is bringing along a special pair of shoes that he wants me to wear, so I know that my feet are important. The toes might be crucial to today's success. What if he can't get it up because of my toes? I grab the scarlet bottle and blob some red over the blue and then I realise I can't put my heels on in case I smudge it, so I run down the street in the freezing cold, trying to hail a taxi in bare feet with my heels in my hand. My heart is racing and I realise I am really fucking nervous, but there is also no time to have a quick drink or a joint.

When the taxi drops me off around the corner from the rent-by-the-hour hotel the driver smiles and says, "Have a nice evening," and I feel bad because he thinks I'm off for a drink with friends or something but instead I'm a dirty girl who's about to let some stranger touch me and cum on my breasts. But I walk into the lobby and am instantly pleased. The man smiling at me from the lounge is really sweet-looking, with a cute little hat and a cane, debonair in an older, gentlemanly kind of way. He welcomes me with a warm hug and a huge smile on his face, pays the woman at the front desk and then we walk down the hall to our room. I know that she knows what we're going to do next.

The room has a seventies retro Grecian porno feel about it—clean, kitsch, and with more than a whiff of Austin Powers. There's a blue-lit sunken spa in one corner, a wooden sauna in the other, a white-sheeted raised bed in the centre, and a large round mirror on the other wall. If I wasn't so nervous I'd laugh. The Gentleman asks if I would like to go to the bathroom before we begin and I say no, and then I remember my plan and say yes. I've got this tip from watching *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*—put some lube on your cunt so that the client thinks you are genuinely turned on. Thank god for Billie Piper. When I come back he has pulled out a

pair of flat shoes with big shiny red bows on them which he asks me to wear. Then he starts counting out the payment in twenty-pound notes, gets to one hundred and then can't find the other twenty. I feel so awkward I nearly tell him not to worry about it, but I manage to stop myself. Eventually he finds it, I take the money politely and put it in my purse, and then he comes over and lifts my dress over my head and starts running his hands all over me.

The Gentleman moves us in front of the mirror and puts his hand down my new sexy pink satin-and-blue-lace high-waisted 1950s-style knickers. (In preparation for today I've bought fancy lingerie and some perfume from Boots, as though it's a first date.) He is behind me with his hand on my cunt and I am facing the mirror, watching the two of us as though it is a porno on a tv screen. I can't see my torso or face because the mirror is set down low, and just looking at my suspenders and the shiny new shoes I could easily be someone else. I am transfixed. I moan and wiggle my hips and drop my eyelids a little so that I'll look like I'm getting into it, but after a minute or so, to my surprise, I'm no longer faking it, I really am turned on, and there's that tell-tale release of wetness which he notices at the same time as I do. He moans appreciatively and keeps rubbing my clit, just how I like it, and I feel proud of myself for not needing to fake it and I feel pleased that he is getting such a good show. I am all flushed and moaning and so hotted up now that I lean forward and put my hands on the wall while he keeps rubbing my clit, and all of a sudden I realise that I could easily cum, I just need a minute or two more, and this is so surprising to me because I am the girl who had to fake it for so many years, and so I do, I fake it, I fake my orgasm so that he'll stop, because I want to keep that for myself.

After my breathing slows down he finishes undressing me, telling me that my breasts are wonderful, that I have an excellent figure, that my bush is lovely. He gets his cock out and I feel disappointed—now for the hard work huh. I wish it could just all be about me. He asks me if this is the first black cock I've ever had and I think about it and realise that yes, it is, but I want to go into a political discussion about the multicultural breakdown in Australia and how we have a lot of Asian migrants and migrants from the middle east and refugees from Eastern Europe, but how most "black" people in Australia are Indigenous people, and how there is so much segregation between white Australia and Indigenous Australians thanks to a history of genocide and cultural oppression that there aren't any Indigenous Australians at all in my particular white middle-class university-educated social circle, but instead I sink to my knees

to keep my tongue busy and shut myself up. But he doesn't want me to give him head. He pulls me back up off my knees and leads me to the bed and gets me to sit on the edge, with my feet up. He takes one shoe off and examines my foot and I am relieved that I painted my toenails red but I am also nervous that my hard calloused soles will offend him. Thirty years of going barefoot as much as possible every summer has left me with feet like leather— not very lady-like at all. He tells me to keep my feet up on the bed where he can see the bows on the shoes. I want to ask him what it is about the bows that makes him tick. I find myself wondering whether it reminds him of someone he once loved, or whether it is a Freudian fetish—that his mother wore shoes with bows and that was the last thing he saw before he realised she was castrated, yada yada. *Shut up, brain, shut up.* Thankfully, because let's face it, it's been a long time since I had a real cock in my hands and I'm not sure I ever really knew what to do with one, he starts jerking himself off. I touch myself as he wanks, putting on a bit of a show and making out like I am going to cum again, and he tugs at himself while I fondle his balls and then slowly he cums, all over the backs of my two little hands, while he stares alternately at the bows on my shoes and my pubic hair. I assume I should say something at this point so I say, "Oh my. Look at all that spunk." I haven't said anything about his cock being big (because it's not), and there's not that much cum, so I can't say I've never seen that much cum before...am I supposed to lie? Would it be obvious I was lying? Perhaps he wants me to lie. Perhaps that's what he's paid me for. He holds me close for a while and I notice how lovely he smells, sweet and spicy, like homemade pumpkin soup.

There's a delay on the tube which means there'll be no time at the other end to go home and change before my weekly babysitting job with the Souters. I sit next to an old lady in a grey coat and wonder if she can tell that I've just had sex with a stranger. I feel a little guilty until I remember the one hundred and twenty quid in my purse and then I feel proud, and bold, and free. I can still smell spunk on the backs of my hands though, which is kinda gross. The Gentleman had cleaned it all up, tenderly wiping my hands with the corner of his towel as though I were something precious, something pure that he had sullied. I hadn't known what I was supposed to do next, fill in the rest of the hour being friendly, or just get dressed and leave? Thankfully he had started getting dressed so I had too, and while we stood there, two strangers pulling on our clothes, getting stuck in sleeves and contorting to reach for zips, he'd asked me how TNT had been working for me and I'd come clean and admitted that he was my first, which he'd seemed pleased about. It felt good to make this gentle man, who

was well past his prime, feel special. I wonder if the lady in the grey coat can smell the spunk on my hands. I hide them in my pockets and happily fondle the money hidden there.

I turn up at the Souters' in the same dress that was, only an hour ago, lying on the floor next to the spa, my make-up still intact, in teetering high heels and with a flash of red peeping out at the toes. The Souters are a husband-and-wife solicitor team with a Tory sticker on their SUV, their children wear straw boaters to Sunday school each week and Mrs Souter has told me on more than one occasion that the downfall of the United Kingdom was when they started allowing "deviants" like Elton John to get married and have children. In line with most fathers Mr Souter seems to find the idea of anyone other than his wife or his mother looking after his children to be slightly vulgar. (He himself is of course included in this umbrella term of "anyone" because for a father to look after his own children is the height of vulgarity. That is a job for women; specifically, for *his* women.) Consequently, in his embarrassment at my existence he usually barely acknowledges my presence in the house, other than to call me away from important things I am doing such as running the bath or cooking a meal in order to remind me to do something irrelevant such as: "Remember that Lucy needs to brush her teeth before bed." Wow, thank you so much Mr Souter, I'd never have thought of that myself. It's like it's his pathetic way of feeling important, of proving to this intruder in his home that he is still the boss, that he runs the show, and that everything would fall apart if it weren't for him. However, tonight he takes much more notice than usual, looks me up and down when he thinks I'm not looking, and asks me, "So how's your day been, Melanie?" I don't bother correcting him. "Good, thank you," I reply. "Lunch with an old friend. Nothing too exciting."

Chapter Thirteen

Other People's Orgasms

My life is becoming more and more reliant on the virtual world. I spend hours on my laptop every day flirting with prospective clients, booking hotel rooms, and skyping with friends back home. To add to that there's my ritual "Great Kate Facebook Hunt" that Chanelle valiantly suffers through on a daily basis, trawling the photos our mutual friends have posted for glimpses of Kate's magical clavicle.

"It's just a fucking neck," Chanelle points out during one of these sessions. We've had a particularly big weekend snorting coke in the toilets at a punk gig so I put her narkiness down to the comedown and hand her a cider to shut her up. My friends are getting bored with Kate, or rather, they are bored with hearing me talk about her all the time. I can't blame them, especially seeing as the most interesting thing I've had to report all week was that she "liked" a comment I wrote on a mutual friend's page. "Do you think that means she likes me?", I ask everyone I can. I'm getting kind of bored myself. I'm sick of this one-way conversation, of me putting in all the hard work daydreaming about our life together, imagining conversations and scenarios in my head. I've read every single update she's ever posted, I know her political beliefs, her sense of humour, and that she likes to swim at Clovelly Beach, and I feel as though I know her, though we've only actually met twice in real life. It's got to the point where I feel pissed off on the odd occasions that I see that she's actually online at the same time as me, because she never interacts with me anyway. Seeing "Harvey Wallbanger" pop up on my "online friends" list only for her to fail to like any of my posts until she logs off again twenty minutes later serves to contradict the romance we are having in my head.

"Face it, Meg, you're obsessed," Chanelle yells at me one night. She's yelling because we're squashed up against the speakers in an underground SM club observing an older Daddy in tight leather chaps with a long skinny blonde plait use a single-tail on her Girl. There's nowhere else safe enough to stand because the room is tiny and anywhere within six metres behind the couple is dangerous territory because of the backlash of the whip. "No I'm not. I'm in love," I yell back.

“Same thing,” Chanelle says. She’s right, of course—she’s been reading up on the chemistry of love in a valiant effort to save me from myself. Her theory is that by learning how it works you can demystify the heart and, ultimately, control it, and thanks to Wikipedia she has discovered the depressing fact that when you are in love your dopamine levels plateau in much the same way as someone who has OCD. “Love and mental illness are pretty much the same thing, babe,” she hollers in my ear. “You are officially lovesick.” Chanelle touches my forehead with the back of her hand as though taking my temperature.

I swat her hand away. “Fuck off.”

Chanelle gives up on me and five minutes later I spot her in the corner merrily spanking a baby-faced butch with a green mohawk, a round arse, red braces and shiny black boots. I know her well enough now to realise that the flush in her cheeks means I’ll probably be sleeping alone tonight.

I wake up on the couch the next morning to the sound of Chanelle fucking in my room. When she finally emerges she is tangled up in the arms of a sweet-faced Thai girl with a tattoo of Medusa on her arm.

“What happened to Green Mohawk?” I ask when her shag detaches herself from Chanelle and trails off to the toilet. I feel old. Old, and hungover.

“Helen Fisher reckons most relationships fail after about four years anyway,” she says by way of explanation.

“Who the fuck is Helen Fisher?”

“It’s all part of my research,” Chanelle yawns. “Four years is roughly how long it takes to raise a child through infancy, right? So love is only designed to last that long. It’s scientifically timed for the skeezy breeders.”

“Shit. Does that mean I’ve already almost used up one of our four, mooning over Kate on facebook?”

Chanelle shrugs. “Don’t know, and don’t care.”

* *

By now I've accumulated a few more clients—two semi-regulars, a handful of one-offs, and The Gentleman, who now sees me weekly. We've progressed to the point where he fucks me for a while now, but every week he still cums in exactly the same way—all over my hands, while staring at my shoes. Every Tuesday after our lunchtime session I go straight from there to see Mrs Chen. The money only stays in my back pocket for long enough to make it from one borough to the next. I sit in the clinic with my skin emanating chlorine from the hot tub and with the smell of cum still on my hands. I am juxtaposed. I have sex (with a condom on—all that wasted sperm!) every week on cheap white sheets in a hotel room, and then the same afternoon I go and lie down on paper sheets on the other side of town and have someone massage and cup me and stick pins in my ear and legs and belly to make me more fertile. Straight people have sex in order to get pregnant. I'm also having sex in order to get pregnant, just in a more roundabout way. Mrs Chen is worried about the fact that I often go five or six weeks between periods, but confident she can change that to four. Occasionally she even electrocutes my ovaries with these little wires linked up to the needles. I lie there with the pins twitching inside me and make jokes about hardboiled eggs. She always laughs, though she must have heard that one about a million times by now. I've started going to yoga to make myself more zen, I've managed to cut out three cups of coffee a day, and I'm considering slowing down on the drinking.

"If you want to get pregnant you have to start acting like you're pregnant," Mrs Chen tells me. "I'm working on it," I tell her with a pout.

The next week when I arrive I am told that Mrs Chen is sick, but that I will be seeing her son-in-law for my treatment instead.

"How long have you and your partner been trying for?" he asks as he prepares the needles.

"Oh no, that won't ... that wouldn't ... I'm single."

"I'm sorry. Maybe you will find a man soon." He pats my leg reassuringly.

"I hope not!" I laugh.

He looks concerned.

"I'm gay. Gay and single," I say, trying to sound as merry as possible.

"Ah." He looks over the rim of his glasses at me as I lie there on the bed. "Well, have you thought about adopting instead? There's plenty of children out there who need a home, you know."

The GP isn't much better. I make an appointment to talk about my pregnancy plans, not for any real reason but just because I feel like I should. She recommends that I start taking folic acid and gives me some pamphlets on the anonymous donor system.

"You'll need to see a counsellor if you access fertility treatments through the NHS," she tells me. "Just to make sure you've taken everything into consideration."

"Such as?"

"Well...you know...there's plenty to talk about. Having a baby is a big decision, especially in your situation. They'll also get you to think about what levels of support you'll have access to from friends and family, once you've had the baby. Are you sure you want to do this? Children are a lot of work, you know."

Gee, no, I didn't know, I feel like saying. Maybe I'll get a goldfish instead.

