

THE MOTHERHOOD MYTH: UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the gap between women's expectations of motherhood before they have children and the reality of their lives as mothers, a phenomenon that I call the Motherhood Myth. My study sheds light on how this Motherhood Myth takes shape, how it is transmitted and reinforced by culture and interpersonal expectations and what its consequences are on family life, women's mental health and well being. I use several frameworks centered on critical and interpretive perspectives, and conducted an autoethnography and in-depth interviews of two women. Among other findings, this research demonstrates that for those mothers in my study, the expectations of motherhood were very different from their actual lives with children. I present the findings and analysis from those case studies in an ethnodrama, a play in three acts, in which each act is a dimension of the shock of motherhood, and each scene represents an aspect of the myth. Act I is about the generational and cultural disconnect the women experienced while raising their children, the cultural expectations that feed the myth of the good mother. The second scene of this first act presents the emotional and physical tsunami that followed the birth, and the deceptive myth of the natural, organic, all sweet motherhood. Scene three is an attempt to understand the reasons for these women's naiveté, which exposes the "can have it all" myth. Act II goes deeper in the intimacy and meaning of the experience, from the consumerist part of raising children as a way of coping, to the damages of individualism and mothering competition. It also explores the deep, never ending, and unexpected feelings of fear, worry, shame and guilt. Act III addresses the myth of gender equality that those mothers had internalized while growing up: contrary to what they always thought, they are not treated as

equals with men at home or at work and this affects their lives negatively. The study shows that the Motherhood Myth has consequences on mothers' well being, and by repercussion on their families and society. I anchor my work in the third-wave feminist movement and call for a move from universalism. I argue that this Motherhood Myth that my study highlights plays a role in the "stalled gender revolution," discussed in sociology in the past few years. Addressing the motherhood myth is crucial because women themselves are reluctant to talk about it and prefer to find ways to cope and "balance" in silence and privately. Finally, I make propositions to modify this idealized image of motherhood.

*A ma mère  
Pour mes fils*

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*« I feel like it's a giant game of whack-a-mole; do you know that game? Where you pop one mole down and one pops up. That's what motherhood has been like for me; it's been like one giant game of whack-a-mole. » (Kate, 2015)*

I remember imagining the arrival of my first child. He would be a little person I would have to take care of, but he would follow me in my activities, I would take him anywhere I needed in his baby carrier, and I would happily entrust him to daycare after a few months. I would take advantage of the simplicity and practicality of breastfeeding. I knew, of course, that I'd be tired and would not sleep so well at the beginning, but I could work while he slept. Soon enough he would spend his days in preschool, and we would be back to normal: my husband and I working like before, while he would socialize with his toddler friends. Life would be as it was before, just better.

This is not, however, what happened. The uncomfortable baby carrier hurt my back. My son hated being outside, and I was too exhausted to go anywhere anyway. I slept—not worked—whenever he slept, after swaddling and rocking him for hours. Breastfeeding was draining, and it didn't help any with weight loss (contrary to popular belief). The thought of "abandoning" my baby in daycare was heartbreaking, and I didn't generally trust caregivers with him anyway. Once he was in daycare I discovered that children spend as many days sick at home as in care, and that you get sick too; on top of those sleepless nights, illness makes working, and even thinking, a challenge.

Motherhood came with physical and psychological changes, readjustments within my couple relationship and our social circle, and a redesign of my professional interests, focus, and priorities. It was not all rosy and "natural," as I had anticipated. And all this was the case, I must add, with a healthy pregnancy, no complications, no postpartum depression, a healthy child, in a two-parent family where both parents participate in the "second shift"<sup>1</sup> and are financially secure. This is how my interest in the Motherhood Myth started: with my own "shock of motherhood" upon becoming a mother 11 years ago. But it was not just me. Everywhere I looked I noticed a common feeling of surprise and even shock among new mothers of my generation, with similar professional background and education level (30-something, raised with feminist gains taken for granted, college educated, with a career on track or in mind before having children). All young mothers who shared their impressions with me—friends, acquaintances, mothers of my kid's friends— expressed disbelief about the gap between their expectations of motherhood and the reality of life after their child was born. It is precisely this gap between myth and reality, and the

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<sup>1</sup> The « second shift » is a term coined by Arlie Hochschild to describe the hours of housework and childcare added to a woman's work day. Women spend a first shift at work and have a second shift when they return home every day.

