

In Real Life - synopsis

The bulletin boards of EternalMaternal.com are humming. From threads on loneliness to biting toddlers, all of the aggravations – major and minor – that come with motherhood are robustly debated. Played out for all to see are the domestic lives of three interconnected women, all of whom are finding it easier to be more honest online.

There's **Lily**, who has it all: three kids, a beautiful home and a hard-working man. But in truth, she's spent the last few years swimming uphill in custard, knackered and knee-deep in small children. In RL no-one listens to this wallflower; luckily she's discovered a place on the internet with people who are *interested* in what she has to say.

Magda's tolerance for moaning mothers is at an all-time low. By showcasing herself online as a #StrongBraveFierceMama, she gets much-needed validation. From strangers.

Hannah managed to spectacularly fall in with a Bad Crowd after her first baby. This time she's determined to scope out potential mum mates before committing. You can learn an awful lot about someone who thinks they're anonymous.

When online and real lives start to collide, who will make the connection?

And at what cost.

In Real Life

Motherhood is *meant* to change you. You become the frame of someone else's life, not the picture.

You're the pulse of the bass guitarist or the sha-na-na-of a backing singer. Your time as the strutting front man has passed.

And it's a rollercoaster. Especially at first. It's that loss of self, combined with the strain of being totally responsible for someone else's fragile little life.

A most unhealthy alchemy.

So who do you rely on through the pressure cooker bit? It's not like it used to be, with granny around the corner ready to dispense homespun advice about dipping dummies in gin. You probably left home years ago and your mum's still working. Or maybe she's one of those minted baby boomers, hoovering up your inheritance on endless cruises and complaining about the impact of low interest rates on her savings.

You're needy in those early years. But it's not the father of your child that you want, is it? He's turned out to be a selfish nobber of a man-child, stuffing towels under the spare room door so he can sleep and forgetting to put the bins out. You've recently come to loathe your in-laws since they commented that time about your husband looking *tired*, and then there's this sudden chasm between you and your gloriously-vapid, childless best friend. Most irritating of all are those smug parents of older children, who keep telling you to enjoy the baby bit as it zips by in a nanosecond. *Then the hard work really starts...*

What you want – the company you crave – is from other mothers who happen to have the same identically-sized child as your own.

You can become a leading member of your NCT. Maybe you already are. And you love them, all your new mum mates, but it can be a tad competitive: who's sleeping, who's crawling, who's already rediscovered their pelvic floor and libido.

What you need is The Internet. A place where you can compulsively google sleep routines and info on post-partum vaginal dryness in complete anonymity. Did you know some of the world's highest users of chat forums are mums with babies? Regularly stuck at home between the naptime hours of 1pm and 3pm and most evenings, we reach out. Make connections in a new way.

It's wonderful, actually: all these women sharing their new lives. In Jane Austen's age, they were just stuck writing letters to their unappreciative sisters. Now they can be heard throughout cyberspace. Some of it's wank - the endless posts about baby-led weaning for example, grown women having kittens because someone gave custard to their PFB.

But the best of them, the best of us, are like bright, comforting beacons that cut through the greyness of sleepless nights, the days when you're knee-deep in nappies. Make you feel connected to the wider world.

There's something oddly compelling about a collective group of first-time mothers. Maybe it's the gradual realisation that for all their striding about being equal, biology has become their destiny in the end.

I used to be a lurker. That's what I call them now. Those people that lurk about in the shadows on talk boards without commenting. I can't tell you how many times I'd type a reply to a post and then delete it, suddenly shy. I worried that I'd sound presumptive or offend someone. Then one time I wrote something to someone with a new baby who sounded really fed-up. And she was so *grateful* for my advice. My kindness made her weep (that's what she typed back anyway).

It's addictive. Sometimes you can spot someone on a conception board asking about folic acid and then follow them right the way through their "Journey". I suppose it's a bit like the talent shows on the telly. Except it's RL (real life) not X-Factor.