* *

I eventually get too excited about my baby plans and spill my secret to Chanelle, but she just goes quiet for a change. She scathingly calls me a sell-out breeder and reminds me that my life will be taken over by shitty nappies and that I will never have sex ever again, but after a few days she loosens up and agrees to help me make a list of potential donors. "Let's start with the basics," Chanelle suggests while we're hanging the washing up around the flat one afternoon. "What sort of man are you looking for?" She hands me a pen and the back of an envelope to write on and while she finishes draping my undies along the top of Ola's flatscreen tv I do a quick brainstorm:

Donor Daddy Checklist

1. *smart, GSOH, and NSA (essential)*
2. *good looking (i.e. nothing weird that might get passed on genetically, like a horsey face or a big nose)*
3. *cool (i.e. not someone the baby will be embarrassed to be related to)*
4. *healthy (i.e. not a total pisshead or pothead, and no history of mental illness)*
5. *good politics (i.e. won't give the kid a toy gun for christmas or take it to Maccas)*

"I want the donor daddy to be someone I like, someone the baby can be proud of, someone it can stay with occasionally when I need to have a weekend of hot, loud, sex," I say as I hand the list over.

"Ok. Piece of cake."

The task proves to be harder than expected—neither of us actually know that many guys.

"There's Ramon and Morgan and Jack," I say, but then Chanelle reminds me gently that yes, they're men, but they're all also trans. She knows a fair few guys from the punk scene but we have trouble thinking of anyone who isn't either an alcoholic or on drugs.

"Speaking of drugs," she says, downcast, "does this mean you're not going to come mushrooming with me at Hampstead Heath next weekend?"

I sock her in the head with a cushion. "I'm not pregnant yet. Chillax."

We celebrate that fact with a vodka and the booze seems to get our brains working because in the next half an hour we come up with a list of two definites and two maybes between us. While I'm taking a quick wee break Chanelle scans my donor daddy checklist again.

"Hey, what the fuck do GSOH and NSA mean?" she yells.

"Good Sense of Humour, der," I call back. "I don't want to be putting sperm up my clacker that can't take a joke. And No Strings Attached is crucial. That should have an asterisk next to it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'm looking for a donor, not a daddy. I've already got me one of those," I smirk, walking back into the room wiping my wet hands on my jeans. "I don't want them to be a parent. I see it as more of an uncle role. You know, taking the kid to Dreamworld, sending presents at Christmas and babysitting every now and then so I can still have a life."

"So how are you going to word that? Dear so-and-so, please gimme your sperm and then fuck off, P.S. the kid would like an X-Box for Christmas and I wanna go to a party next Friday night?" she laughs.

"It's all in the delivery," I reply. "But yeah, it's a pretty big ask."

"Not necessarily. They spoof it out all the time. What's it to them, swinging a bit your way? You've just gotta pick someone who doesn't want a kid themselves."

I think about what she's just said and then cross two names off the list. "Damn, so that only leaves one definite and a tentative maybe," I say.

I pour us another vodka and we start drafting an email.

However, when I get my replies, both of which are rejections (one's a climate change warrior and has had a voluntary vasectomy as his contribution to population control, and the other has already offered his sperm to another dyke friend), I can't help but feel crushed. I've already almost run out of men to ask, and I've only asked two so far. Where is my Mr Right? It's like being turned down for a date, but with worse consequences.

* *

I've taken to eyeing up pregnant women on the street. I want to be them, not be with them, but it's perving all the same. Mostly I admire their thickening waists, their tight bellies protruding lewdly, flesh no longer able to be contained neatly beneath their clothes. Sometimes, however, I am filled with a new feeling—a seething, indignant jealousy. The woman who begs for change at my bus stop is now visibly pregnant, the bulge strikingly prominent on her skeletal frame. All through the summer I have felt nothing but compassion for her situation, which I have assumed most likely involves some sort of combination of drugs, homelessness, and most likely a history of childhood trauma. Now, however, I hate her. Here I am smiling at my fucking ovaries every morning, taking them to yoga, getting them electrocuted at lunch, eating non-GM food and laying off the coffee, and she probably hasn't straightened up enough yet to realise she's even got something growing inside her. How does her body still function like that when she has probably had more hits in cold alleyways than she has had hot meals? In a way, though, we have something in common. Society looks down on me as unfit for motherhood because of who I fuck, just as it looks down on her as unfit because she's fucked up. I shouldn't be hating on the woman at my bus stop, because we're both in the same boat there—no one thinks either of us should be allowed to reproduce. But apparently jealousy can override good politics.

I've also started to get really stressed about sperm. If I can't find a donor I'm going to have to buy some, and I've looked into it and it's not cheap. In fact, judging by the market price for

jiz you'd think it was liquid gold or something, which is mad considering the amount that just gets tied up in a knot in a bit of latex and thrown in the bin, in my line of work. I briefly contemplate poking holes in all the condoms with a safety pin, and a couple of times with The Gentleman there are moments of insanity where I consider sticking my cum-coated fingers up my cunt while he's not looking. But of course, I don't. It's a strange feeling looking up at a client as he's sweating away on top of you and wondering if he'd pass on good genes, but I guess you've gotta think about something to pass the time.

* *

"So what's it like, doing sex work?" Chanelle asks.

Stevie, Chanelle and I are on the bus on our way back from a climate change film night at a social centre in Bethnal Green.

"Ummm..." I turn to look at Stevie.

"I don't mind hearing about it," she shrugs.

"Ok, well it's mostly pretty boring, actually," I say. "It's all so predictable—start with the obligatory head job, move on to a quick fuck, and then spend the rest of the booking listening to them talk about themselves before they put their clothes back on and leave."

Chanelle looks so disappointed that I follow that up with some animated stories about the exceptions to this rule: the pompous-sounding pom who wants to play Beethoven on his trumpet while I fuck him in the arse, the elderly man who has recently been widowed and who just likes to hold me, both of us fully clothed, and of course the lawyer, who likes to show off how many different positions he's memorised, all in quick succession. "It's like the karma sutra montage. Bam, bam, bam. On your back, on your knees, on your head, three thrusts in each pose and then move on to the next. He's such a typical lawyer—no soul, but an exceptionally good rote learner."

They both nearly wet themselves laughing, and Stevie asks if she can watch when I do the trumpet scene. "Just tell him it'll be hotter if you make it a threesome, and get him to pay me to sit there and watch."

I decide to come clean and tell Ola what I'm up to. She's used to seeing me leave the flat in all sorts of outrageous outfits, but what she's not used to seeing me leave the house in is new, unripped stockings and understated makeup (my heterosexual hooker disguise). I'm expecting her to be concerned for me or perhaps a little shocked, but just like when I came out to my family it's a complete anti-climax.

"Oh yeah. I used to be a stripper. Are you getting much work?"

I didn't see that one coming. Ola's cool, but she's from a strict Polish Catholic family and she never, ever, talks to me about sex.

"Enough to start saving for a baby. And for this pair of elbow-length black latex gloves I've had my eye on for the last few months."

"I miss it sometimes, you know, feeling like a sex goddess up there on the stage, everyone telling you you're beautiful. I always felt so strong, so powerful." Ola looks kind of wistful.

"Why did you give it up?"

"My boyfriend, I guess." Ola shrugs. "He would have found it a threat. He wouldn't have understood that it's all just an act." She puts the kettle on and gets the milk from the fridge— cow milk for her and soy milk for me. I'm trying to switch to soy to impress Stevie.

"The clients don't get that either, most of them," I say. "I'm gay, for fucksake. I fake the whole lot. I fake that I'm straight, I fake that I'm conservative, I fake that I always wear presentable clothes... It's not so different to all the other crap part-time jobs I've had."

"Except that with this job you also fake that you're interested in hearing about their work or their ex-wives. And you fake that you're interested in *them*."

"Not so different to nannying," I point out. "It just pays a shitload better. Although with bad nannying jobs you just pretend to think the child is sweet and cute until the parents have left the house, and then you can collapse on the couch. With sex work you have to pretend for the whole booking."

"I'm not sure I follow." Ola passes me my mug and a chocolate digestive, which I readily stuff in my mouth. I know they're not vegan, but I didn't buy them, so I figure that doesn't count.

"Ok, so for one they're both about hiring love. Or at least intimacy. When I'm nannying I'm pretending to be a mum, devoted to her children. When I'm doing sex work I'm pretending to be a girlfriend, devoted to her man. I'm always playing a stand-in role."

“Well that’s London for you,” Ola tells me. “Everyone’s too busy working to live, so they pay other people to live for them. You’re not the only one whose job is to stand in for someone else’s life.”

“How so?”

“Think about it. The dog-walker stands in for the dog-lover, the personal shopper takes the place of the best friend. There are even people who get paid to water other people’s indoor plants, for fucksake.”

“Exactly. Outsourcing is what London does best,” I say.

“And either way, you’re never the real thing,” she nods.

“God no. You don’t see my clients taking me out to see a movie, or cooking me dinner when I’ve had a hard day. And no matter how much fun we’re having, as soon as Yvonne comes home Donald ignores me and only wants her. I’m a cheap imitation.”

“I dunno how you do it,” she sighs, shaking her head.

“What, the nannyng, or the sex work?”

“Both. I’d rather have my own kids and my own sex, thank you very much, not someone else’s.”

* *

Aside from the sex work I’m also still working for Yvonne and the Souters, and doing a bit of casual babysitting on the side. The nannyng agency calls me up one Wednesday night with a desperate last-minute booking.

“Their sitter had a minor car accident on the way to their house and they’ve got tickets to a nine o’clock show. It’s an easy job, the kids are already asleep. I know it’s a big ask but are you by any chance free?”

The family is only a few stops away on the bus so I grudgingly accept, even though I’d just sat down with a bowl of dahl for a night of *Antique Roadshow* repeats. I arrive just after eight. It’s a nice house—a three-storey with big bay windows and a neatly pruned rose bush out the front. I ring the bell and hear a woman’s voice call “Can you get it, darling?”, and then footsteps come up the hall and the door opens and the sweaty bald guy who got me to piss in his mouth two weeks earlier is standing there staring at me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he hisses, red-faced. I guess that means that he recognises me, even without the wig. I can’t decide whether to stay or to run.

“Is it the babysitter, dear?” comes the woman’s voice from somewhere inside the house. Comprehension slowly registers on his face.

“Ah, I should go.” I turn to leave but he shoots out a hand and grabs me hard on the arm.

“You can’t leave. She knows you’re here now. She’ll want to know why you left.” He’s hurting me but I can feel that he’s shaking, and once I realise that he’s just as scared as me I start to relax. He shows me into the lounge and then stands there awkwardly, asks if I’d like a drink, lifts up the whiskey decanter, puts it back down, tells me he’ll be right back and then scurries out the door. His wife pops her head in a moment later. She’s warm and elegant and has an incredibly sexy arse. If only it was the wives who visited hookers, instead of their men.

“You’re an absolute gem, coming round at such late notice. Help yourself to the fridge, and we shouldn’t be much later than twelve.” Her husband loiters awkwardly in the background. We hear a car pull up outside—“That will be the taxi, dear,” and they both disappear out the door. I am just on my way to the kitchen to appraise the junk food selection when the door opens again. It’s the husband. He pushes his face up close to mine.

“You do anything to my kids and there’ll be hell to pay. No funny business, understand?” he spits, and then grabs his hat from the hat rack and leaves.

“He’s the one who wanted to call me Cleopatra and drink nothing but my piss all night, and yet somehow he seems to think *I’m* the dangerous pervert, out to get his kids?” I whisper down the phone to Chanelle once I’m certain they’ve definitely gone.

“Go through his drawers, see what other dirt you can dig up on him,” she suggests. “Or pinch something expensive. He’ll be too scared to point the finger at you.”

“I think I’ll stick to pinching the last piece of banoffie pie from the fridge, but cheers for the suggestion.”

When they get home I’m thanked and given my pay, and at the door he shoves an extra fifty quid into my hand. “Now leave me and my family alone, you hear?” he spits, as though I came here on purpose, as though I can think of nothing better to do than spy on his dull little life. I’m tempted to ask him for a lift home, for a laugh, because the irony of

the scene is not lost on me—it's supposed to be the dads hitting on the babysitters, but this guy seems scared that I have turned up to hit on him. Either way, I'd say I've just crushed any babysitter fetish he might have had.

Chapter Fourteen

Shopping for Genes

With all the charting and mucus-checking and acupuncture I've been taking a closer note of my cycles than usual, so when my left ovary starts to ache one afternoon I realise it can mean only one thing—I'm ovulating. I do a little dance in the lounge and then knock on Ola's door to announce my good news. Not that I have secured any sperm yet, but hey, it's a start. Other than Chanelle, she's the only person in London I've told about my baby plans so far, and if I'm honest it's because I'm a little bit fearful of the backlash from my fellow queers. I know that most of my friends are like Chanelle, who just sees babies as getting in the way of fucking and partying and travelling. Ola pours me a congratulatory cup of peppermint tea and then goes back to her studies. An hour or two later my work phone rings. The client offers me a hefty tip if I can get there within the hour, and says he's already booked a hotel for the night. I don't usually work evenings but tonight I'm so bored that I'm almost contemplating vacuuming the rugs. I'd be crazy to turn it down. When I get there he's got *Top of the Pops* blaring in the background and there's a few lines of coke racked up along the top of the tv. I politely decline, having decided against mixing business with pleasure, so he does his line and mine in quick succession and then gets me to take off all my clothes. I play with myself on the bed for a while as he watches and then he asks me to sit on his face. He's not that much older than me, and high as a kite but so far a pretty nice guy, and I guess you'd say he's good looking but it's hard to say, me being gay and all. I fake an orgasm after a few minutes and then we start to fuck, but what I've forgotten about coke is that it makes it harder to cum, so the fucking goes on way longer than usual. We've done it sideways, missionary and cowgirl, and he's not looking any closer to cumming, so I lift myself off him to shift into doggy, which is usually a sure-fire way to success, when I notice that the condom has disappeared. Or more to the point it's split, probably because I didn't use enough lube, and all that's left is a twisted-up ring around the base of his cock. The client hasn't noticed and so in a split-second decision I lower myself back down on him before he can see. I pump up and down as fast as I can go, and he's close but he's still not quite there so I wrap my hand around his neck and apply pressure to his windpipe. I hope fervently that if it did it for Michael Hutchence, it might just do it for him. His face blushes pink, then red, and as he

gently chokes against my hand I feel the tell-tale jerking of his cock as he cums, pumping his load deep inside me, hard up against my hopeful cervix. I sit straddling him in a sudden panic, waiting for his breathing to subside. How the fuck am I going to get off his cock without him realising that the condom broke? Eventually I reach for some tissues and then bend my head forward in what I hope looks like a demure gesture, draping the long locks of my wig over his stomach to create a screen. I lift off him and swiftly cover his cock with the tissues, rolling the ragged condom off unseen.

