

# After the Storm

Postnatal Depression and the  
Utter Weirdness of New Motherhood

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# The Cloud

It is the worst of times and the worst of times. Brighton, May 2017. I am bone-tired, shoving a buggy through jostling crowds. Early summer sun beats down from a blue sky. People are eating ice creams and sitting in deck chairs, enjoying the year's first blast of warmth. But this is no ordinary Sunday on the seafront. Either side of me, two lines of polished parked cars – all Minis – stretch for ever into the distance. There are Minis in every possible colour and style. Some are themed like cartoon characters or sporting heroes. Some have eyelashes. Some have stickers on the bonnet and furry seats inside. Hundreds of people walk – no, amble – in between, admiring the cars. The flow of the crowd is one-way. I am trapped. On I trudge, trying not to run over any feet/children/dogs, trying not to make eye contact with the smiling faces, the shiny, happy people basking in the Mini Love.

I had set out from my flat not knowing where I was going, just needing to walk, to get out, to put one foot in front of the other, to do something that felt vaguely autonomous. These walks are the only choice I have left. I slammed the door, cursed the never-arriving lift (No. 1 Bane of My Life), crossed the road, crossed the perilous cycle path, cursed at a cyclist (Bane No. 2), and turned left along the front. I stomped along the promenade – past the i360 viewing

tower, past the seafood shacks and the smokehouse, the ice-cream stalls, past the pier, lit up and heaving, past the crazy golf and the aquarium. Brighton is a place where people come for holidays, for hen-dos and high-jinks. It's a place of merriment and celebration. I am a dark cloud over it. My partner, Ian, actually said that to me this morning. 'It's like living with a dark cloud.' He has said kind things, too. He mostly says kind things. He is a man at the end of his rope.

I know that I have not been easy to live with for a while now. My mind has been steadily darkening since December, a month or so after the baby was born. I have accumulated layer upon layer of bad feeling; of negativity, rage and doom. I am swollen with it, waiting to explode. 'I think you have postnatal depression,' Ian says regularly. 'I think you should go and talk to someone. A therapist. Your GP.'

He is a GP two days a week. He is a graphic novelist and writer the rest of the time. Even though I got him to check all of my moles the first time we were in bed together (apparently this happens to doctors a *lot*), I am refusing to accept his diagnosis on this one. I don't feel depressed. I feel fucking furious. To make matters worse, in my hazy state of mind I have inadvertently stumbled into the midst of the London to Brighton Mini Run, an annual get-together for Mini owners. The smell of petrol hangs in the air. People have dolled up for the occasion. They smoke rollies and cheers tinnies. There is a distinct festival vibe. A cruel pastiche of my former life. I used to go to festivals. I was last woman standing at many of them, greeting the dawn with a can of lager and a wide grin. Now I can hardly stand up straight.

I am running on adrenaline. Or rather, the fumes of adrenaline. I haven't had more than four hours of sleep in a

row for seven months. I am jumpy and twitchy, like a person on high alert. I want to shout and scream and lie down and curl into a ball and have someone – anyone – just take the baby for a few hours and give me time to regroup my thoughts. I feel like I am on the edge of a psychotic fit; some uncontrollable outburst. Ian has told me he is worried I am ‘almost psychotic’ more than once. But I have no options. I feel like I should just be getting on with this. Surely not everyone can find it this hard, or humans ... just wouldn’t do it, would they? So here I am, almost psychotic, surrounded by jolly Mods and Minis – my least favourite car.

Ian and I have a Mini. It is an old pigeon-coloured thing with one functioning door. The electrics are bust so the windows don’t open. Pieces of the upholstery and dashboard keep falling off. Ian and I argue every time we try and get into (or out of) it. The passenger door has been broken for two years but it will cost more to get it fixed than the car is worth. Getting a baby in and out is a gymnastic feat. I often end up literally on my arse in the street, baby held aloft, bags scattered. Travelling 300 miles to see Ian’s or my relatives, in Manchester and Wales respectively, is a logistical nightmare. Ian refuses to get rid of the Mini (he’s had it ten years), and I see this as him digging his heels in as some kind of eternal bachelor, in denial about his new responsibilities. The Mini convention is like something sent from my subconscious to mock me. And I can’t get out. It’s like a bad dream. (I remember those, from the days when I used to sleep.) People must be wondering why I’m charging ahead with such a thunderous look on my face. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I have it on silent so as not to wake the baby in the precious moments that he sleeps. I miss calls, but then people are calling less.

My whole life has become one of shutting down, switching off, of retreating into darkness.

It's a text, from Ian. 'Where are you?'

I text him back. It's hard to type while walking and steering. He's worried, but I also want to vent at him. I am the master of angry texts, especially angry nocturnal texts when he is away. (How come he gets to go away?)

