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Introduction

Today as I begin to write this introduction it's as if Leto, the Greek goddess of motherhood herself, is heartily laughing at me, not with me.

The first of the school lurgies has entered our house. My husband is supporting our business elsewhere, meaning that I am currently balancing a laptop on my lap, a lukewarm cup of coffee in one hand and a bagel in the other, while always keeping one eye trained on a particularly energetic four-year-old whose temperature is sitting at 39°.

My eye, however trained it may be, slips out of focus if I look for long enough. Held within the blur is a moment in which the time I've spent as a mother to this child feels distant and present all at once. I think of those early days, when the heaviness of my tummy felt linked to my eyelids, my brain begging for sleep and my body praying for a miracle. My bones themselves felt exhausted. But this was my second child, so the repeated reassurance that 'they grow up so fast' was not a sound that resonated with the same impact. I had awoken to this truth once before. But oh, to wake up there again!

Through the years I've been serenaded by the soft moo of the breast pump or called upon abruptly by a sharp squeal the moment a toe touches bath water. I have a four-year-old, an almost-ten-year-old and a

fourteen-year-old stepdaughter. I have had to acknowledge that modern motherhood is peppered with hurricanes, none of which feel as confronting as the first, but the smaller ones accumulate. They're all as life-altering as each other.

Over almost a decade I have faced the internal hurricane that comes with doing what's best for my children even if it comes at a personal sacrifice. In 'Winterscape' by Anita Desai, a biological mother lets her grieving, heartbroken sister nurture the child she'd given birth to out of love for them both. The story speaks of a bargain I couldn't imagine making, not just because I have strained relationships with similar characters in my own life, but because it's hard to imagine letting someone else raise your child when you've carried them and you too love and want them. Motherhood is filled with difficult decisions but, as Desai suggests, if they're driven by love more than ego, you will, more often than not, make the right one.

I have faced the agonising thought of not becoming a mother. Going through that has, I think, made me the mother I am now. While I doubt this was Ali Smith's intention in 'The Child', her story helped provide me with language for that period of my life. The piece also articulates an idea – and a fear – of motherhood, which stands in stark opposition to the ideals of those who want the best for their children: that nature may sometimes take precedent over nurture, and that your child, despite your very best efforts, might turn out to be the opposite of what you imagined. 'The Child' is a burlesque of this, whereby a baby is a cruel tyrant, expressing prejudiced views of women and asylum seekers.

And I have, of course, like the protagonist in Toni

Morrison's 'Sweetness', continued to tussle with the hurricane of being a black mother, with all its intricacies. Historically, black mothers haven't been given space in black British literature. I predict that this will be the longest lasting hurricane of all.

When I was asked to edit this book, I had no idea what kind of work I would read and how it would make me view my motherhood journey thus far. Having grown so tired of the microwave pop-and-go type motherhood books, I was more than willing to sink my teeth into words that would maybe, just maybe, help me more eloquently describe the indescribable.

What I love most about the stories I've chosen for this book is how far-reaching they are. It will always be important to me that stories and representations of motherhood are as diverse as possible. Even though my identity is one spread across many intersections, it doesn't cover all bases, and I too have had to learn what it means to be truly quiet and listen to someone else's version of motherhood – something we usually blanket as a universal experience. This is most true of 'Winning' by Casey Plett, about the relationship between a transgender mother and daughter.

Recently I was speaking to a friend who is a mother of two under two, who – let it be known – said she feels as though motherhood is either overly and falsely glamourised, or made out to be completely horrific, when actually there are multiple moments of each throughout the course of every single day. I couldn't help but agree.

While I don't regret my decision to embark on motherhood, I can firmly say that if I had been offered

a one-year, no-holds-barred trial, I wouldn't currently be a mother of two.

The firm grip this duty has on my time, body and mental state, to say the least, is a stronghold that no one can actually describe. So many feel as though they cannot and should not communicate the pressures and stresses motherhood places on you, because it seems like every other mother is having a great time of it.

What's most striking about this collection of stories is how close they are to the blistering truth. They do not shy away. There aren't many saccharine moments – not because motherhood is without them, but because they are fleeting. Most of it is back-breaking emotional work, where the small beings you have made space for end up teaching you more than you bargained for.

In the days when my children were very young, I could have been a character in Helen Simpson's short story 'Café Society'. I remember all too well the tightrope I walked daily between my life as a career woman, one where I felt independent for the hours between 9 and 5, and heading home to become a full-time carer to those who depended on me at night. I think back to when I preferred to walk four miles to meet a friend to avoid the countless buses that couldn't accommodate me. In fact, even if they could accommodate me, there were times that I would rather walk for miles with a pram than feel the prickles of a dozen corneas on me, all of them saying, without tongues, that they wished I could do a better job at keeping my baby quiet.