On the overland on the way home the reality of what I've just done hits me square between the eyes. I've crossed the boundary. I could have an STD. Have I gone fucking mad? I've just risked my safety in the vague hopes of getting pregnant to a coked-up stranger in a hotel room. I don't even know his name. Or what he does. Or whether his family has a history of mental illness or diabetes or receding hairlines. I try to imagine how I would tell my child about its father. "Your daddy had a cute English accent and liked cheap hotels, cocaine, and the cowgirl position." Mind you, plenty of people have been conceived in cheap hotel rooms. Nothing wrong with that. There's a woman sitting opposite me with a toddler asleep in her arms, all pudgy limbs and soft hair. I look at him and feel a stab of deep longing, followed by an even deeper stab of remorse. That man might be becoming a father to my child, right this very moment, and he'll never even know. What kind of person have I become?

Even more disturbing is the deep disappointment I feel when the pregnancy test comes back negative. *I stayed sober for two whole weeks for nothing*, I think bitterly. Luckily my STD check also comes back negative. I celebrate this news by dedicating an afternoon to cruising the net, researching how to do home inseminations. It's much messier than an unprotected quickie with a client, but it's a hell of a lot safer.

"You know, for the first time in my life I'm feeling kinda down on queer sex," I tell Em the next time we skype. "Straight people get to make love and a baby at the same time. It's romantic. Or they can even just get knocked up by mistake. But queers have to go through this huge rigmarole. It's so orchestrated. Hell, if you're in a relationship you even have to invite a third person in, like a non-sexual three-way. It's not fair."

"What are you going to do, hold a rally?" Em laughs. "Let's focus on finding you some spunk. Hey what about Logan?"

“Ooh. There’s an idea.” We both click on to his facebook page. “He’s got good genes,” I say.

“Wow. Check out that photo of him with the fish.”

“Where?”

“In his mobile uploads folder.”

“Ha. Cute. And I like his update about the surfing lesson. But shit, have you noticed how many recent posts there are from Amy on his page? I didn’t even know they were friends. Fuck.”

“So?”

“Why’s she suddenly all over him like a rash? I bet she’s beaten me to it. She and Claire have been clucky for years. Bitch.”

I frantically click “like” on a few of his pictures. Two can play at this game.

“You’d make a way better mum than she would. He’d be crazy to turn you down,” Em says.

“I dunno about that. She’s got the maternal hippy vibe going on. Logan knows me more as a trashbag boozehound.” I’m starting to get paranoid that perhaps no one will think I’m good enough mother material. Have I been partying too hard and slutting around for so long that it’s damaged my chances at being a mother? I make a mental note to post fewer drunk photos and more “save the reef” and “free the panda” petitions from now on.

My mum’s ideas are a little more creative. She suggests the son of a family friend and also a cousin related by marriage, not blood. It feels weird talking about this stuff with her because, despite the fact that on the surface we’re just assessing whether these men would have good genes, ultimately we are talking about their cum. How can I ask a boy I grew up with to jerk off in the bathroom and then hand me the cup, knowing full well where his hands have just been? Even worse, how can I then lie down and put the stuff that’s just spurted out of his cock inside my vagina? What about when it all comes leaking out later in the day, my childhood friend’s orgasm running down my leg in the middle of the frozen section at Coles? It’s almost like asking him for sex, which makes it kind of incestuous. Even worse, I have a sneaking suspicion that Brayden, the son of the family friend, used to have a bit of a crush on me when we were younger. So I’d effectively be asking him to put his sperm inside me, but not in the way he’d have liked it to happen.

Her other suggestion is even weirder. “Ok. How about Richard?”

“Richard?!” Richard is the (much much) younger guy Mum had a fling with just before she married my dad, settled down, and had me.

“He’s a lovely guy, Meg, incredibly intelligent, and he’s happily married now with two gorgeous boys, so I doubt he’d miss a few stray sperm. I’m sure he’d be delighted to help.” “Ew, Mum, no.”

“He has excellent genes, darling. Though I s’pose he is on the wrong side of forty now...ok, sorry. Just trying to help.”

It’s Chanelle who finally hits the jackpot.

“I’ve found you a man,” she yells at me over the music, interrupting my carefully executed Cyndi Lauper footwork. We’re out with Stevie, Monika and Jack at an eighties dance party in Camden, but the others have gone outside for a fag. Chanelle’s got her dreads tied up with a scrunchie into a side ponytail but that’s about all she’s bothered to do. I, on the other hand, have put a lot of effort into my Boy George look, but under the white face paint my skin is starting to get itchy.

“Who?” I yell back, quickly scanning the crowd, trying to figure out what she’s talking about.

“Jeremy. I went to school with him. He’s straight, but totally down with the queer thing.”

“You’re trying to set me up with a straight man?”

“Not him, his sperm, dummy.”

“His what?”

“Sperm!” Of course she yells this at the precise moment when the music is cut so that the organisers can announce the prizes for best dressed, and a few people standing near us turn around to look.

“Can we have this conversation somewhere a little more private?” I usher her off to the toilets, where I grab a wad of toilet paper and start scrubbing at my face at the sink. “Go, go, tell me about him,” I order.

“Ok. He’s my age, obviously, but he’s got his head screwed on. He’s a doctor.”

“Ooooooh.”

“And he’s cute.”

“Keep talking.”

“Tall, muscly, curly black hair.”

“Swoon.”

“Healthy, good politics, kind, funny...”

"He sounds gorgeous."

"He is. So I've already talked to him about it, and told him about you, and he's totally into it. He thinks you sound great. He said you've got a lovely smile."

I squeal. "He's seen a picture of me? Chanelle! Which one? Not the one of me being sick over London Bridge?"

"No, the one of you with my underpants on your head, singing karaoke."

I flick a bit of wet toilet paper at her.

"So when can I meet him?"

"He's getting back from Syria next month."

"Syria?"

"Yeah. Did I mention he's been volunteering in the refugee camps?"

"Could this guy get any better?"

"Sure can," she grinned. "As of last week, he's single. Apparently the girlfriend packed up and came back to the UK, and he stayed on at the camps."

There's the sound of a toilet flushing. In the mirror I watch as the door opens and Stevie walks out of the stall with a strange look on her face.

"It's not what you're thinking." I turn to her, face streaked with white paint.

"Umm, I'm gunna head off, hey," says Chanelle, moving towards the door. "I might leave the eighties to you old folks, and see what's happening down at the Dev. See you at home, Meg?" She scoots off, leaving me with Stevie.

"It's cool, babe," Stevie says, avoiding eye contact as she washes her hands. "I'm not about to get all possessive and go mogo on you. I just want you to give me a heads-up when you see other people. Fair play?"

"Sure. Yeah, of course. But that's not what it was, anyway."

"You don't have to tell me everything. I'm not your gaoler."

"Maybe I want to tell you." I pause. Is this true? Do I want to share this with someone I'm only casually fucking? But then again, at what point do I tell my lovers? Now, or when I'm four months pregnant? Sooner or later she'll have to know. "Jeremy's not my lover. He's the father of my baby. Going to be, I mean. I hope."

"Cool." She dries her hands on a hand towel.

"That's it? Cool?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I dunno. Maybe because we're shagging, and it might freak you out that I want to start a

family?”

“I like kids. They’re fun. I want some, eventually.” She pushes me up against the wall next to the paper towel dispenser.

“I’m not asking you to help me raise it,” I start to say.

“I know, I know...” and then she has her tongue down my throat and the rest of my sentence gets lost in the heat of her mouth.

* *

The next day I’m stripping the sheets off the bed, as I always have to do when Stevie’s spent the night. She’s a squirter, which started out hot but has become a bit of a pain in the arse. She makes such a mess that unless I remember to put a towel down I have to wash the sheets after every fuck. The problem is I only have one set of sheets and our dryer’s broken, so I often end up sitting in the lounge with them draped over the couch, drying the sheets with a hairdryer. My room stinks of sex. There’s used condoms and gloves all over the floor, a dildo on my bedside table and a ball-gag hanging from the blinds. Every time we fuck it gets better —we’re both getting to that point where we’re getting inside each other’s heads, figuring out what makes each other tick, and it’s really paying off. In fact after what we did last night I’m back to the same point I was after Ramon, having second thoughts about having a baby. I’m having the best sex of my life, I’m figuring out all these kinks I never knew I had, and I’m not sure I’m ready to give that up. But who’s going to want to fuck me when I’m pregnant? Only fetishists and people with mummy issues, probably. And of course, hopefully, Kate. Kate wants a baby too, so she’ll find me sexy. But if Kate and I don’t work out then there’s the problem of who’s going to want to fuck me *after* I’ve had the baby. A quickie in the toilets at the pub won’t be so easy to initiate when it’s no longer just me, but also my plus one, and the list of potential fucks is going to get even smaller than it already is. My current requirements are that all potential sexual partners be queer, women or trans*, left-wing, kinky, and sex-work-friendly. Soon I’ll have to add “child-friendly” to that list, too. I’ll be looking at a whole new dating pool demographic—childless queers who want a ready-made family, other single mums, and needy butches wanting to be mothered. The future’s not looking so hot.

I know I'm contradicting myself here because I totally had the hots for Mahla, but it was different for her. She's butch and leather so despite the baby she was still clearly queer as fuck. I pause in my sheet-changing and look at myself in the piece of mirror that's stuck to the back of my door. Then I get a pillow and stick it up my shirt, trying to imagine how I'll look when I'm pregnant. I know how I'll look—I'll look straight. Everyone always assumes that a woman in a skirt and lipstick is hetero, and with a pregnant belly as an accessory I'll have no chance in hell—they'll think I'm a straighty-one-eighty, hands down. Even if they get past that and realise I'm queer the assumption will still be that I am taken. Accidental pregnancies aren't exactly a common problem in queer circles, so single mums are a pretty rare sight. I stick the sheets in the machine, turn the kettle on and pour myself a bowl of puffed quinoa and soy milk. My biggest fear, though, is that everyone will assume that I'm daddy-hunting and run a mile. A pregnant belly doesn't exactly scream NSA fun.

Later that day I'm idly flicking through facebook when "Harvey Wallbanger" pops up online. I'm about to make my status invisible so that she doesn't think I'm a total loser for always being online, when a message pops up from her.

Harvey Wallbanger: *Hey, so how's London?*

I freeze. Shit. I can't believe she just messaged me. Holy fucking shit. I need to impress her, and quick.

Meggy Legs: *The usual. Cold and grey.*

Harvey Wallbanger: *You comin back soon?*

Meggy Legs: *Not till March...I'll pretty much miss summer :(*

Harvey Wallbanger: *Ah, bum. That's a shame*

Does she mean it's a shame because she wants to see me, or because I'll miss most of summer? I sit there in a panic, trying to think of what to say. I should try and flirt at this point, but I don't know how. Where's Chanelle when I need her? Eventually I come up with something.

Meggy Legs: *I'm planning on going straight to the beach the day I get back. Wanna come?*

I sit waiting for her reply, heart beating hard, but nothing comes through. A few minutes later I realise that she's logged off, and my heart sinks like the Titanic. But hey, I remind myself, contact has now been made. And even better, it was her who initiated it.

* *

One Sunday afternoon not long after the Camden eighties party I'm on my way to meet Stevie for an evening swim. I've hit a bit of a wall with the winter already (even though it's technically still autumn, as Chanelle points out), and Stevie's solution is to take me swimming at the local leisure centre to trick my brain into thinking it's back in Australia. "And after that we can go back to Jack's and turn the heating up to high and put on some zinc and eat ice-cream," she promises. It's also her way of giving me some special attention before Ingrid arrives on Tuesday for a week. Of course, she's broke as usual so I have to buy the ice cream myself, which means taking the long route to meet her at Jack's. I'm walking through the park, the trees depressingly bare and the garden beds all dug over, when I pass by the playground. It's empty so I go and sit on one end of the spring-loaded seesaw and bounce half-heartedly for a while, distracted by a movie reel playing in my head of me with a little one all bundled up against the cold, pushing it in the baby-swing. In this movie someone is standing on the other side with a camera, taking photos as our baby shrieks in pleasure. I peer closer, trying to figure out who that other person is. I try and picture Stevie's face there, but it doesn't stick. Or else it does, but like a package deal, Ingrid's face looms up alongside hers. Kate's face, on the other hand, fits much better. Kate's finally replied to my question about going to the beach together with a "yeah, sure!" to which I'd responded with a legal query to keep the conversation going:

Meggy Legs: *hey can I ask a quick lawyer question? what's the go with same-sex parenting in Oz now? can two women be on the birth certificate?*

Harvey Wallbanger: *sure can!*

Meggy Legs: *awesome*

Harvey Wallbanger: *you planning on having a baby?*

Meggy Legs: *haven't found the right woman to do it with yet...*

Harvey Wallbanger: *I doubt that will take long. you'll make a great mummy :)*

I'd glowed for three days after that message. I tuck my hands inside my jacket sleeves to try and warm them up, and kick the dirt with my heel. Stevie had taken the news about my baby

plans pretty well, I figure, though if I'm honest I'm not entirely sure that it's the reaction I'd wanted. I didn't know she eventually wanted children, but when I am ready to have kids *now*, what use is that? She still has to hitchhike around Eastern Europe, do a carpentry apprenticeship, have a working holiday fruit-picking in Australia and get her licence before "eventually" becomes "now". She's the right person at the wrong time, though I would never dare tell her she's a cliché to her face. A straight couple walk past me hand in hand in matching lime-green parkas, breath clouding around them as they talk. She looks about eight months pregnant, though it could be much less under all the winter layers. Ever since I started planning to have a baby all I seem to be seeing is pregnant women and children. It's like they were here all along but I didn't have the special 3-D glasses to see them until now. London is getting dark, the air fuzzy in the twilight like an old television screen that has already been turned off at the wall but is taking its time fading to black. The couple stop under a street lamp, talking in murmurs in the wet, heavy air. I bet he's not telling her about his plans to put a mattress in the back of a van and drive around Morocco for a year, and I also bet they're not negotiating how many nights she's planning to spend with her other lover this week. They probably have a framed picture of their first ultrasound on the mantelpiece and a spare room he's papering in pastels with a dancing-clown border. In the glow he bends down and kisses her Shrek-coloured tummy. I feel like I am secretly witnessing some kind of romantic threesome, and all of a sudden, bouncing on my own on one end of the seesaw, I feel deeply, bone-achingly lonely. Who's going to kiss my tummy when I'm bulging at the seams?