I'm part of the hard-core now. Chat Royalty. I'll sniff out a troll from their opening sentence. I can be across 40 threads, popping up all over the place. I'll be in Relationships, bagging out the DH

who's letting his DM trample on his DP; you'll find me in Body and Soul raving about the benefits of the hot cloth facial cleanse method. I even post the odd recipe. In RL, I don't cook.

But I still like mixing with the needy new mums the best. When you're *actual* life is overflowing with people who – if they think of you at all – is to pass you off as a bit shit, why shouldn't you create a space that represents you as wise and kind?

And as I found out, the online mums really seem to *listen* to someone like me.

It's nice.

I have so much to say.

Chapter one– Four years ago

It was a Tuesday morning when it hit Tom that his wife hadn't adjusted to motherhood as well as the last eleven months would suggest.

Hannah had just pulled back the living room curtains, swathing Baby Ben and his highchair in a halo of light, a diagonal stream of dust dancing twistily behind his little head. Their golden boy had eaten the first half of breakfast with usual gusto. Like the town loon railing against the world, he'd been shouting and waving balled fists about if Hannah paused too long between shovelling him mouthfuls of mushed *Weet-bix*.

Ben had moved on to the finger-food section of his meal, busily sucking the butter off a crumpled soldier of toast and giving his mum the chance to start her breakfast. Tom had just finished his, dumping his bowl and mug on the floor next to the sofa.

Some mornings, if she's feeling passive-aggressive, Hannah will wonder aloud if Tom will clear up his breakfast things *before* he goes to work. Or, in a real hold-the-phone moment, pick up hers too. This Tuesday, however, she's decided to let it go, so they've been left as usual: perfectly positioned for the baby to beeline towards when she sets him down for his post-breakfast crawl. She wrestles Tom's spoon off Ben most mornings. His little face still changes every time from a triumphant beam to one frozen, rictus-like, in an expression of sudden, savage loss.

Tom shouldn't be there for the news. He isn't normally. Usually, he's shaving during the 7.30am bulletin, fast asleep and dreaming for the earlier ones and out the door by eight. He must be running late.

In the whole wide scheme of planes-almost-crashing and lost-lotto-tickets, her husband still sitting next to her at 8.03am hardly tops the leader board of fate. Afterwards though, Hannah keeps harking back to that morning. She needs to follow the links in the chain that delayed him.

Was it the extra time they spent lying in bed? Tom pretending to listen to her debate carrots as a choke risk. She's still lightly boiling them for Ben, whereas some of her friends' babies are showily

gnawing through whole ones. Is she being over-cautious? And did Tom know the sugar content of a *Pink Lady* is scarily high? Given how many apples Harriet is consuming, should she perhaps mention fructose as a concern to Sophie or does that sound mental? She could always grate the carrot...

The whole conversation – her monologue, really – lasted less than five minutes, but it altered Tom’s schedule. The butterfly effect in action. Undone by steamed veg.

Then there’s these last three minutes they’ve spent playing peek-a-boo with Ben. Along with pointing, it’s his latest party piece. He’s just started to curl his fat hands into tight fists and press them into his eyes, convinced that – because he can’t see them – he’s vanished.

‘Where’s that baby gone?’ Tom had turned Hannah, running his hands through hair in mock distress. ‘He was sat right there and then he went! Pouf!’

‘Oh my goodness. But where could he be?’

They have half an eye on the news, but most of their attention is taken up by the Mystery of the Missing Baby. Peering around the room, they wait until the excitement gets too much for Ben. He pulls his hands away: *Ta-dah!*

Hannah collapses back into the sofa with a fake swoon and Tom clutches his chest in a heart attack pose. Ben is chortling at their double act in that infectious, deep-throated ‘*hur-hur*’ way of babies. It’s delightful.