implications for women's lives and gender equality, that this study is about. As I will explain, I contend that motherhood is probably the biggest obstacle to gender equality, and I believe that this motherhood myth is a contributor to the "stalled gender revolution" (Hochschild, 2003 ; England, 2010 ; Gerson, 2011 ; Risman, 2004). This notion of the myth or shock of motherhood is not only the product of personal experience; it is addressed in sociology and women's studies (Maushart, 2000; O'Reilly 2007; Stone, 2007), in newspaper and magazine articles (Slaughter, 2012; Walker 2008), on "mommy blogs," and in literary essays (Enright, 2012; Lamott, 2005; Rich, 1976; Walker, 2008). This is not a complaint about how having children is a horrible experience. On the contrary, motherhood is a wonderful adventure, rich and intense, one I would do again even if I already knew all that I know now<sup>2</sup>. I wonder, though, how it can be so veiled, so unexpected, so misunderstood, and how different things would be if mothers—and the people around them (bosses, friends, co-workers)—had a better idea of what being a mother really means.

The sociological literature on the subjects of motherhood and gender equality has not explored this phenomenon that I propose to study, and which I believe contributes to most of the obstacles to true equality: the gap between women's expectations of motherhood and their lives as new mothers; the difference between their imagined life with children and the reality of raising a family. There are related subjects in the sociological literature that I will present in the last chapter: the burden of the second shift and the notion of work–life balance, which are accentuated when children are in the picture; the opt-out phenomenon; and the ideology of intensive mothering. Many sociologists of gender or family deplore an unfinished gender revolution (England, 2010, Gerson 2011; Hochschild, 1989; Risman, 2004), and my research,

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<sup>2</sup> I did, however, give up on the original plan of having three children.

centered on mothers' expectations vs. experiences, would enrich the academic discussion on gender equality in general. I am framing this study within the literature on gender equality and motherhood because I believe that motherhood is one of last frontiers to true equality. The purpose of the study, before I started the interviews, was both to describe and examine the gap between women's expectations of motherhood and their actual experience as new mothers and to try to understand how young women come to internalize this vision of motherhood. The purpose is not to study how women balance their family with work, but how they rearrange their previous life plans and preconceived ideas with the new reality of their lives as mothers, which should give clues to how this phenomenon may affect gender equity. In the conclusion I make propositions to modify this idealized image of motherhood in American society in general. The themes addressed in the sociological literature on mothering—the cultural contradiction of motherhood, the opting-out phenomenon, and challenges of work–life balance— affect mothers of all women the most. However, the literature fails to address directly and in depth this question of expectations vs. reality, the myth of motherhood, an absence that likely contributes to the persistence of gender inequality. I intend to fill this gap by asking several research questions. First:

- What expectations of motherhood did women hold before having their first child, and how does the reality differ from their imagined life as the mother of a young child?

I follow this with three questions derived from the main interrogation about a gap between expectation and reality, which this study started to answer:

1. What contributes to the existence of a motherhood myth among college-educated women like these?

2. How do women deal with these unexpected challenges of motherhood? How do they adjust their life goals in response?

3. How does this gap between expectations and reality affect mothers' lives, at home and at work?

Among other findings, this research will reveal that mothers' expectations of motherhood differ in many respects from their actual lives with children. The taboo and resulting silence (including from other mothers) regarding the reality of motherhood contributed to the illusions about it, bolstered by the societal message women received growing up that they had equal chances and standing to men. Mothers adjusted by accepting, resisting, changing their life plans, and finding solace in a feeling of agency, but not without a cost to their well-being, their families' peace, and their own future prospects.

I used several frameworks to conduct this study, which will be centered in social constructivist and interpretive perspectives. In the first chapter on methods, I explain how I use interpretive ethnography, case studies, and ethnodrama to uncover and fight the motherhood myth: I conducted an auto-ethnography and interviewed two other women in depth. With the findings from those interviews I crafted a play where the three of us exchange our motherhood stories. The second chapter is a prologue to the play, in which I first anchor my work in the third-wave feminist movement, especially adapted to my endeavor; I also call attention to the fact that biology should not be ignored in a discussion of gender equality and motherhood. The next three chapters are the three acts of the play that presents my findings from the three case studies that I conducted. Each scene of this ethnodrama represents an aspect of the myth, a disillusion, based on a lived experience. Chapter 7, "The Myth Stalls The Revolution," discusses the stalled gender

revolution—how it affects mothers especially, and how the motherhood myth surely play a role in the revolution’s stagnation.