The couple walk on, probably off to the local Wetherspoons for a Sunday roast, I imagine, and are replaced with a rowdy bunch of kids, just old enough to be out on their own. They amble around the playground shooting me dirty looks for taking up the coveted see-saw and shouting rude words between them, trying to shock me. Begrudgingly I get up and walk on towards Jack's. I know what's coming, and it isn't going to be fun.

Chapter Fifteen

Sex and the Nanny

"You're home early." Chanelle is sitting on my couch with a bowl of popcorn in her lap and a chick-flick on the telly. I flop down next to her.

"Ta-da!" I produce the tub of vegan salted-caramel ice-cream from my bag. Luckily the heating had been off at Jack's, so it hasn't melted too much.

"You're not my type, but fuck I love you." Chanelle pauses the film and goes to get some spoons. "How was the pool?" she yells from the kitchen.

"It's over. I called it off," I yell back.

"You WHAT? You walked out on Stevie? Are you insane?" Chanelle's eyes are wide as she walks back in with my precious tin of imported Milo and two spoons, shaking her head.

"It's over."

"What went wrong?"

"She's too young."

"She's twenty-seven."

"Precisely. She's about to hit her saturn return, and I'm about to finish mine."

Chanelle rolls her eyes. "Since when have you believed in that shit? She's also fucking hot, and an exceptionally good Daddy, I seem to recall you saying."

"Yeah. She's a great Daddy, but she isn't mother material."

"That sounds weird." She laughs uneasily.

"I mean, look at the difference between her and Kate. Kate is buying her own house. Stevie hasn't even got a proper place to live. If I stayed with her, I'd be giving birth to the baby on Jack's blow-up mattress."

"Easy, tiger."

"Sorry. You know you're totally welcome here while you're looking for a squat." I grab her round the head and stuff her face into my cleavage, smothering her in a boob-cuddle until she manages to wriggle free.

"Stop it. You're messing up my hair." Chanelle currently has a shaved head. "So what you're really saying is that she isn't Kate. But you know what? Thank fuck she isn't like

Kate. Stevie's kinky, she's adventurous, she's got a fucking degree in English lit, for fucksake. What's Kate got? A steady job and a mortgage."

"Stevie smokes. I don't want to bring my kids up around a smoker."

"You're an idiot. You know that? You've got your priorities all screwed up. I might be ten years younger than you, but christ, sometimes I feel like I'm your mother. I could slap you for letting Stevie go. And to teach you a lesson, I'm gunna make the moves on her myself."

"Don't you fucking dare."

"You don't even know anything about Kate. What if she turns out to be the kind of mum who feeds her kids Maccas and lets them run around the house with toy guns all day?"

"You're right," I say tiredly. "But where the hell am I going to find a vegan anarchist squatter who also has their shit together enough to bring up a child? I'm living between two worlds here. Anyway. I don't want to talk about it. What crap are we watching?"

Chanelle looks guilty. "*Sex and the City the Movie, II*. And I don't wanna hear it, either—I need some junk food for the brain tonight. We found an empty today, and we're gunna try and open it up tomorrow. I spent the whole afternoon checking out the joint and sourcing the right tools for the job."

"Hey, way to go. That's awesome news." I check the ingredients list on the Milo tin—it's not vegan, so I put it back down. Then I remember that I'm not seeing Stevie any more, pick it back up again, and dump half the tin into the ice-cream tub.

An hour and a half later the ice-cream tub is empty and we are both slouched almost horizontally on the couch.

"I can't tell if I feel sick because I just ate almost half a litre of ice-cream, or because that film was so offensive," I say, as the credits start to roll.

Chanelle groans. "Can't you ever just enjoy something without ripping it to shreds?"

Charlotte's nanny was hot. And a dyke. Focus on the good bits, like her tits."

Charlotte's one of the main characters in the film, and spends half the movie worrying that the nanny is going to take her husband's wandering hands and shove them up her shirt.

"Actually, the nanny bit was kind of interesting. Charlotte needed the nanny more than she needed her nerdy husband. It was really the nanny she was worried about losing in that scenario, and not him. She didn't want to be left alone to look after the kids without any help."

"I'd give Charlotte a helping hand," Chanelle chuckles sleazily. She's going through a phase of going for the straight-acting femmes after swearing off butches forever following her latest heartbreak. Watching tv with her is getting painful—she perves on almost anything with long hair that moves, and verbalises it all like a teenage boy. I ignore the comment.

"Anyway, Charlotte stopped worrying once she found out that the nanny was a dyke, right? Which totally disproves my theory that the perfect nanny is asexual."

"Huh?" Chanelle's not really listening any more, but I'm on a roll.

"Charlotte's nanny was a lezzo, which means she had sex with girls, which means she has sex, right?"

"Der." Chanelle rolls her eyes.

"And yet even though Charlotte knew her nanny was having sex, it was less of a threat than if she'd been a heterosexual virgin. If she'd been straight she might have run off with the husband, which would have left Charlotte high and dry." I steel myself for some kind of crude joke about Charlotte being dry but Chanelle's missed the opportunity—instead she tells me she's too tired for politics and goes off to brush her teeth. I log on to facebook and automatically go to Stevie's page, but with a sinking stomach I realise that she's put me on restricted access. I can't see any of the posts on her wall, and her photo albums are also all blocked. Not quite as drastic as de-friending me, but only a small step behind. I blink the beginning of tears out of my eyes and flick over to look at Jeremy's page instead. Jeremy's come into my life just before I got desperate enough to start sticking pins in the condoms at work, though I have already had unprotected sex with a stranger and considered propositioning my mum's ex-boyfriend, so things are still pretty bad. But hey, at least I haven't created a "find a donor for Meg" facebook event yet. However, the cat's not yet in the bag so to speak, so I've still got my name down for the Desperate and Donorless Ball. I start dashing out a reply to Jeremy's latest email, doing my best to sound upbeat and relaxed.

"You gotta start being a little more discerning," Chanelle chastises me. "You're acting too easy. It's not a good look." She's come back into the room and is reading over my shoulder.

"You mean I should play a little harder to get? How?"

"Like for starters, don't send that email."

She's got a point. In answer to his question about what role I would like him to have in the baby's life, I've written: "Whatever you want is fine!"

"It's not even true," says Chanelle. "You can't lie to get him to put out."

I sigh and press delete. "Ok, is this any better? 'Preferably you would play an uncle kind of role, available for contact and perhaps later on, even the occasional visit, but with no parental or financial responsibilities or rights.'"

"Much better."

"Fuck. What if you're not there one day and I get asked an important question like that when my hormone levels are surging, and I agree to something stupid like joint custody?"

"Baby, you're sperm-sick," Chanelle says, shaking her head. "Like love-sick, but worse."

The "romance" with Jeremy is a good distraction from Stevie. This is just the way it has to be from now on, I tell myself. I've gotta think about the baby, now, and not just about myself. In an effort to get to know each other better Jeremy woos me with youtube clips of his favourite bands, stories about his Irish grandfather, and photos of himself both past and present. He even makes me one of those electronic mixed tapes, though he's too young to really appreciate the sentimentality of cassettes. In return I send him cute stories about Mona and Donald (to illustrate my maternal capabilities), and the youtube clip of me falling off a surfboard up in Noosa a few years back, partly for comedy points and partly to show off the beaches back home. I also send him some photos of myself bushwalking. I figure this makes me look earthy and wholesome and responsible, like someone you'd trust to carry on your genes. Every night when I hear Ola come home I scurry out of my room to tell her the latest snippet of news about him or to show her the new photos he's sent. "Wasn't he a cute little baby?" I ask, and she nods politely. I nag Chanelle constantly for more information: "Has he said anything about me? Did he like the photos I sent? Does he like spicy food? Do you think he'd like me better in jeans or a dress?" Jeremy and I have made plans for me to come and meet his mother when he's back in London in a few weeks' time, and I've already bought a new outfit for the occasion. I'm so excited that I nearly forget about my thirtieth birthday.

Chapter Sixteen

Birth Days

The day of my birthday I wake up uncharacteristically early. It's more from nerves than from excitement—I'm having the gang over for dinner but I hate playing the host, and am cursing myself for making this stupid plan. Why couldn't I have just told everyone to meet me at the all-you-can-eat vegan Chinese instead? I'm terrified that only a couple of people will come and I'll look like a Nigel-no-friends. Or a Billy-no-mates, as the poms would say. The flat looks like a fucking pigsty and Chanelle, who promised to help me clean it and who also made most of the mess, hasn't been home for two days now. I suspect it's something to do with Green Mohawk girl, who she reunited with last week at a gig. Thankfully Ola is away for a week for a wedding back in Poland, because she'd have a fit if she saw the kitchen right now. Top of my list of priorities this morning, however, is to somehow deal with the smell. English houses all seem to be stamped with the same olfactory trademark—an undertone of acrid coal-fire overlaid with fabric softener and kitty litter—and despite the fact we don't have a fire or a cat, this house is no exception. The place smells of stuffy couches and stuffy rules, of Eastenders reruns and washing-up gloves. And today I'm craving home with its lack of inhibition, I'm craving the freedom to leave the doors and the windows open and let the blue sky flush the corners with fresh air and sun.

I run round the house opening all of the windows as wide as they will go, which isn't very wide because we're on the fifth floor and they don't want anyone falling out, and also because it's London and no one in their right mind would ever want to open their windows here anyway. Then I dig out a packet of incense and light the whole lot in one go, shoving the sticks into a pot plant that's dying a slow death next to the telly. Facebook is full of birthday wishes but from a cursory scroll I can see that there's nothing from Kate, and even worse, nothing in my inbox from Jeremy. It's been five days now since his last message. What if he didn't like the photos I sent him? Maybe I should have left out the one of me

dressed as Betty Page; too much too soon, perhaps. Disappointed, I flip down the screen and strip off my tracksuit for a shower. Under the curtain of steam I admire the identical twin lines of yellowing bruises that stretch down the middle of each breast. It's the handiwork of a leather Daddy named Ashley who I had a play-piercing scene with last week. I start to worry that she'll find out I'm having a birthday dinner that she hasn't been invited to, but the worry doesn't last long. I'm distracted by the memory of her mouth wrapped around my left nipple and the warm jets of the detachable shower-head as I hold it between my legs. I daydream as I wank, thinking about the year behind, the year ahead, my plans for my thirties, the water thrumming hot against my clit, and just as I am reaching my climax the vision of a baby is superimposed over Ashley's face, latched hungrily on to one bruised nipple, sucking hungrily, and I drop the shower head in disgust and turn off the taps. Fucking baby, ruining my sex life already.

As I'm brushing my teeth I find myself wondering what kind of toothpaste Kate likes to use. She doesn't strike me as an organic co-op shopper, but then again the middle-class queer trend has always leaned towards hippy-chic, so you never know. I just hope she doesn't use a synthetic exfoliating body-wash. I read recently that they use tiny little plastic balls that don't biodegrade, which means when they end up in the ocean, the fish swallow them, and end up with their tummies full of plastic. Hopefully once I tell her that she'll switch to a more ecofriendly brand. I once tried to count how many times in one day I thought about her but gave up when I caught myself mid-morning wondering whether she was a flat white drinker or a latte girl. I am painfully aware of how obsessive this crush is getting—Chanelle never lets me forget. I'm just about to use my electric toothbrush to finish off the job I'd started in the shower when the phone rings. It's my parents and my grandma, calling from back home. The three of them put speakerphone on and sing "Happy birthday" down the line and then Dad takes the first turn, asking me about the weather and then telling me a long story about how poor Hawn, the male of their Goldie/Hawn goldfish duo, committed what they suspect was suicide by swimming through a too-small hole in the air-filter and getting stuck midway at the gills.

"Poor bloke had probably had enough of being served up the same bloody dinner every single night for the last three years," Dad chuckles. It's a dig at my mother, who is famous in our family for having only a two-dish repertoire: Pizza Hut or ravioli topped with tinned

tomatoes. Gran gets on the phone next, asks me about the weather, tells me she's worried that my father is looking too thin, and then says, "Now, what's this I hear about you wanting to have a child?"

I make stabbing motions at the phone. I had sworn my mother to secrecy.

"Yep, that's right. Exciting, isn't it?" I say brightly, even though I know damn well that she will not be excited by this news.

"My dear. Erm, how can I put it..." I've heard this phrase enough times in my life to know it means she's preparing to say something I'm not going to like. I interject before she can say anything hurtful.

"I've found a beautiful donor, Gran. His name's Jeremy, he's tall, good looking, and he's a doctor. He and his ex-girlfriend have been working in Syria for the last two years with Medecins sans Frontieres, helping in the refugee camps. Good genes," I say brightly. "Oh, well that's a relief," she says.

"What, that he has good genes?"

"No, dear. That he has a girlfriend."

"Ex girlfriend, Gran."

"Yes, well it doesn't matter, dear. The point is that he is not a...a homosexual."

I have two choices here. I can ignore the slur or I can argue. She's pushing ninety, so I go with the first option. Unfortunately she doesn't stop there.

"I just think, dear, that the optimal arrangement is for a child to have...how can I put it." I tense myself, knowing what's coming next. "For a child to have a mother and a father."