But at this precise moment, she should be hustling Tom into his socks so that as the news continues, he is striding up the street in them. Not sitting on the sofa next to her, barefoot and laughing.

The really nice newsreader, the one with the soft brown eyes that seem to moisten any time she has to report a particularly *nasty* piece of news, has almost finished. The sports man is probably readying himself for his bit. Maybe Tom was waiting to hear about the cricket.

When she first moved to Australia, this commitment to reporting back on sport — even netball — had surprised her. The sports news in Oz lasts longer than the *actual* news. But after two years, she was

used to it. In fact, Hannah likes this sports guy; she would have watched him. You can tell he is a really nice man too. A family man.

When Ben was born, they'd agonised about exposing him to television. The flickers might trigger epilepsy. Hannah remembers silently judging the women at her first Mothers' Group as they recounted how the discovery of *Bing* on YouTube meant they could shower, while their month-old charge was propped up on towels in front of the TV for a bit of tummy time.

And she'd suffered terribly when her mother-in-law came over each morning to help out in those first dark weeks. Automatically switching on the telly as soon as she'd arrived, she'd hold Ben up with one hand supporting his neck and use the other to flap his arm in a cheery morning wave at the breakfast show's two anchors. Hannah would retreat into the shower once Tom had gone to work to stand under the hot water in a daze and try to summon up the energy to reach for the shampoo. Turning off the taps, she'd hear Tessy still chattering over the telly to Ben. *Is Granny looking after you while your mum has a lovely long shower, Benjamin?*

Somewhere along the way over the last eleven months, nestling in between Ben's bout of gastro or his refusal to try rice cereal, they'd gotten over themselves. Ben was a regular viewer of *Playschool*, *Night Garden* and the *Baby Einstein* back catalogue.

If they'd stuck to their guns though, Tom would never have seen the news that morning.

It turns out that TV really is bad for you.

'... And *finally*, to an alarming trend being reported by some of Melbourne's most well-known department stores. Shops in the CBD's affluent Chapel Street area are being targeted by what retailers are terming teams of "Buggy Burglars".'

A trickle of the milk that Hannah was draining from the cereal bowl runs down her chin as she jolts her head down to register the newsreaders pleasant gaze, just as the screen switches to footage from a store's CCTV system.

The picture is grainy, but you can clearly see four women pushing four different colour combinations of the same \$1,500 *Bugaboo Cameleon* down a department store walkway. From the racks of petrol blue peasant tops they're passing, they're in the *Miss Shop* section of *Myer*. The film jerks forward every two or three seconds so they disappear and then pop up a little further across the screen.

It takes every nerve, every muscle on Hannah's body to put her bowl down on the floor next to Tom's and then slowly wipe her chin in a casual fashion.

A wide shot of the store's home entertainment department fills the screen. Rows of TVs play the same cartoon. This section of the floor is empty, except for a lone sales assistant behind a till. Then the rolling pram convoy appears.

The women all look alike from behind. They're styled in the uniform of the affluent Melbournian SAHM : swingy hair, pushdown boots and blazers. Skinny jeans showcase four pilates-honed bottoms.

'...Using their prams to conceal goods and their babies to divert attention, some mums are swapping playgroup for police cautions. A sign that even the yummy mummy brigade are feeling the bite post-GFC? Some viewers may find the following images disturbing...'

Yummy Mummy. The phrase usually makes Hannah's teeth itch. It's patronising. Marking mothers on fuckability – boxing them in – as a regular poster on *EternalMaternal's* feminism talk board she is officially offended. Even so and although this is *very* wrong, she experiences a distinct – not entirely unpleasant – prickle of pride.

Three of the women on screen are moving around the shop floor – babies in prams like to be kept in motion – while the fourth, the one with the blue buggy, has gone up to the till assistant. As they talk, he leans over the counter to stroke the fat little foot belonging to the pram's occupant. The camera zeros in on the *Bugaboo* – Hannah didn't know security cameras could zoom in like that – and its occupier's face becomes pixelated out. It's as if he's a mini football yobbo, up to no good. The nice presenter is right. *It is* disturbing.