And then there are, of course, glimpses into future hurricanes. Unlike a meteorologist, I don't need apparatus to predict these ones. The hurricane of your children

becoming emboldened enough to show you a reflection of yourself. The hurricanes that come alongside being their first bouncer, forcefully batting any harm out of the way as it comes hurtling towards the one thing you feel obliged to protect. This is explored in 'Mother's Son' by Tessa Hadley, where a son confides in his mother that he is having an affair with someone he loves, and the mother conceals this from her son's distressed girlfriend. The story articulates one of my bigger fears: becoming a woman who hurts other women by putting her instinctive, but arguably misplaced, loyalty to her son before all, even herself. As sure as I am in this moment that I would dissolve any twisted loyalty I think I have towards my son in order to protect someone else's daughter, I haven't yet been faced with this in real time. I hope that if I ever find myself there I can stand firm, but if there is one phrase that motherhood has taught me to live by, it's 'who knows?'.

It's after months of thinking about these stories and a week of writing that I'm drawing this introduction to a close. My time, like my body, is no longer my own; I'm bound by my children's schedules, which often become complicated by the unexpected, including my current battle with sickness. I do things incrementally, making things happen as and when I can.

I am now sitting in a clinical environment wearing a clean gown that perhaps hundreds if not thousands have worn before me. It feels symbolic of motherhood itself. After five years of suffering with terrible back passage issues after giving birth to a 10lb 2oz son, I've finally been forced to put myself first. I think that may be the thread that ties all of these beautiful, emotional, scary and

sometimes heartbreaking stories together: a desire to remember oneself among becoming someone else's everything.

This collection stands as a reminder that there is not a single cell of newness that exists under the theme of motherhood. Someone has always been where we are or felt how we feel. In times of darkness, stories similar to ours can be hard to find, as traditional media and popular conversation parrots that motherhood is the greatest journey you will go on and that your child is the most precious gift. I hope you find that my selections for this book shine a light into all corners and resonate with mothers at every stage of their journey, from those of us with young children to those on the precipice of an empty nest; from those of us dealing with depression to those of us who can't wipe the smiles off of our faces. And I hope these stories hit home with those who aren't mothers, too. In some ways, I especially hope this collection reaches non-mothers. Because mothers and non-mothers have to co-exist in community spaces, those that we all depend on, and in this sense I hope this book can be used as an educational tool. I hope it offers entertainment as well as blistering insight into worlds that, for me as a mother, are commonplace but for so many are currently, and may forever remain, foreign. I hope that digesting these stories will help those who aren't familiar with the hurricane of motherhood understand just how much their support, help and understanding is desired, even needed, for all of us to feel good and be well.

Candice Brathwaite, 2023

Winterscape

by Anita Desai

She stands with the baby in her arms in front of the refrigerator, and points at the pictures she has taped on its white enamel surface, each in turn, calling out the names of the people in the photographs. It is a game they play often to pass the time, the great stretches of time they spend alone together. The baby jabs his short pink finger at a photograph, and the mother cries, 'That's Daddy, in his new car!' or 'Susan and cousin Ted, on his first birthday!' and 'Grandma by the Christmas tree!' All these pictures are as bright and festive as bits of tinsel or confetti. Everyone is smiling in them, and there are birthday cakes and Christmas trees, the shining chrome of new cars, bright green lawns and white houses. 'Da-dee!' the baby shouts. 'Soo-sun!' The bright colours make the baby smile. The mother is happy to play the game, and laughs: her baby is learning the names of all the members of the family; he is becoming a part of the family.

Then the baby reaches out and waves an ineffectual hand at a photograph that is almost entirely white, only

a few shades of grey to bring out the shapes and figures in it. There are two, and both are draped in snow-white clothes which cover their shoulders, exposing only the backs of their heads which are white too, and they are standing beside the very same white refrigerator in the same white-painted kitchen, in front of a white-framed window. They are looking out of it, not at the camera but at the snow that is falling past the window-panes, covering the leafless tree and the wooden fence and the ground outside, providing them with a white snowscape into which they seem nearly to have merged. Nearly.

The baby's pink finger jabs at the white photograph. The mother says nothing immediately: she seems silenced, as if she too has joined the two figures at the window and with them is looking out of the white kitchen into a white world. The photograph somehow calls for silence, creates silence, like snow.