"Jeremy isn't going to be the dad, Gran. He's just the donor. He's not going to be a parent to my child."

"Ah. I see. That's a pity." The disappointment in her voice jabs me between the ribs.

"The baby is going to have lots of aunties and uncles to love it. I'm sure we'll do just fine," I say as calmly as possible.

"You really have no idea how hard it will be, dear."

"Being a single parent?"

"No dear, childbirth." I let out a surprised snort, despite my suspicions that she is laying this final card on the table in the genuine hope that in light of this information I will now have second thoughts and cancel my reproductive plans. My grip on the phone relaxes as she

goes off on a tirade about how my grandfather somehow managed to be away driving for every one of her six births and how the only reason the last child was born in a hospital was because there was no goddamn room left in the place by then for her to do it at home.

"And we didn't have epidurals in my day, dear. We did it the hard way, and believe me, it was NOT fun," she says, as way of signing off. I hear her shouting for my mother to come take the phone, and then the opening bars of the *Home and Away* theme song start up in the background, which explains the abrupt ending to our conversation.

My mother, when she comes to the phone, is apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Meg. Don't listen to her. She's from an older generation, remember."

"I'd have thought she'd be more excited," I say.

"Darling, she just wants what's best for the child. We all do. And of course, in an ideal world the child would have a father too."

"Oh yeah, like Dad did?" It's no secret that my grandfather used to beat Gran, and sometimes the kids, too.

"You know what I mean."

"No. Actually I don't, Mum." I'm losing my patience.

"It would just be easier on the child if it came from a...a normal family."

"And by normal you mean straight."

"Meg, I'm not saying..."

"Do you really think my child is going to be disadvantaged in life because of who I sleep with?" I interrupt. "Do you think I'm unfit to be a mother because I'm gay? Seriously? Come on, Mum. You and I both know that having heterosexual parents doesn't necessarily equate to a happy childhood. Look at our family. Everyone knows that Aunty Jean and Uncle Frank haven't had sex since 1980, when Shane was conceived. And your cousin Tania brought her two up virtually on her own, and no one ever criticised that. And what about you?"

"You've made your point, Meg." Her voice is tight on the other end.

"Sorry. I didn't mean that." Mum was put in foster care at the age of three and hasn't seen her parents since. She's never told me the full story but from what I can gather her parents both had big drug problems and her dad spent most of his life in and out of jail. "Mum, I've wanted to have a baby ever since I can remember. I'm great with children, you know that. And when the kid needs some masculine guidance, I'll just bring it over to visit Dad."

We both laugh. Dad's a hairdresser, the only straight one in Sydney, he boasts, though to look at his moustache you'd swear that was a joke.

"So how's the weather today, sweetheart?" she asks.

When I get off the phone I check the internet again. Still no birthday wishes from Kate, despite the fact that I can tell from a quick squizz on facebook that she has been online today, because she's liked one of our mutual friends' updates. There is, however, an email from Jeremy. My heart skips a beat. The frigging computer screen freezes as I'm waiting for the message to open so I have to reboot it, sick with nerves the whole time. Eventually I get back online and with my heart in my mouth I skim-read his words. There's the obligatory birthday wishes, confirmation that he got my photos (*I particularly loved the fancy dress one...were you Wednesday from the Addams family?*) and a few other pleasantries, but the guts of the message is that, *stranger things have happened, Meg, but I'd only been back in the UK two days when I bumped into Teresa at my local Sainsburys, and well, one thing led to another and it looks like we might be giving things another go*. Jolly good for him, I seethe, but I happen to know from Chanelle that his bitch ex-girlfriend is a strict Irish Catholic and I bet my back teeth she's not going to be overjoyed about our plans. Jealousy bubbles up my throat as I realise that when it comes to it, he'll choose her over me. I've pretty much just been dumped. Slightly stunned, I head towards the kitchen to get myself some breakfast, but on my way I stub my toe on the couch and it is the last shit thing in a morning full of shit things, so I end up crying in a puddle on the floor.

At that point, just when I'm about to blow my nose on my shirt, cancel my birthday party and cry myself back to sleep, Chanelle bursts in the door with a bottle of bubbly and a grocery bag.

"Ta da! Happy birthday!" she trills, and then notices I'm slumped on the ground. "Come on, up you get." She bullies me to my feet. "Have you eaten yet? No? Perfect. Christ, it's bloody freezing in here." She starts walking round the flat, shutting all the windows. "Go get back under the duvet and I'll bring in a tray. I'm making you my specialty—baked bean nachos."

Chanelle looks suitably disappointed herself when I tell her the news about Jeremy and Teresa. We're propped up in bed together with the remnants of the nachos balanced on

the quilt between us, and when she leans over to give me a hug the plate slides sideways and empties itself onto my lap.

“Oh well. It’s high time I washed the sheets, anyway,” I say.

“I’m so sorry, Meg. I thought he was the one, I really did. You two were perfect together. I can’t believe he’s gone back to that trollop.”

“I never even got to meet his mum,” I say dejectedly. “I’d bought a new dress for it and everything.”

“Look, I know it’s a cliché, but there’s plenty more wrigglers in the sea, right? We’ll think of someone else. And in the meanwhile, it’s your bloody birthday and I’ll be damned if I’ll have you moping around all day in your jim-jams. Bottoms up, love.” We clink tea cups together and shift our focus onto finishing off the bottle of champagne.

The bubbles, beans, and some angry girl-punk give me the boost I need to get dressed and sort out the house. Chanelle and I shove the mess to one side and scatter a few Indian throw-rugs around the lounge, tackle the worst of the washing-up together, and then she chops vegies while I cook up a big Thai red curry. It’s been difficult getting the ingredients together —no one in this supposedly multicultural city seems to have ever heard of jasmine rice, and coconut cream only comes in hard blocks. Once the curry’s done we leave it to sit and head out for an afternoon of shopping. By this we mean trawling the op-shops looking for cool outfits for tonight’s party. Unfortunately Chanelle gets a bit distracted by the free bin at the first shop we hit up, and so we also end up having to cart around a brown lamp shade, a lidless blender, and two kewpie dolls with us for the whole afternoon. Outside the shop she borrows my biro and writes her name on one and mine on the other, and then ceremoniously hands me the one named Chanelle.

“Best friends forever, yeah?”

I whack her over the head tenderly with the doll and then give her a great big hug. Fuck I love that kid sometimes. In the third shop Chanelle totally scores with a red pinstripe dress that she says will look even better if she cuts the bottom half off completely, and I find a sexy little green party dress with white polka dots and the most amazing pair of pink high heels, “to catch the lights upon the ferris wheel,” I sing in my best Debbie Harry impression. In fact, I’m so inspired that I drag Chanelle off for a ride on the London Eye, even though it takes us ages to get there and even longer to wait our turn. But we smuggle a bottle of whiskey into

the queue to keep us warm and that keeps our spirits high. The downside is that by the time we're finally on the wheel we're both busting to piss.

"This is the worst ride I've ever been on," I groan, clutching at my bladder as we climb sluggishly into the sky. "It's so fucking slow."

"Help! This is an emergency! My friend is bored!" Chanelle yells, banging on the window, causing me to come dangerously close to wetting my pants as a family looks on disapprovingly from the other side of the car. Of course by the time we roll off the wheel and into a pub, fighting each other for the one free stall in the loos, the sky is getting dark, and then of course we can't leave the pub without trying a pint of their in-house chocolate ale and so by the time we get to my place Shaz and Jack are already sitting smoking in the stairwell outside my front door. Since Stevie and I split I've allowed myself to develop a bit of a crush on both of them, so it's kind of intimidating having them arrive early together, catching me off guard.

"There's punishments for tardiness," Jack growls, leaning over me as I fumble for my keys. I can see Shaz smirking in the background, and I wonder briefly what these two have been plotting. I finally get the door open and let everyone inside.

"Nice place," Shaz says, looking at my breasts. I feel myself go red.

"I've gotta get changed. Do you wanna..." I gesture vaguely at the lounge and scurry off to my room, leaving Chanelle to hold the fort.

The doorbell goes just as I'm doing up the buckles on my new shoes. I jog-walk to the door as fast as possible, making a mental note to never ever wear them outside the house—my feet are already hurting and I've only walked from my bedroom to the front door. I show in Jita and Stevie, who kisses me awkwardly on the cheek. It's the first time we've hung out since I ended things, though we've seen each other around a fair bit, and I'd half expected her to not turn up tonight. Seeing her now makes me realise how much I miss her. A few moments later the doorbell rings again and there's Monika with a bunch of flowers.

"Happy birthday darling." She hugs me and then makes a beeline for Stevie. Wine bottles get opened and beer caps are popped, Chanelle plugs her phone into the stereo and puts on some tunes, and I feel myself start to relax. The doorbell goes again and I answer it to Elin, the Swedish butch I met in Spain, with a smokey-eyed woman called Frederique on her arm—"Just call me Freddie," she says in a husky French accent. By some miracle most of the

people on my invitation list have actually turned up, which is virtually unheard of in London. Everyone says they're starving so after a quick stint of mingling I disappear into the kitchen with Chanelle to dish up the curry.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck," I moan once we're out of earshot, leaning against the wall in a mock swoon. "Stevie looks so hot tonight. Remind me why I dumped her?"

"Because you think you're in love with some numpty called Kate, that's why." Chanelle flicks me with the tea-towel.

"Yeah, well I might need to review that decision tonight. How's my hair look?" I give it a bit of a fluff, squinting at my reflection in the oven door. Chanelle hands me a pot of steaming curry.

"You look fine," she says, rolling her eyes.

I've had a change of heart since this morning's frantic window-opening frenzy. I've let go of my concerns about climate change and instead decided to crank the central heating for the night. It's my birthday and I'll be damned if my bed's going to be the only warm place in the house. So thanks to my decision to fuck the planet and also thanks to the way-too-spicy curry which makes everyone consume even more of the free-flowing cheap plonk than usual, the pile of coats, jackets and assorted knitted accessories keeps growing throughout the evening until we are all wearing considerably less. I love a good shoulder-perve and Jack in particular, lanky in his tight jeans and black beanie, has stripped back to a white singlet and is showing off some deliciously nasty-looking tats. My mind leaps automatically, imagining that pornographic mermaid jumping and twitching as he flexes his muscles, pounding me with his fist. Next to him, Monika and Stevie are engrossed in deep conversation. I feel a sharp pang of jealousy because, despite the fact that I told Stevie firmly ages ago that I wasn't interested in a relationship, she's still the most fuckable person in the room.

Something to do with her dark eyes, that brooding look that still just makes me want to please her. That, and her incredibly long brown fingers. Jita is next to me but talking to Chanelle, giving her caning tips I suspect, from the way she's gesturing with her arms. Jita looks like some kind of angelic goddess with her big rolling hips, long flowing skirts and her hennaed hair, her sandalwood oils and her quiet voice, but looks can be deceiving. Jita is a formidable top, though you'd never know it to look at her now, and I've seen her in her leathers at parties, eyes flashing, brow focused, two or three subs kneeling eagerly at her

feet. On my other side are Elin and Freddie. Elin and I had a threesome at a sex party with her primary partner Joss, who is based in Berlin, but for some reason the dynamic between us never sat quite right. Her date, on the other hand, is simmering in the corner like a pot of spiced honey. I feel dizzy just looking at her. Her lips are the same colour as my Jacobs Creek shiraz, her hair is black and thick to her shoulders, and her breasts keep threatening to tumble out of her top every time she leans over to grab a handful of crisps. But from the body language between the two of them Freddie's definitely out of bounds tonight. There's something comforting (and also enticingly destructive) about knowing that every single person in the room is a potential fuck, I think contentedly, leaning back in my chair.

There's a lull in the various conversations happening around the room when Chanelle loudly announces that she had a great wank over my boss the other day.

"No disrespect to mothers or nuthin, but that Chastity Cummings is such a MILF. I came three times in one session, no batteries needed."

This somehow gets the ball rolling on masturbation confessions. Freddie recounts the time she found a home-made porno when she was babysitting for her high-school teacher, the story all the hotter thanks to her accent, and then Monika tells an animated tale of when a burglar tried to break in through her window while she was wanking.

"I leapt up and smacked his hand with my vibrator so hard that he let go of the window and fell down into the bushes, right. But the worst bit was when me mam came running in to see what the commotion was about and the old chook saw me standing there with me vibrator still buzzing in me 'and!"

Chanelle laughs so hard that wine spurts out of her nose.

"I used to have a bit of a peeping Tom fantasy, but I think you've just killed it for me," Jack tells Monika.

"What, you wanted to be watched, or you wanted to be the Tom?"

"What do you think, darling?" Jack winks and mimes wanking his cock while doing creepy heavy breathing in her ear. She screams and slaps him away, blushing.

"I used to wank ova me nan's neighbour," Shaz tells us all. "I'd hide behind the curtains in the upstairs bathroom, starin' at her arse while she did the weedin'."

"Hang on, doesn't yer nan live in a nursing home?" Jack asks with a smirk.

"Fuck you." Shaz gives Jack the finger and we all laugh.

“Don’t worry, Shaz, we’ve all got our secret dirty fantasies.”

“Yeah, mine’s rubber gloves. Being fisted by someone wearing rubber gloves,” says Jita.

“As in latex gloves, yeah?” Chanelle asks.

“No, like washing up gloves. The big thick clumsy yellow ones. You need a lot of lube to make that one work, believe me.”

“I used to date a woman who had a fantasy about pap smears,” says Elin.

“Oh yeah, I get that,” I say. “I used to fantasise about having a baby when I was a kid. Like, the birthing part of it.” No one says anything. Shit. Maybe I’m the only one who’s had this much to drink. “I mean, it was the first thing I knew about sex, right? Sex was what made a baby.”

“Not in the queer community,” someone jokes.

“Depends on what you call sex,” says Stevie. “We all come from someone’s orgasm, whether it’s a turkey baster job or a quicky in the back of the car at the drive-in.” She smiles across at me and my heart pinches gratefully.