She's forgotten how to swallow and her tongue is too big for her mouth, but she's still somehow not looked over at her husband. She feels him though stiffen beside her on the sofa, like a dog spotting a rabbit. His ankle rests on the thigh of his opposite leg. He is halfway through putting his socks on; this is the last thing he does before he heads to work. If the bulletin had aired two minutes later, he'd have missed it.

The shop assistant's compulsion to touch the soft, fleshy heel of a baby's foot isn't unusual. People of all ages are frequently squeezing bits of Ben. Her baby's cheek has been chubbed by both schoolgirls clad in sensible chunky shoes and old men with sun-damaged noses. There's something about the very young that moves people. Alex would say it's simple evolution, pure survival of the fittest: babies have to be cute or we'd never put up with the backbreaking nappy changes.

A new scene: a man behind a desk. Leaning forward into the camera, he looks like an ex-footie player. His blonde mullet skims the top of his thick sunburnt neck, a gold ring glints on his (meaty) right pinkie. It seems unlikely, but a caption informs us that he is Detective Peter Bessant of the Victoria Police Force's Robbery and Serious Crime Squad.

'Several stores in the Precinct area approached us about the sudden surge of theft involving women with prams,' he says, sounding gruff and looking grumpy. 'We've been studying the security footage and are pursuing a number of lines of inquiry.'

What must sound like a snort of relief escapes through Hannah's nose, a gentle *pft*. She's been holding her breath a little too long. Tom shoots her a sharp look; she's not idea what he's thinking.

But then DI Bessant is replaced by yet more CCTV footage, and now it's in real-time rather than Benny Hill speed style. It must be a slow news day. For goodness sake, isn't there swine flu in Mexico, terrible flooding in Queensland? This isn't *news*. She considers huffing something along these lines to Tom as the camera tracks the four women heading towards the store's exit.

It's briefly hard to spot them amid the bustle of other shoppers and then the camera refocuses at one of the women's knee level. The snatched close-up shows a smallish cardboard box wedged in the basket underneath her pram. The black lettering on the box is easily readable: *Now TV 4K Smart Box*.

The picture snaps back to a wide angle and then zeroes in again to show the sharpest image yet of one of the women. It's the one with the blue pram who was chatting to the assistant. She is looking almost directly into the camera.

Tom picks up the remote for their smart box from the sofa armrest. The new NOW TV model has many excellent features. Not least of these is a button that allows the user to pause live TV. He presses it.

In the split-second that it takes for the infrared receiver on their telly to pick-up the remote's signal, she feels a surge of dread-based adrenaline. A bit like a cockroach being sprayed with Mortein, in the sudden silence of the room, she can almost hear her mind going in circles. It's inevitable she's going to end up fitting on her back, waving her arms and legs in the air; in the meantime, she takes a deep breath and looks over at Ben, hoping perhaps for a diversion.

Golly. He really *is* a remarkable baby. His repertoire expands daily. Along with peek-a-boo, he's also just discovered pointing. Her baby books say it's a milestone usually not reached until around the one year mark. Hannah is ever so proud. The index finger of his right hand is permanently extended at the moment jab, jab, jabbing away at everything. He points at trees, dogs and balls especially.

Ben sits in his highchair with dried *Weet-bix* encrusted in his hair and flaking off his cheeks like scales. He's not yet dressed for the day and still sports a white onesie *Wondersuit* from *Bonds* that makes him look like a small Elvis in his Vegas phase.

Jab, goes his finger towards the screen. Jab. He can point with some urgency and will persist in pointing until he's been acknowledged. Jab!

Tom and Hannah both follow the arc of his hooked fat finger. It points remorselessly at the woman now frozen on the screen.

'Mum,' said their little boy.