The baby too drops his hand, lowers his head on his mother's shoulder, and yawns. Snow, silence, and sleep: the white picture has filled him with sleep, he is overcome by it. His mother holds him and rocks him, swaying on her feet. She loves the feel of the baby's head on her shoulder; she tucks it under her chin protectively. She swivels around to the window as if she sees the two white figures there now, vanishing into the green dusk of a summer evening. She sings softly into

the baby's dark hair: 'Ma and Masi – Ma and Masi together.'

'*Two*?' Beth turned her head on the pillow and stared at him over the top of her glasses, lowering the book she was reading to the rounded dome of her belly under the blue coverlet. '*Two* tickets? For *whom*?' because she knew Rakesh did not have a father, that his mother was a widow.

'For my mother and my aunt,' he said, in a low, almost sullen voice, sitting on the edge of the bed in his pyjamas and twisting his fingers together. His back was turned to her, his shoulders stooped. Because of the time difference, he had had to place the call to the village in India in the middle of the night.

'Your *aunt*?' Beth heard her own voice escalate. 'Why do we have to pay for your aunt to visit us? Why does *she* have to visit us when the baby is born? I can't have so many guests in the house, Rakesh!'

He turned around towards her slowly, and she saw dark circles under his eyes. Another time they might have caused her to put her finger out to touch those big, bluish pouches, like bruises, but now she felt herself tense at the thought of not just one, but two strangers, foreigners, part of Rakesh's past, invading their house. She had already wished she had not allowed Rakesh to send for his mother to attend to the birth of their

child. It had seemed an outlandish, archaic idea even when it was first suggested; now it was positively bizarre. 'Why both of them? We only asked your mother,' she insisted.

Rakesh was normally quick with his smile, his reassuring words, soft and comforting murmurs. He had seemed nervous ever since she became pregnant, more inclined to worry about what she took as a natural process. But she could see it was not that, it was something else that made him brood, silently, on the edge of the bed, the blue pouches hanging under his eyes, and his hands twisted.

'What's the matter?' she said sharply, and took off her glasses and turned over her book. 'What's wrong?'

He roused himself to shake his head, attempted to smile, and failed. Then he lifted up his legs and lay down on the bed, beside her, turning to her with that same brooding expression, not really seeing her. He put out his hand and tried to stroke the hair at her temple. It annoyed her: he was so clearly about to make a request, a difficult request. She tensed, ready to refuse. He ought not to be asking anything of her in her condition. Two guests, two foreigners – at such a time. 'Tell me,' she demanded.

So he began to tell her. 'They are both my mothers, Beth,' he said. 'I have two mothers.'

*

There were three years between them and those seemed to have made all the difference. Asha was the first child in the family. So delighted was her father that it never crossed his mind she should have been a son. He tossed her up and caught her in his arms and put his face into her neck to make growling sounds that sent her into squeals of laughter. That she was fair-skinned, plump and had curly hair and bright black eyes all pleased him. He liked his wife to dress the child in frilly, flounced, flowered dresses and put ribbons in her hair. She was glad and relieved he was so pleased with his daughter: it could have been otherwise, but he said, 'A pretty daughter is an ornament to the home.'

So Asha grew up knowing she was an ornament, and a joy. She had no hesitation ever in asking for a toy or a sweet, in climbing onto her parents' laps or standing in the centre of a circle to sing or skip.

When Anu was born, three years later, it was different. Although her father bent over her and fondled her head and said nothing to express disappointment, disappointment was in the air. It swaddled baby Anu (no one even remembered her full name, the more majestic Annapurna), and among the first things she heard were the mutterings of the older people in the family who had no compunction about pronouncing their disappointment. And while her mother held her close and defended her against them, baby Anu knew

she was in a weak position. So one might have thought, watching her grow. Although she stayed close to her elder sister, clinging to the hem of her dress, shadowing her, and Asha was pleased to have someone so entirely under her control, there remained something hesitant, nervous and tentative about Anu's steps, her movements and speech. Everything about her expressed diffidence.

While Asha proved a natural housekeeper and joined, with gusto, in the cooking, the washing, the sweeping, all those household tasks shared between the women, pinning her chunni back behind her ears, rolling up the sleeves of her kameez, and settling down to kneading the dough, or pounding spices, or rolling out chapatis with a fine vigour, Anu proved sadly incompetent. She managed to get her hand burnt when frying pakoras, took so long to grind chillies that her mother grew impatient and pushed her out of the way, and was too weak to haul up a full bucket of water from the well, needing to do it half a bucket at a time. When visitors filled the house and everything was in an uproar, Anu would try to slip away and make herself invisible and only return when summoned – to be scolded soundly for shirking work. 'Look at your sister,' she was always counselled, and she did, raising her eyes with timid admiration. Asha, used to her sister's ways, gave her a wink and slipped her one of the snacks or sweets

she had missed. An understanding grew between them, strengthened by strand upon strand upon strand of complicity.