“Anyway, so the first thing I knew about my cunt was that it was there to give birth to a baby,” I plough on, figuring that I’ve come this far so I may as well finish, “and so somehow the pleasure I got from playing with myself got tangled up with the idea of giving birth.”

“Man, you is fucked up, woman. That’s some screwy shit,” Shaz shakes her head.

“I dunno, Shaz, think about it,” pipes up Jita. “All that blood and gore, the screaming, your cunt being stretched wide open and on display for everyone to see, legs in stirrups...it sounds like a hot dungeon scene if you remove the baby from the picture.”

“Remember Mahla’s performance at Shackles?” Elin asks the room. A few people nod. “She did it when she was about eight months pregnant, ja. She had this slave on a leash at her feet, and she stuck a hitachi in the slave’s mouth and straddled her head so that her leather kilt covered the girl. It was obvious what she was doing with that vibrator, but you couldn’t actually see.”

“Yeah, it was pretty intense,” Monika pipes up. “Mahla was standing there with her big pregnant belly making all these sex noises, except it was also really similar to what it would sound like if she was giving birth. The closer she got to an orgasm, the more I thought we’d have to call a fucking ambulance.”

"Wow, sounds hot," I say. And instantly I miss Mahla, even though it's been almost half a year since I last saw her. "Anyone ever heard about birthgasms before?" I start to ask the room, but Chanelle interrupts.

"Did you know," she starts, and I groan because I know this tone of voice, it's the "I'm an intellectual wanker" voice she puts on when she's trying to get people to take notice of her and prove she's not just a little twerp, "did you know that we're attracted to people who smell like our parents?"

"What, like ciggies and salt n vinegar crisps? Ooh yeah baby, come to mumma," Shaz cracks up, slapping her thigh as she laughs.

"No, you twat, like the hormones and shit, the whatchyacallit? The pheromones."

"So Freud was right," Monika says dryly. "We do all just wanna fuck our parents."

"Well I know I'd never say no to a Daddy," I say, shooting looks at Shaz, Jack and Stevie in quick succession. May as well cast my net wide.

"Ah. But what about a Mummy?" Freddie murmurs from the couch.

"A what?"

"A Mummy, cherie. How can you have Daddies without Mummies? Or more importantly, how can you have good little submissive Boys and Girls without a Mummy to teach them their manners, and cuddle them when they cry?" she purrs, stroking Elin's hair with one hand.

"Mummies? Ew. So not hot," I screw up my face in disgust. "There's nothing hot about mums."

"Except for Chastity Cummings," Chanelle interjects.

"And correct me if I'm wrong," points out Jita, "but didn't you fuck a mummy in Spain?"

"It's different. Mahla's a Daddy," I retort.

"Yeah, a Daddy wif tits an a babby," Shaz snorts.

"I'm with Meg," Jack joins in. "I don't wanna think about my mum when I'm in the bedroom."

"But you do want to think of your father?" Freddie counters, a triumphant smirk playing on the edges of her mouth. "You're a Daddy, oui. So you are saying to me that the women who sleep with you secretly want to fuck their fathers?"

"No, but..." Jack flounders.

"You are all supposed to be feminists," Freddie chides. "Why is a strong, sexy,

maternal dom something disgusting? This is sad.”

No one knows quite what to say.

“Everyone needs a Mummy,” Elin pipes up, looking adoringly at Freddie. “Daddy might bring home the bacon, but it’s Mummy who heats up the pan.”

The room erupts into cat-calls as Elin blushes and buries her face in Freddie’s cleavage. Something about the gesture reminds me unexpectedly of Ramon, the Catalan boy I fucked while Stevie was away.

“So what was it like, shagging someone with a baby?” Jita looks at me questioningly.

“Hot. Hot and tricky. Mahla does attachment parenting, which meant Lilith slept next to us in the tent instead of in a cot,” I explain reluctantly. “So it kind of limited our play.”

“How’d’ya manage to fuck, then, if she was always there with you?” Jita asks.

All eyes are on me.

“How do you think?” I ask, getting defensive.

“Innit kinda wee-rd, hafing sex wif a baybee nex t’yas?” Shaz looks disgusted.

“I guess. Yeah, of course it was. But Lilith was too young to know what was going on.”

“So you’re saying she was too young to know the difference between a flogger and a cane, and that made it ok?” Shaz challenges, and everyone cackles.

“Shaz! As if. We didn’t do impact play around her. No SM, just sex.”

“Ah,” Stevie chips in, “so you’re saying she was old enough to know the difference between the sound you make when you’re being spanked, and the racket you make when you’re cumming.” It’s not a question. She raises one eyebrow at me from across the room and instantly I am again naked on Jack’s kitchen table, ejaculating all over the Moroccan hand woven place-mats, screaming the house down as Stevie fucks me with a rolling pin.

Everyone knows this famous story because an hour later we were woken up by the cops banging on the door, investigating a domestic violence report from the elderly Pakistani neighbours in the flat above. Seeing as the neighbours also happened to be friends of his father’s, Jack had made me explain myself to them the next morning to clear up any lingering concerns that they might have had about him being a wife-basher. I give Stevie the finger and she holds my gaze, smirking, and despite all the teasing laughter I feel myself starting to get wet. Perhaps there is hope for us yet.

“Ok, who needs more wine? I bloody do.” I scurry off to the kitchen amid a giggling chorus of “pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake”.

While I'm bent over the fridge trying to find another bottle of wine amongst the cauliflowers Chanelle skipped out of the bins behind our local Tesco's on a drunken mission home from the pub last week, someone comes into the room and stands behind me. Stevie. I freeze, hoping my arse looks good from this angle. A hand wraps around the back of my knee, fingertips brushing my inner thigh, and slowly runs up my leg, up under the skirt of my dress, up till her palm is cupping the crease of my arse and her fingers are resting lightly against my crotch. Slowly she grazes the stub of her fingernail against the cotton, finding my clit, teasing. Instantly, I want more. I squirm against the light pressure of her fingernail, desperate for more friction.

"Stop."

I stop. It's not Stevie. From my position bent over the fridge I look down at the floor. Behind my two pink high heels are a pair of industrial leather boots. The same kind of boots all the butches in the UK seem to be wearing at the moment. The hand removes itself from my now-damp inner thigh, dismissively spans me on the bottom, and then the boots step backwards and start to walk away. I whip my head around to identify my assailant but in the process I bang my head on the fridge door, missing my chance.

I am trying not to shake as I walk back into the lounge-room. I feel like all eyes are on me, but whose eyes are the ones who know what just happened in there? I keep my head down as I move around the room refilling everyone's glasses, surreptitiously checking everyone's shoes. When I get to Shaz she lifts her glass.

"Cheers, babe." She winks. The boot fits. I give her a flirty smile and myself a quick congratulatory pat on the back. Score.

I sit down and try to join in the conversation but my mind keeps returning to the feeling of her hand cupping my arse, fingers flirting with my clit.

"Meg. Naughty girl."

I start, and look up.

"You've run out of loo paper." Jack's standing in the doorway with an empty toilet roll in his hand as way of demonstration. He's got one hand provocatively planted on his hip, teasing glint in his eye, and his tight black jeans are stuffed into a pair of, you guessed it, industrial leather boots. "That's just earned you an extra twenty birthday spankings, I'd say."

The lights go off at this point and then the glow of candles emerges from the kitchen and everyone starts to sing happy birthday. Chanelle, bless her heart, has somehow secretly made me a vegan cheesecake. She's got a teary look in her eye.

"I'm really gunna miss you, mate," she says, shyly presenting me with the cake.

"I'm still here for another two months. Slow down."

After I've blown the candles out and served it up, Jack clears his throat.

"It's high time I put you over my knee, my girl."

I squeal delightedly and trot over to his chair and lie down across his knees obediently. He lifts up the skirt of my new green polkadot dress and slaps my cheeks lightly with his palm, warming up my skin. Once he's got me ready he orders me to count each spank out loud. He's supposed to stop at thirty of course, but somewhere around the twenty mark I let go of the pain and dissolve into his lap. He senses my acquiescence and declares to the room that it's their turn now. Freddie steps up first.

"May I?" she asks Jack. She squats down in front of me and strokes my cheek. "This is going to hurt, baby girl," she says softly, "but can you be good for Mummy and make her proud?" I nod, and close my eyes waiting for the spank. Instead, she reaches her hands into my dress and finds my nipples, squeezes them hard, and twists. My eyes fly open in surprise as the pain shoots into my fingertips and toes like an electric shock as she twists harder and harder and harder. "Good girl, good girl," she murmurs, and, eyes locked in mine, she ever so slightly raises her eyebrows in mock concern. "Poor baby, is Mummy hurting you?" I whimper, close to tears, pretty sure my nipples are about to fall off, but somehow I feel like I can trust her, like Mummy really does know best, so I breathe through the pain and everything but her eyes starts to melt out of view. Finally she releases me and I fall down moaning over Jack's knees, hands wrapped protectively over my nipples. Freddie lifts up my face and nestles it between her magnificent bosom, stroking my hair. "Good girl," she croons. I stay in that position while the parade of birthday spanks proceeds, resting in Freddie's cleavage as she soothes me, holding me as I float in a haze, and somehow I feel so safe, so held, as though everything is going to be ok because Mummy is here.

Chanelle grins wickedly when it eventually gets to her turn. I've never let her top me before. She holds up one hand. "Hang on a minute everybody!" Sensing a shift in the mood, Freddie kisses me on the top of the head and releases me and steps away. Chanelle returns a

moment later with a bunch of snake beans she's found in the back of the fridge and proceeds to whip me with them til they fall apart.

"Hey! She got more than one spank in there!" I complain, the heady fog lifting and indignation rushing in, but Jack tells me to shut my mouth. He finishes me off with a few final weighty slaps, "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty!" he triumphantly declares, even though it's probably closer to the seventy mark by now, and as soon as he lets me go I race off to the kitchen myself and return with some spring onions and a leek. "Payback time, Chanelle." I slap her on the arse with the leeks as she tries to wriggle away, and then Jita grabs the spring onions and the next thing you know Chanelle is stripped half-naked with her hands up against the wall while everyone takes turns using whatever they can get their hands on—spatulas, wooden spoons, frying pans, shoes. Elin and Freddie are ignoring all the mayhem and have started kissing on the couch, and I am watching Monika eyeball Stevie when I am grabbed from behind.

"In the bedroom. Now."

My knees nearly buckle under me but I obediently walk towards my room. There's a hand at the back of my head guiding me, and when we get into my room the hand pushes me down so I am kneeling on the floor. Only then do I look up and see that both Jack and Shaz are standing above me. Jack unzips his fly and pulls out his cock, forcing it into my open mouth. I suck obediently, heart booming in my chest, clit pulsing wildly. Shaz moves behind me and holds my head in her hands, dictating how fast and how deep I suck. She growls at me to suck it harder, bitch, and I do, my throat opening to take Jack's cock deeper into my throat. He smiles when he sees me gag.

"That's my girl. Suck it for Daddy."

Shaz pulls me up by my hair and bends me over the corner of my bed. Together they pull down my knickers and spread my legs apart. I can feel fingers at my pussy lips, spreading me wide, and then the head of Shaz's cock as it presses against my opening. Jack bends down and whispers in my ear. "Nice and wet, you little slut. You going to be a good girl for Daddy and take that cock quietly?" I nod eagerly. My lips stretch wide as the thick head of Shaz's cock pushes hard into me, hard until I give, and then it slides in fast. I cry out in surprise and Jack slaps me in the face. "I thought I told you to be quiet." He's split my lip. I taste the blood in delight. Shaz pounds into me from behind while Jack holds me still with his arm around my neck, the crook of his elbow pressing against my windpipe until I am dizzy and desperate for

air. Then he releases my throat and forces my face down into the quilt. I can smell baked beans and corn chips and despite the intense hotness of the scene I crack a cheeky grin. Best birthday ever. The fucking gets faster, building into a frenzy, and then I hear Shaz groan and abruptly stop. I can feel her legs shaking against my buttocks, and I am pleased. "It's your turn with the little whore," she pants after a minute. Jack pulls me onto the bed and while Shaz pins my wrists down above my head Jack straddles my mouth. I take him into my mouth between the straps of his harness as he jerks himself off, slapping his cock against my face and rubbing himself all over my mouth and chin til he cums, sharp and hard. Shaz's stroking the head of her cock and I'm wondering whether she's about to fuck me again when she fixes on something on my bookshelf and grins. "I've got an idea," she tells Jack. He follows her gaze and then grins himself, climbs off me and grabs Chanelle's kewpie doll and a bottle of lube. "Hold her for me." Shaz opens my legs as wide as they will go and then spreads my lips with her fingers. Jack covers the head of the doll in lube and then starts trying to push it into my cunt. I cry out in pain—it's too big, bigger than a fist, for sure. Jack slows down and works at me with his fingers, opening me up bit by bit til he has his whole fist turning and grinding inside me. Then he pulls out and replaces his hand with the doll, pushing insistently until I open up and suck it in, first the head, stretching me wide, then the awkward bumps of its arms and legs. By this point I am so far gone I barely know what is happening to me, straining, crying out and panting and red in the face, and there are fingers on my clit and fingers in my cunt holding onto the doll as I gather up speed, rise to the stop of the wave and then cum in a rush, bearing down, pushing fingers, arms, legs and head out as I scream one last time, arch up and fall back onto the bed, Jack kneeling between my legs, grinning, holding a doll slick with lube.

"It's a girl," he says, grinning cheekily.

The three of us fall asleep holding each other but I wake up in the night with a tight bladder and a desperate thirst so I wriggle out from between the two and pad into the bathroom. As I pass Ola's room I can see Elin and Freddie curled up together asleep on her bed. In the lounge, Jita and Chanelle are fucking quietly by the light of a candle, amidst bits of snake bean, leek, and spring onion. One of my yellow washing up gloves is lying next to them on the floor. Monika and Stevie are the only two to have left, and I realise with a thud that that is the end of that.

The next morning after everyone has crawled off to their own homes, Chanelle and I sit amongst the bruised vegetables eating the leftover curry.