I am stuck in the middle of a Mini convention

I wait a moment, and then I launch my irresistible punchline:

And I fucking hate Minis

He doesn't rise to it, not today. I half expect him to. He'd love it here. He'd blend right in. Not like me, with my three-day-old clothes and scraped-up hair and foul demeanour. He texts back. I look, expecting some lengthy and passionate defence of his beloved Minis, but no. He says:

I'm going to get on my bike and meet you at the marina

I do not reply. I do not look for him up on the cycle path (although he will have to pass me up there, where the traffic is moving freely, unlike the slow, aching meander of the Mini convention). I stomp on. Everyone and everything is in my way. Sunday is in my way. Life is in my way. By the time I get to the marina I am a ball of rage, some kind of dying earthbound sun, a red giant on her way out. We buy burgers. As we sit down, where it is quieter, the baby wakes and looks

at me. My heart pounds in my chest, as it does in the night, as it does any time he might need me. I pull out his bottle. The baby accepts the bottle and sucks on it. The knot in my chest – the constant knot of anxiety – slackens off a little. The baby is okay. Don't panic.

I begin to eat. I chomp on the burger joylessly, not tasting it, hawking and squeezing it down my dry throat. My love for food – like my love for most things – has mostly disappeared. I eat whole packs of biscuits, mindlessly, to stay awake in the afternoon. I shovel in jumbo bars of chocolate, barely chewing. Sugar is my fix – but also, I sense a self-destruction in these acts, beyond any previous joyous self-destruction: a self-loathing I have never known the like of before. A darkness that is opening and widening, dividing the centre of me.

Ian watches me eat. I shake my head and scowl. I don't want to be watched. Don't want to be scrutinised. Leave me alone in my ... My brain says it before I consciously allow it to: *Misery*. And there it is.

Boom.

I am miserable.

And I know it.

I start to cry. Ian nods and hugs me.

'I think I might be depressed,' I say.

'Yes. Will you go and see someone?'

'I'll go and see someone for a potential diagnosis,' I say.

His face sort of crumples, but it's all I can give him right now. I am so ashamed. The floodgates have opened and I can't stop crying. How did this happen? I am tough. I am smart. I have built a career. I have lived alone. I have spent decades carving out a life for myself that feels right and fulfilling. Now I am cracking, right down the middle.

# A Uniquely Vulnerable Time

A lot has changed since then. For a start, I don't hate Minis any more. I actually thank them, in part, for pushing me to some kind of breaking point. Crying in a burger restaurant is never a good look, but it was a good thing I cracked, really. I needed to so that I could admit what was happening and start rebuilding my life. Even though I was so afraid – so afraid – of saying I needed help, because somehow I knew that by saying it, the whole thing would come crumbling down.

Many things were walling me in, separating me from the truth. Pride, shame, a deep fear of failure. I felt like I was the only person doing it wrong. The only person feeling it wrong. I felt as though anything less than perfect was wrong. In fact, what I went through wasn't so unusual.

According to the NHS, more than 1 in 10 women experience postnatal depression (PND), and it is thought many more cases go unreported. Women are too often afraid or ashamed to speak up or admit there is a problem. I was hesitant to write this book because I thought, *What if my son reads it in ten years and gets upset, or thinks I didn't love him in the beginning?* But as my devastatingly wise friend Katie says:

‘People don’t have babies; they have people.’ My son will have his own opinions one day, and I hope we can have conversations about it and he’ll understand that I’m doing this for all the women who might be struggling and don’t know how to say. All the women who don’t know what the hell is wrong with them, like I didn’t.

What is PND, exactly? Well, that’s a huge question (welcome to my book!) and, like most mental health issues, is slightly different for everyone. According to the World Health Organisation, postnatal depression (‘postpartum depression’ in the United States) is:

A syndrome associated with pregnancy or the puerperium (commencing within about 6 weeks after delivery) that involves significant mental and behavioural features, most commonly depressive symptoms. The syndrome does not include delusions, hallucinations, or other psychotic symptoms. This designation should not be used to describe mild and transient depressive symptoms that do not meet the diagnostic requirements for a depressive episode, which may occur soon after delivery (so-called postpartum blues).

It’s likely something women have always experienced, although historically little has been written about it. Hippocrates described the emotional difficulties of the postpartum period, writing about ‘puerperal fever’ which produced delirium, agitation and bouts of mania. However, a mother’s mental health before and after giving birth has generally not been of great concern, or has been classified out of existence by being lumped in with other mental illnesses.

In the nineteenth century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's semi-autobiographical story 'The Yellow Wallpaper' featured a woman diagnosed with nervous depression after the birth of her first child. Confined to one room as a 'rest cure', she becomes fixated on the wallpaper and convinced that a woman is trapped behind it. The story ends with her attempting to release the woman by tearing the wallpaper down – clawing at her cage, effectively.