Later, sons were born to their parents, and the pressure, the tension in their relationships with their daughters was relieved. Good-naturedly, the father allowed both of them to go to school. 'What is the harm?' he asked the elderly critics of this unusual move. 'These days it is good for girls to be educated. One day, who knows, they may work in an office – or a bank!'

That certainly did not happen. Another generation would be born and raised before any girl in that Punjab village became an office clerk or a bank teller. Asha and Anu had a few years in the local government school where they wore blue cotton kameezes with white chunnis, and white gym shoes, and sat on benches learning the Punjabi alphabet and their numbers. Here the scales may well have tipped the other way, because Asha found the work ferociously difficult and grew hot and bothered as she tried to work out problems in addition and subtraction or to read her lessons from the tattered, illustrated textbooks, while Anu discovered an unexpected nimbleness of mind that skipped about the numbers with the agility of a young goat, and scampered through the letters quite friskily. Asha threw her sister exasperated looks but did not mind so much when Anu took over her homework and did it for her

in her beautiful hand. Anu drew praise when she wrote essays on 'The Cow' and 'My Favourite Festival' – but, alas, the latter proved to be her swan song because at this point Asha turned fifteen and the family found her a bridegroom and married her off and Anu had to stay home from then on to help her mother.

Asha's bridegroom was a large man, not so young, but it did not matter because he owned so much land and cattle. He had a great handlebar moustache and a turban and Anu was terrified for Asha when she first saw him, but was later to find no cause for terror: he was a kindly, good-natured man who clearly adored his bright-eyed, quick-tongued, lively young wife and was generous to her and to her entire family. His voice was unexpectedly soft and melodious, and he often regaled his visitors, or a gathering in the village, with his songs. Asha – who had plenty of talents but not artistic ones – looked at him with admiration then, sitting back on her haunches and cupping her chin in her hands which were bedecked with the rings and bracelets he had given her.

They often asked Anu to come and stay with them. Asha found she was so accustomed to having her younger sister at her heels, she really could not do without her. She might have done, had she had children, but, though many were born to her, they were either stillborn or died soon after birth, none living for more

than a few days. This created an emptiness in the big house so full of goods and comforts, and Asha grew querulous and plaintive, a kind of bitterness informing her every gesture and expression, while her husband became prone to depression which no one would have predicted earlier. Anu often came upon him seated in an armchair at the end of the veranda, or up on the flat roof of the house in the cool evenings, looking out with an expression of deep melancholy across his fields to the horizon where the white spire and the golden dome of the Sikh temple stood against the sky. He left the work on the farm to a trusted head-man to supervise and became idle himself, exasperating Asha who tended to throw herself into every possible activity with determined vigour and thought a man should too.

After yet another miscarriage, Asha roused herself with a grim wilfulness to join in the preparation for Anu's wedding, arranged by the parents to a clerk in a neighbouring town, a sullen, silent young man with large teeth and large hands that he rubbed together all the time. Anu kept her face and her tears hidden throughout the wedding, as brides did, and Asha was both consoling and encouraging, as women were.

Unexpectedly, that unpromising young man, who blinked through his spectacles and could scarcely croak one sentence at a time, showed no hesitation whatsoever when it came to fathering a child. Nor did Anu,

who was so slight of frame and mousy in manner, seem to be in any way handicapped as a woman or mother – her child was born easily, and it was a son. A round, black-haired, red-cheeked boy who roared lustily for his milk and thrashed out with his legs and grabbed with his hands, clearly meant for survival and success.

If Anu and her husband were astonished by him, it could scarcely have matched Asha and her husband's wonder. They were enthralled by the boy: he was the child of their dreams, their thwarted hopes and desires. Anu lay back and watched how Asha scooped Rakesh up into her large, soft arms, how she cradled and kissed him, then how her husband took him from her, wrapped in the candy pink wool shawl knitted by Asha, and crooned over him. She was touched and grateful for Asha's competence, as adept at handling the baby as in churning butter or making sweets. Anu stayed in bed, letting her sister fuss over both her and the baby – making Anu special milk and almond and jaggery drinks in tall metal tumblers, keeping the baby happy and content, massaging him with mustard oil, feeding him sips of sweetened milk from a silver shell, tickling him till he smiled.