"Jita is an absolute babe," she sighs. "I never thought I'd manage to score her."

"Was the sex good?"

"You know, I think we actually made love."

I pretend to vomit into my bowl. "Made love? Excuse me?"

"Shut it. I really like her. She gets me, you know?"

"Wow. The great untouchable Chanelle has been touched by Cupid's bow. What are you going to do about Green Mohawk and your other gazillion lovers?"

"I didn't say I was going to give up polyamory and move to the suburbs and have two point four kids. I'm not a loser like you."

I'm looking after Mona and Donald the next day (and still nursing the tail-end of a birthday hangover) when Yvonne pops out of her study for a quick cuppa. The kids are playing in the lounge because it's too wet to go outside, so Yvonne comes and joins us on the carpet.

"You know, sometimes I look at how big they're both getting and I can't even imagine how I ever fit them inside me," she says.

The tips of my ears go pink as I am reminded of the kewpie doll incident, and I busy myself wiping Mona's nose.

"I've been thinking about my nanna's generation, lately, and about how stuffy they were about things like sex. I wonder what it was like to give birth back then. You know, with the men waiting outside smoking cigars, and the women being all secretive and hush-hush."

"For some of those women childbirth was probably the first time anyone other than their husband had seen their..."—I nearly say cunts, forgetting where I am, but catch myself just in time—"their you-know-whats since childhood."

Donald is excited that Yvonne has joined us in the middle of the day and is climbing all over her, trying to get her attention.

"My nanna gave birth to my dad at her mother's house," she says, wincing as he throws himself into her lap, accidentally kicking her in the face. "They had such a formal relationship, my nanna and my great-grandmother. I can't imagine Nan being comfortable enough there to scream the bloody house down, like I did."

“My gran was trying to talk me out of having a baby by telling me how painful childbirth is,” I tell Yvonne, and laugh. “I guess back then there was less choice about whether or not you reproduced. It was just kind of expected. I don’t think she’s quite got her head around the fact I’m never going to accidentally get pregnant, but that I’m going out of my way to make it happen.”

Yvonne puts her empty cup down on the coffee table, staggers to her feet with Donald clinging around her shoulders, and piggybacks him around the room as I perve indulgently at her bouncy arse. I am relieved to discover that my feminist values are still intact. I definitely find this mother hot.

* *

Once the excitement of my birthday threesome wears off I start to feel a bit despondent again —Kate hasn’t liked any of my posts for days now, and as expected, Jeremy has also emailed asking if we can put our donor plans on ice while he waits for the right time to bring it up with Teresa. In my mind I’ve already kissed him goodbye anyway—I’ve done my crying and I’ve worn the dress that I was going to meet his mum in to a party at Jita’s house instead. Winter has settled its fat bum on the couch and is refusing to get up, and Christmas is looming like a drag queen in red and green eight-inch high heels. The supermarkets are chockas with tinsel and an old CD of WHAM!, Boney M and Mariah Carey carols seems to have got stuck on repeat. No wonder the British Empire fell—judging by the Christmas music they’ve been overlooked by the millennium and are still stuck back in 1998. To make matters worse, I’m not even getting laid at the moment. Jack’s busy with some twink he’s got staying with him from Sweden, and Shaz has seemed a bit distant. We’d made plans a few weeks back to make the most of the Christmas crowds and do a spot of shoplifting at Harrods, but she’d made up some excuse at the last minute. I suspect it’s got something to do with feeling like she should be more loyal to Stevie. Not that I’m ever alone, though—my old flatmate Danny has turned up from Sydney with the obligatory gifts of a jar of Vegemite and some pawpaw ointment and is now crashing with me for a few days en route to visit family for the festive season, and Chanelle’s squat has folded so she’s back as well. No peace

for the wicked, as my grandmother would say. I turn up to my weekly appointment with Mrs Chen and even she has some Santa hat earrings on and the Michael Bolton panpipes temporarily replaced with a Christmas album from one of the *Britain's Got Talent* runners-up. She takes my pulse, gets me to stick out my tongue, and then pats my hand reassuringly. "You need to find yourself a man quick smart." I'm about to remind her that I'm gay when she clarifies, in her usual cryptic way—"Your egg is on the National Express and there's no traffic on the M4."

When I get home the flat is unusually quiet. Danny and Chanelle are engrossed in a game of scrabble and Ola is taking a bath. I throw myself down on the couch.

"I need some sperm."

"Sure thing, honey. I've got plenty right here," Danny murmurs absentmindedly as he carefully places all his seven letters down, spelling out "hornier" on the board.

"I'm serious, Danny. Mrs Chen says it's peak hour and there's no traffic jams."

"Now you've lost me."

Chanelle rolls her eyes. "It's her hocus-pocus fertility witch that she sees religiously, at two hundred quid a pop."

"You wanna get up the duff? Seriously?" Danny looks up, surprised.

"Yep. I had a donor lined up but then he went and got himself a Catholic girlfriend."

"Sweetie, why didn't you just ask me? I've got loads of practice shooting my load." He winks at me flirtatiously.

"Really? You'd be interested?"

He shrugs. "Sure. Why not? I'm hurt that you never asked."

"I dunno...I guess I didn't ask because I thought you'd just say no. I couldn't handle the idea of being rejected by someone I love." I give him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. He wipes it off with exaggerated repulsion.

"I kinda like the idea of passing my fabulousness on to the communal gene pool," he says.

"Though I can't guarantee it's any good—I've been banging queens and fairies for over a decade now and none of them have ever popped out a sprog. Either I'm shooting blanks or we've been doing something else wrong."

And just like that, I have a donor. Sitting there in my living-room, and with twenty-four hours to go till ovulation.

It feels kinda funny talking about this stuff with an old friend but we stay up late discussing the fine print and by the next day we've written up a DIY contract and got Ola and Chanelle to be the witnesses. Then we have to talk about the sperm, which feels even weirder.

"Where do you want to do it? The bathroom, or my room, or the kitchen?" I ask, fully aware that what I am really asking is, *Where in my house are you going to jerk yourself off, and can you please wash your hands afterwards before touching the furniture?*

"Your bedroom, sweetie. There's better mood lighting in there."

"Ok. I'll wait out here with Chanelle, then, and I'll go in when you're done and do the insemination."

"I don't have to be there when you do it, do I?" he asks, looking suddenly horrified.

"Fuck no. Please don't be. Go for a walk or something."

That afternoon Jita, who is a bit of a part-time herbalist and has somehow got wind of my plans (all signs of course pointing to Chanelle) brings over an assortment of tinctures and teas. What with the five capsules, three powders and two syrups the fertility guru already has me on, it's a wonder there's any room left inside me for normal food. As she's leaving she mentions another friend she helped to get pregnant, who had been trying unsuccessfully for years.

"She was taking everything I had given her but nothing was working. The thing that did it in the end," she says, "was some charmed honey. A witchy friend of mine makes it in San Francisco—I smuggled some back on the plane with me after Pride and within a week she was up the duff."

It sounds like some reworked version of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie the dyke bee charmer stirring pots of honey with cinnamon sticks and muttering magic words. But hell, I take her email address all the same: if I ever find myself in San Francisco and I still haven't succeeded I'll give the honey a red-hot go. It strikes me that, even in this day and age where we know exactly where babies come from and all the different variations on how they can be made and the different technologies that can help make that happen, there is still so much superstition surrounding fertility. There is a sense of magic about conceiving, which is perhaps why Chanelle's put so much effort into the event. She's got a bit carried away with the idea and has been bugging me all day about a song list, she's offered to do my hair, and I've had to put a firm stop to rose-petals being strewn all over the bed. She's even worked

out what to get Danny to spoof into—a daggy pink mug with “Be my Valentine” written on the side in curly letters.

“It’s perfect. It’s totally romantic,” says Chanelle.

But she’s wrong—there’s nothing romantic about syringes and thermometers and cups and donor consent forms and peeing on a stick. And hell, if the home jobs don’t work I know it’ll just get worse—blood tests and counselling and injections and drugs, and then some perfect stranger in a white coat getting the sperm out of the freezer and squirting it up my cunt while two assistants hold my legs open. Romantic conceptions are a heteronormative fantasy, not that straight people necessarily have the petals and the music, of course. I wouldn’t mind betting that a significantly high percentage of pregnancies have started in a ute outside a pub while a cover band plays AcaDaca in the background, but right now I’d happily take that over a daggy pink mug.

Late that afternoon the app on my phone announces that my fertile time has begun. Chanelle ceremoniously hands Danny the mug and he disappears into my room. We sit around swirling our cups of tea while I try not to think about the fact that on the other side of the wall right now, Danny has his cock out on my bed and is pulling himself off. About five minutes later he scurries out. He won’t look me in the eye but mutters, “Ok, it’s ready”, and then buries his head in the fridge, looking frantically for a beer. I walk tentatively into my room. It feels unfamiliar all of a sudden. Chanelle’s lit a few candles and there’s some ambient trance playing on the iPod and I realise that I feel lonely. Chanelle had offered to be in there with me—she’d even offered to squirt it in, but I’d politely declined. I just can’t shake the feeling that there should be a lover here with me, that I should be doing this with someone I love, that this should be a joint journey and not a solo ride. I don’t want to look at the pink cup, sitting on my bedside table. It scares me. It looks so serious, sitting there next to my lamp, theoretically innocuous but in reality containing the possibility for a new life in its pearly depths, like some kind of smelly crystal ball. I’d forgotten how gross sperm smells. I try and pretend it’s not there, but really, I need to accept that it is and quickly, coz I need to get this stuff inside me, stat. Strike while the iron’s hot, before the spunk gets cold. I force myself to be brave and take a quick peek. I’m surprised at how little there is. It’s hard to believe that piddly little bit of fluid has the power to create a person. I take the cup and the syringe and I go over to the bed. I lie back and think of England. I think about the lions at Trafalgar Square, I think about the brown

chill of the Thames, I think about that weird new building that some people call The Bullet but others call The Cock, and I lie back with my legs raised, propped up against the wall and I stick the syringe as far up inside me as possible and push in the plunger and then attempt to have an orgasm. I'm trying to fill my head with beautiful thoughts while I play with myself with the vibrator, but I'm just not that turned on. I've just shoved a syringe full of my mate's orgasm up me and we've never even kissed. In fact I feel kinda like a stranger's walked up to me and stuck their finger in my bellybutton; like a taboo has just been broken, but not in a fun way. I could try and eroticise this but I don't want to eroticise something involving Danny. We're nonsexual friends and it feels non-consensual thinking filthy thoughts while his cum is inside me, but I know I need to cum to help my cervix contract so that the sperm can be sucked up into my tubes, and channelling goddesses and deities and pure thoughts is really not doing it for me so I grab my phone and hit up some porn. I feel that this should be a beautiful spiritual moment so I start with some nice gentle lesbian stuff. None of it does anything for me. I switch to a queer porn site, PC but also perverse. It's better, but I'm still not getting close. And then I start to get worried that if I leave it too long the sperm will start leaking out of me somehow so I revert to my usual foolproof backup and hit my favourites button and there's the cheerleader gang-bang site on my screen and suddenly I'm hot for it, I'm racing towards that finish line and goddamit I'm about to start a life while looking at a skinny blonde with fake tits being hammered in both holes and her mouth and it's too late for the goddesses and the deities because then there's the creampie scene and I'm cumming in a rush, and whaddya know, it's mission accomplished. The next job is to lie with my legs up against the wall for at least half an hour so Danny's wrigglers can hang out around my cervix and dare each other to go in. As the orgasm fades and the "Be my Valentine" mug comes back into focus on the pillow to the right of my head, I remember again that sperm really stinks. I am lying with my mate's sperm inside me, smelling his orgasm. Wrong doesn't even begin to describe it. And to top it off I'm stuck in this position for the next half an hour and there's no way of moving the cup while keeping my legs up in the air, so I have to just lie there next to it thinking pure thoughts and trying to ignore the stink.

* *

The next night we have an impromptu dinner party and there's six people wanting tea and only six mugs, which means I have to use the pink one. I give it to Shaz. She deserves it for standing me up three weeks earlier on our Harrods shoplifting date.

* *

When I have my usual Tuesday afternoon appointment with Mrs Chen the following week she takes my pulse and shakes her head.

"Sorry Meg, no lucky this time." Sure enough, two weeks after our home job to the dot, my period turns up triumphantly. I try to not feel too disappointed. Danny's up north with his family by now so I send him an email and he replies by promising we can keep trying when I get back to Oz in a couple of months. I throw myself into work and juggling stalking Kate and the occasional dalliance with Jack, when he's not busy sucking cock, that is, and put it on the back-burner again. I also start planning the group trip to Stonehenge, which is happening the weekend before I fly home and is supposed to be kinda like a farewell party.

Two and a half weeks before my flight back to Australia I'm on the tube on my way home from seeing a regular—the potty-mouthed artist who likes to call me a little whore while he's fucking me (yes, you are correct, I am indeed a whore, I always feel like replying)—when I get a text from Danny:

Fucked up my flight deets, can i crash at yrs tonight—early flight home tomor

I write back saying no problem, and stop by at the office on the way home for some wine.

I wake up in the morning with a cracking headache. When I'm brave enough to open my eyes I see a syringe and an empty cup lying next to me on the bed. It takes a while to figure it out but the wetness between my legs seals the deal. Oh god. We didn't, did we? It starts to come back to me—dancing on the tables at The Dev, getting kicked out for dancing on the tables at The Dev, arguing with the minicab driver, finding a forgotten bottle of Perry in the cupboard, glancing at the calendar on the fridge and then climbing onto yet another table and

triumphantly announcing to Danny and the cat that, ladies and gentlemen, I am right at this moment producing an egg, and would you like it poached, scrambled, or fried. The rest is a blur, but not hard to piece together. Not the most romantic scenario—a quick “Wham, bam, thank you, vibrator,” after a big night out. Chanelle will be so disappointed—no Enya on the stereo this time. I walk gingerly into the lounge and find Danny blissfully passed out on the couch. I wonder if he’ll remember. I turn the kettle on and scramble through the drawers for some Berocca.