Professor Hilary Marland has extensively researched the treatment and perception of women's mental health in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Victorian times, postnatal mental illness was often written off as just 'insanity'. Professor Marland describes some haunting examples, including the case of Mary Sibbald, who was admitted to the Royal Edinburgh Asylum in 1855 'suffering from puerperal insanity',

one of a number of patients who were reported as being too demented to describe their condition. Noted to be incoherent, violent and thin on admission, Mary had no milk and was unable to feed her child. She was very disruptive and turned her room 'upside down', but at the same time was described as exhausted, pale and weak, with a feeble pulse, dull-eyed and showing 'symptoms of sinking from condition'. An abscess on her left breast was poulticed, she was given brandy and morphine and force-fed custard and sherry.

Force-fed custard and sherry. Maybe I should have tried that.

Early motherhood is always hard, and I'm sure many of the symptoms I describe in this book will echo the experiences

of all new mums. Childbirth and the first six months are often so traumatic I think women should be screened like soldiers who have come back from war. Public discourse about postnatal trauma is steadily growing, and hurray for that, but we still don't talk about motherhood honestly enough in the mainstream. Nothing prepares you for the onslaught, exhaustion and anxiety.

So how do you know if you've actually got PND? There is no physical test, but there are questionnaires used by doctors to work towards a diagnosis. A GP in the UK might use the PHQ-9 and GAD-7 questionnaires, which provide depression and anxiety scores. But half the women who suffer a peri- or postnatal illness don't disclose. I didn't. This is sometimes due to fear, but not always. Sometimes you're just clueless and lost through no fault of your own. If all your usual reference points and life norms have gone, and everyone's experience – and baby – is different, how can you even tell when you need help? It's difficult to know what to look for, and differentiate between the 'normal' weird as opposed to a problematic weird. Because *everything* is suddenly weird.

Dr Rebecca Moore, a British perinatal psychiatrist with over twenty years' experience of working with women during pregnancy and the postpartum period, gives some insight as to why women might not reach out when they're struggling. 'It can be hard to tease out, especially if it's your first baby,' she explains.

It's hard to know whether you're just feeling knackered. We all have bad days where everything seems to go wrong and we feel really low. The thing to bear in mind is how often things are happening. If you're having an

occasional low day that's probably just the way it goes for many women. But if every day is feeling bad for most of the day, then I think that's something different. If [every day] you're feeling really anxious or low or can't sleep and you don't want to see anybody, then, if you feel able to talk to somebody about it, you should. It's about how much it's impacting on you.

But doesn't this request for self-diagnosis make it yet another job for women to do when they're already maxed out? It requires a leap of faith to make any kind of call. 'Sometimes we can't see it ourselves, but our partners can, or parents can, or friends can,' Dr Moore says.

Part of the problem is we're always asking women to 'reach out' and often they don't feel able to and don't know where to go, or might feel judged. As a society we need to be better at reaching out and checking in on our friends, rather than them having to source their own care at a time when they feel really awful. In my opinion, the way services are set up is the wrong way around. We wait for people to be at breaking point, but we don't capture the track up to it. A lot of that has come through stresses and strains in health visiting – they are not able to provide that 'listening' support they once would have done where they would have picked up on more cases. There has been a decimation of children's centres, which for a lot of people would have been a lifeline of support. So you've got this erosion of these kinds of things that did provide that help for people with a milder presentation.

Coronavirus has only made things worse. Dr Moore says the figures for PND ‘skyrocketed’ in 2020. During the pandemic, women’s choices in birth altered very quickly: home-birth teams shut down; partners weren’t allowed to appointments. There’s no doubt that a bad experience of childbirth can drastically affect mental health. Dr Moore is co-founder of a national collective of experts on birth trauma: Make Birth Better. A lot of the women she’s worked with over the years were mentally well but the thing that tipped them over was their birth experience. ‘Childbirth is a uniquely vulnerable time for women and is tied up with women’s rights and the notion of consent.’ It definitely triggered mental illness in me. I’d never had depression before, and I wasn’t depressed during my pregnancy, but childbirth was where everything started to go wrong.

I want to rewind a bit before that, though, and talk about pregnancy – because that was when my autonomy and confidence first started to take a battering. It blew my mind that my body was growing another body. (Inside! Like a meaty Russian doll!) But I also started to become aware that I had a mystery inside me; a mystery that other people – often complete strangers – felt able to take ownership of.

# Comedy Sketch Idea

A pregnant woman in a café orders a coffee. Another woman next to her pipes up: 'I hope that's decaf!'

'Why?'

Other Woman nods to Pregnant Woman's stomach.

Pregnant Woman shakes her head.

'Oh, I'm not pregnant.'

Other Woman looks surprised.

'It's a tumour. Inoperable. I have three weeks to live.'

Other Woman's face falls. 'Oh god, I'm so sorry.'

'Yeah. It's breaking my family's heart. Coffee's about the only thing getting me through.'

Other Woman takes her coffee and leaves. Pregnant Woman smiles an evil smile. Milks her coffee.