Anu's husband looked on, awkwardly, too nervous to hold his own child: small creatures made him afraid; he never failed to kick a puppy or a kitten out of his way, fiercely. Anu rose from her bed occasionally to

make a few tentative gestures of motherhood but soon relinquished them, one by one, first letting Asha feed the baby and dress him, then giving up attempts to nurse the boy and letting Asha take over the feeding.

At the first hint of illness – actually, the baby was teething which caused a tummy upset – Asha bundled him up in his blanket and took him home, promising, 'I'll bring him back as soon as he is well. Now you go and rest, Anu, you haven't slept and you look sick yourself.'

When Anu went to fetch him after a week, she came upon Asha's husband, sitting on that upright chair of his on the veranda, but now transformed. He had the baby on his knee and was hopping him up and down while singing a rhyme, and his eyes sparkled as vivaciously as the child's. Instead of taking her son from him, Anu held back, enjoying the scene. Noticing her at last, the large man in the turban beamed at her. 'A prince!' he said. 'And one day he will have all my fields, my cattle, the dairy, the cane-crushing factory, everything. He will grow up to be a prince!'

Rakesh's first birthday was to be celebrated at Asha's house – 'We will do it in style,' she said, revealing how little she thought Anu and her husband were capable of achieving it. Preparations went on for weeks beforehand. There was to be a feast for the whole village. A goat was to be slaughtered and roasted, and the

women in the family were busy making sweets and delicacies with no expense spared: Asha's husband was seeing to that. He himself went out to shoot partridges for the festive dinner, setting out before dawn into the rippling grainfields and calling back to the women to have the fire ready for his return.

Those were his last words – to have the fire ready. 'As if he knew', wept Asha's mother, 'that it was the funeral pyre we would light.' Apparently there had been an accident with the gun. It had gone off unexpectedly and the bullet had pierced his shoulder and a lung: he had bled to death. There were no birthday festivities for one-year-old Rakesh.

Knowing that the one thing that could comfort Asha was the presence of the baby in her arms, Anu refrained from suggesting she take him home. At first, she had planned to leave the boy with her widowed sister for the first month of mourning, then drew it out to two and even three months. When her husband, taunted by his own family for his failure to establish himself as head of his household, ordered her to bring their son home, Anu surprised herself by answering, 'Let him be. Asha needs him. We can have more sons for ourselves.' Their house was empty and melancholy – it had always been a mean place, a narrow set of rooms in the bazaar, with no sunlight or air – but she sat in its gloom, stitching clothes for her rapidly growing son, a

chunni drawn over her head, a picture of acceptance that her husband was not able to disturb, except briefly, with fits of violence.

After one of these, they would go and visit the boy, with gifts, and Rakesh came to look upon his parents as a visiting aunt and uncle, who offered him sweets and toys with a dumbly appeasing, appealing air. No one remembered when he started calling them Masi and Masa. Asha he already addressed as Ma: it was so clearly her role.

Anu had been confident other children would follow. She hoped for a daughter next time, somehow feeling a daughter might be more like her, and more likely to stay with her. But Rakesh had his second and third birthday in Asha's house, and there was no other child. Anu's husband looked discouraged now, and resentful, his own family turning into a chorus of mocking voices. He stayed away at work for long hours; there were rumours – quickly brought to Anu's attention – that he had taken to gambling, and drugs, and some even hinted at having seen him in quarters of the town where respectable people did not go. She was not too perturbed: their relationship was a furtive, nocturnal thing that never survived daylight. She was concerned, of course, when he began to look ill, to break out in boils and rashes, and come down with frequent fevers, and she nursed him in her usual bungling, tentative way. His

family came to take over, criticizing her sharply for her failings as a nurse, but he only seemed to grow worse, and died shortly before Rakesh's fifth birthday. His family set up a loud lament and clearly blamed her for the way he had dwindled away in spite of their care. She packed her belongings – in the same tin trunk in which she had brought them as a bride, having added nothing more to them – and went to live with Asha – and the child.

In the dark, Beth found it was she who was stroking the hair at Rakesh's temple now, and he who lay stretched out with his hands folded on his chest and his eyes staring at the ceiling.

'Then the woman you call Ma – she is really your aunt?' Beth queried.

Rakesh gave a long sigh. 'I always knew her as my mother.'

'And your aunt is your real mother? When did they tell you?'

'I don't know,' he admitted. 'I grew up knowing it – perhaps people spoke of it in the village, but when you are small you don't question. You just accept.'

'But didn't your *real* mother ever tell you, or try to take you away?'

'No!' he exclaimed. 'That's just it, Beth. She never did – she had given me to her sister, out of love, out of