“Coffeeeeeeeeee. Yes pleeeeeeease. Meg, you’re the woman of my dreams,” Danny whines sleepily from the couch.

“Men usually tell me that just before they’re about to spurt their cum inside me, not the next morning.”

“Huh?” Danny farts, rolls over and falls off the couch. He stumbles to his feet looking like I feel: terrible. “Seriously, that couch is like something from *Little Shop of Horrors*. I nearly lost an arm.” He’s wearing a saggy pair of undies and nothing else and I look quickly away and focus on making him a coffee. I don’t want to look at the bulge that’s responsible for the stuff leaking out of me right now, dribbling down my right thigh under my dressing gown. “How drunk were you last night?” I ask, as lightly as I can manage.

“Totally wankered, as the poms would say,” he announces proudly, and stumbles off to the bathroom.

“But not so wankered that you couldn’t get it up, huh,” I yell after him.

He walks slowly back into the room about five seconds later with a strange look on his face.

“Did I fuck someone I don’t remember? Oh, please tell me it was that nasty chav bouncer with the scar on his chin. I’d deliver a load of spunk into his spotty arse any day. Royal male express.” He cackles loudly at his pun.

“Not his arse. My cunt.”

“Huh?”

“Your sperm. Is in me. Right now.” I hand him his coffee. He looks like he’s going to be sick.

“Did WE...?!”

“NO! Christ. No way.” This is weird. We don’t usually talk about his sperm over our morning coffees. “No, but the pink mug’s on my bed, and you know what that means. It means you and I threw a private insemination party last night.”

“Shit. Oh yeah. It’s kinda coming back to me now. Well, here’s to foetal alcohol syndrome.”

Danny clinks his mug against mine. I sit down on the couch and start giggling.

“We’re shocking! What kind of a mother am I going to make, huh.”

“Too drunk to fuck, but not too drunk to aim it into a tea cup.” He almost sounds proud.

“They might have made it into the teacup, but I bet they were too pissed to find their way into the mothership.”

We both laugh, but as the coffee starts to work its magic I start to fret. “What if the maggoted sperm make a sick baby?” I start picturing drunk, mutant sperm wriggling into my fresh, healthy eggs, and my eyes well up.

“Seriously, Meg, how many babies are conceived when the parents are shitfaced?”

“Shitloads.”

“Precisely. It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but how many babies are conceived when the parents are shitfaced and they don’t even fuck?”

“Us queers always like to do things differently.”

That evening I walk Danny and his backpack to the train—he’s on his way to Heathrow for a midnight flight back home. Even though I’ll be doing the same thing in sixteen days’ time I envy him. I’m done with London. I’m impatient to get home. I’ve had enough of the cold, of not seeing the sun for days at a time, of having to go to a specialty shop to buy something as simple as jasmine rice. I want to get home and see Kate and start the next chapter of my life, whether that includes her, or getting over her and moving on. It’s time to stop treading water. “So I’ll see you back home soon, huh.” I give Danny a big hug and a slap on the bum. “I’ll let you know in the next few weeks if we were a success last night, or just a drunken fumble.” “I’m feeling really used. I can’t believe you only wanted me for my jiz, and then cast me out to the carnivorous couch.”

“Yeah, well I can’t believe that I might be the next Madonna, conceiving in an immaculate conception right here in Hackney, and neither of us even remember.”

“Bitch. As if I’m that forgettable. Love ya. I’ll send you the chiropractor’s bill in the mail.”

“See you soon. And hey, thanks for the sperm.”

Before I leave London myself I manage to squeeze in one last appointment with the guru. Mrs Chen greets me at the door with a cheeky smile.

"Meghan, look at this, hey. My daughter say no good for old lady. But my daughter gone now, unipersity in Leeds. Leab her mama all alone. So time to hab fun!" She pulls down the top of her blouse and I see a flash of red lace and black satin. "And under here matching too." She motions to her skirt and winks. "It's year of tiger, Megan, but I am cougar. Cougar good hunter."

"You're going to go get yourself a man? But you told me men are no good."

She cackles. "Old man no good. Cougar needs young man. Strong, healthy. Good qi." She winks again. "Come."

We go into the treatment room, tiny and grubby, the same panpipes Michael Bolton remix playing that's been playing every single time I've come here over the past six months, except at Christmas.

"I tried again last week, Mrs Chen." I sit down on the plastic chair and offer up my wrists. She looks me cunningly in the eye while taking my pulse, gets me to stick my tongue out, and then shakes her head.

"No baby. But kidney bery weak. You hab diarrhoea this week?" She wanders off to a drawer and starts pulling out acupuncture needles. Her bedside manner sometimes leaves a lot to be desired. I hadn't let myself hope too much, especially considering the circumstances of the last attempt, but still, something inside me shrivels up and goes hard, like a plastic bag that's been thrown on a fire. "Relax. Be happy," she tells me when she sees my face. "Baby needs happy body. Soon, Megan. Soon baby will come."

Chapter Seventeen

Homo Sweet Homo

On the long plane trip home I can't sleep, and I am deeply regretting not shelling out the extra few hundred to fly with an airline that has functional life jackets and tellies that work. The flight-map says we still have four hours left to Sydney, four hours til I am in the same city as Kate, and I'm bored stiff. Bored and agitated. I hate planes with their fiddly little space-saver systems that mean that there's never anywhere to put your legs or your hand luggage. I can't sit still. To keep my hands busy I fish out my camera and entertain myself with a little slideshow of my year in London, going backwards in time: the gang at Stonehenge, me and Chanelle dressed as Sid and Nancy, Chanelle taking a piss in the garden at Saint Paul's, the gang at my birthday party, Mahla and Lilith in Spain, Stevie smiling, Stevie dancing, and Stevie in red braces and boots at the ska punk gig where I fisted her in the toilets (this photo makes my stomach lurch a little). And then completely forgotten, sandwiched between the refugee rally and a photo of Sam stoned and laughing on his kitchen floor, are three or four photos from the dinner in Shoreditch, the night I met Kate. I scan the images like a gold-panner, seeking out her face in the crowd. Eventually I find her in a group shot and with a thump I realise my mistake. In the photo she's wearing a button-up shirt. I never even saw her neck, the first night we met. I've made the whole thing up.

Back home everything has that strange and slightly depressing familiarity where things have changed, but only slightly. It's like I'm holding up two blueprints of Sydney against a light box, one behind the other, and the shapes aren't quite lining up, so that everything has the sense of being just out of focus but also glaringly bright. I'm staying at Em's place and she's lent me her car for the fortnight, but every chance I get I walk or catch the bus in the vague hope that I might have better luck of running into Kate that way. She lives in the area, so the possibility is not completely ridiculous. Sydney has a thrill of excitement running through it —Kate and I are breathing the same air now, and I can feel the potential for her presence lingering around every corner I turn. But still, a week goes by with no sightings. By Saturday night I am stretched thin with the tension. I am at a warehouse party somewhere in the

industrial depths of Marrickville, watching Em chat up a big bulldyke who's visiting from Melbourne while some atrocious early 90s boy-rock blares from the speaker behind my head. It's a far cry from the dirty beats of the London squat scene I've grown so accustomed to. Chanelle would be highly unimpressed. I feel a twang of nostalgia for the little shit and make a mental note to skype her soon. When I'd left she'd been double-dating Green Mohawk and Jita. The problem was, neither of them knew about the other, so I'm keen to see how that one pans out. The other mates I've come with are talking to some people I don't know so I scan the room for more familiar faces and my heart trips and begins to free-fall when I notice Kate, watching me from across the room. I've waited eleven months for this. She's sprawled casually on a couch, eyes soft from too many beers and with a slight leer on her face. She's checking me out but I pretend not to notice, and even though my heart catches I keep my eyes moving past her. Smooth. Make her come to me. In all honesty, she's not the only babe on my mind tonight. My period's now over a week late. That's not particularly unusual for me and it could just be the stress of coming home, or it could be that Mrs Chen wasn't right, for once. Hence the lemonade. I've had a pregnancy test in my bag all week but the moment's just never seemed right. Something about being back in Sydney, and it being summer, and me being single. Something about wondering how to make it all fit. At least I know I'm looking good. I've got my hair rolled up in a 1950s femme quiff and I'm wearing the tight red pinup dress I bought with my earnings from my final appointment with The Gentleman. My friends are still busy talking about an incident that happened at New Year's, some scandal involving people I don't really know, and I'm feeling a bit left out. A year away from the gossip mill has left me at a huge social disadvantage. My mind keeps wandering, wondering if a regular fisting makes childbirth easier, wondering how big Kate's hands are, wondering how much money heavily pregnant sex workers can charge. Surely there are big bucks in that fetish. I need to do a wee so I haul myself out of my chair and totter off to the bathroom and while I'm there I think, fuck I'd like a drink, why not just do the bloody test now? That way if it's negative I can go and get pissed enough to make the moves on Kate. So I dig it out of my handbag and wee on the stick and, heart thumping, I sit down on the toilet lid to wait the five minutes till the blue line is ready to either appear or not, but someone starts banging on the door and yelling to hurry the fuck up so I panic, wrap the stick in toilet paper and put it in my bag and open the door. It's Kate standing there, waiting for the loo.

“Oh hi. It’s Meg, right?” she says. Jeezus. Are you serious? I’ve been in love with you for the last eleven months, and you’re not even sure of my name?

“Yeah. Cath? We met in Shoreditch, once, didn’t we?” Two can play at this game.

“Kate. Not Cath.”

“Oh right. Sorry.” As we shake hands awkwardly I’m painfully aware that there’s probably wee on my fingers.

“So how did you find London? Oh hey, and what did the guards end up doing with your mate who tried to break in to Stonehenge?” Sprung. She’s been reading my facebook updates. She knows exactly who I am.

“They let her off with a warning after I pretended that I knew Kylie Minogue’s mother. The accent works wonders over there, as you’d know.”

“Well, it’s nice to see you.” She grins and I grin back, but it’s funny, because in real life she seems somehow smaller than I remember. “Hey, wait here while I take a slash, and then I’ll get you a drink, yeah?” She disappears into the toilet and I hurriedly fumble around in my bag for the stick. Somehow, even though my handbag isn’t very big it seems to become this abyss where even large things like apples and cameras get lost for hours at a time. Eventually I find it, but as I am unwrapping the toilet paper the door opens and she comes back out.

“Come on, let me get you a beer.” I shove the stick back into the abyss and trot after her, slightly off-balance in my spiky green heels. I follow her into the laundry, which has become a sort of makeshift bar for the night. The sinks are all full of ice and there’s a stack of plastic cups arranged artlessly on a little table. “Is it good to be back?” she asks, reaching into the ice for a couple of cans.

“It takes a bit of getting used to.” She hands me a can. “Thanks.” I hoist myself up on the bench next to where she’s leaning against the sinks and open my beer. I’m trying to decide whether to make an excuse to go to the toilet again so I can check the stick, or whether to screw it and drink a goddamn beer, one surely won’t hurt, not in the first four weeks when it’s barely the size of a pin-prick at least, but every time I look at her I forget about that stick, I forget about blue lines and instead I think about the blue vein running down the side of her neck. Fuck I’d like to lick it. I try to inch closer towards her while we’re talking but in the humidity my thighs have started to sweat and my skin has got stuck to the bench. Eventually I work up the courage to fake a cough and coincide it with a seemingly spontaneous jerk of

my leg that successfully unsticks my skin. Slowly, moving my leg millimetre by millimetre, my leg is eventually, ever so slightly, touching her side. Thankfully she doesn't pull away. Instead, fraction by painful fraction she gradually presses into me, and somehow, by the time ten minutes or so have passed we are touching in two places: my leg against her waist, and her forearm resting lightly on the top of my thigh as though we are so deep in conversation that she has absent-mindedly left it there.

"...so I'm finding tonight a bit hard," I wind up my story. "I've missed out on a whole year's worth of gossip about who fucked who, which means no one's got anything to say to me." "I wish I had the same problem," she laughs. "I just got stuck listening to Amy and Claire's IVF dramas for the last twenty minutes. What is it with everyone going all baby-mad all of a sudden? It's so boring." She presses harder against my thigh. "Thank fuck *you* turned up tonight."

By now her arm is draped across my thigh, fingers idly tracing the outline of my knee as she tells me about this psychology experiment where people were put under observation in a lab and given Panadol but told it was acid. "Most of them were convinced they were tripping. They reported hallucinations and euphoria and everything." Her fingertips are really distracting, and are ever so slowly migrating higher up my leg as we talk. I can't believe this is happening.

"I wonder if they also suffered fabricated come-downs, later on."

"That's the problem with people. They don't look for proof. They'll believe anything, if they want to." She's looking at me as she says it and her look is so piercing it makes my chest tight, makes my knees tingle, makes the air freeze in circles around us. We pause there a moment, caught in the ripple of her words, two ships shored up against each other, hulls shaking and creaking in the swell. Then, slowly, without breaking eye contact, Kate lifts my untouched beer out of my hands and places it on the bench beside me. She steps in between my legs, forcing my knees apart with her hip bones so that my skirt rides up, her stomach brushing against the crotch of my knickers. Only then does she drop her gaze, hands resting vaguely on my thighs, head bent, exposing to me the white stripe of her uneven part. I reach out, lift her fringe out of her eyes, rest my palm against her cheek. Our conversation comes to a stop but I keep on spinning. Our heads are resting together, forehead against forehead, hearts momentarily suspended somewhere between one beat and the next, while inside me,

another heart, perhaps, gathering cells as it grows and swells, itself preparing to beat. Eventually, one hand on her jawline I will guide her mouth up to meet mine and we will kiss, slowly, savouring this last moment before our membranes burst and we spill into each other's mouths. In a moment will begin the series of events which will inevitably lead to some kind of ending. But for now we are still at the beginning, and so let us pause at the end of this first conversation, this conversation that has just come to a halt in acknowledgement that there is something more than words here between us. Let us linger there a moment and enjoy the thrill and the terror of standing on the edge; on the edge, ready to fall.