This work sheds light on how this myth of motherhood takes shape, how it is transmitted and reinforced by culture and interpersonal expectations. It highlights the consequences of this phenomenon on family life, on women's mental health, and on women’s feelings of inadequacy. All this emphasizes the role of motherhood in the stalled gender revolution. By highlighting the oppressive nature of this situation, I wish not just to address how to cope but to lay out what should change. This study should contribute to raising feminist consciousness among mothers, to making readers aware that the status quo is not acceptable and that they must demand an honest, realistic appreciation of their situation in lieu of the long-romanticized version. In this dissertation I use the word “myth”, singular, to represent a phenomenon that in reality encompasses multiple myths. I argue that this motherhood myth makes mothers’ lives very difficult and contributes to gender inequality. My first tentative title was the *Shock of Motherhood* because that is what I felt back then, when I became a mother. But as I kept investigating, I found out that the shock of motherhood is due to the many myths that are central to women’s experience. The Myth of Motherhood is the false, idealized image of what motherhood should be, how a mother should act and behave, held by women before having children, and by society as a whole. That myth puts impossible expectations on mothers. The causes of the myth are multiples and not all understood yet, but they are in part an unwanted heritage of second wave feminism that demanded that women be treated like men, without taking maternity into account. The Myth is cultural, linked to the image of the good mother and to traditional gender expectations on women. It is linked to the economic system that penalizes mothers and puts enormous pressure on them to raise perfect, successful citizen-workers. The

consequences of the myth on women are shock, exhaustion, isolation, guilt that reverberate negatively on the family and the community.

This study is significant because the subject has been overlooked in sociology. The problems faced by the women in this study may appear minimal when compared with the lives of women who are poor, less educated, or mothering alone. After all, the women in my study have more than enough resources to live good lives, and improving their condition is not the most pressing concern in terms of social justice. However, the findings on motherhood for this privileged population have implications regarding gender equality for all groups of women. If those who are thought to have it all actually don't, what does that imply for marginalized women? Addressing the myth is important because women themselves are reluctant to talk about it, preferring to find ways to cope, "balance," or laugh their situation off. And the important people in their lives hold this same romanticized image of motherhood. Employers, husbands, colleagues—all need to hear these women's reality, to hear it seriously, over and over.

Finally, the study takes place at a time when the debate around working mothers' situation, their duties and responsibilities, is fierce. The "mommy wars" between stay-at-home moms and working moms seems to have been appeased, but a new war among ultraprivileged career women is taking its place. On one side is Anne-Marie Slaughter, professor of politics at Princeton and director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department from 2009 to 2011. She explained in the *Atlantic* (August 2012) why having both children and a successful career was today next to impossible for women: "the women who have managed to be both mothers and top professionals are superhuman, rich, or self-employed." On the opposite side is Sheryl Sandberg, businesswoman and COO of Facebook, who in her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) exhorts women to work harder and be more ambitious to succeed. Meanwhile at

Yahoo, president, CEO, and new mother Marissa Mayer (who went back to work a few days after the birth of her first child, with a nursery created next to her executive suite) is calling telecommuters back to the office, putting an end to the company's flexible culture, one undoubtedly precious to new mothers without access to nannies or on-site nurseries.

## Chapter 2

### Methods

For this dissertation, I conducted a multicase study, one of them an autoethnography, of three women. These were studied as intrinsic cases (Stake 2005) following the Method of Instances<sup>3</sup> (Denzin 1999; Psathas 1995), meaning that every individual case was studied in depth and independently from the others. (This differs from the collective case approach, where cases are analyzed in terms of generic and specific properties.) However, as stated in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, "No individual case is ever an individual or a case. He or she must be studied as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). This choice of methods is also in line with third-wave feminist scholarship that insists on not generalizing women's experiences, which are different and unique to each woman. My intent was not to generalize my findings to all women, but to recognize that although unique, every woman's experience is likely to be shared, in parts, by many others. I had

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<sup>3</sup> "This method takes each instance of a phenomenon as an occurrence that evidences the operation of a set of cultural understandings currently available for use by cultural members" (Denzin, cybertalk and the method of instances)

my participants interact with each other fictionally, in a play, and linked their experiences to already studied social and cultural phenomena (see chapter 7). In this chapter I present the different methods I followed: intrinsic case studies, interpretive autoethnography, ethnodrama, critical ethnography, standpoint theory, and third-wave feminist approach to writing women's stories. Those call for social justice and social change, which are at the core of my dissertation.

### **Interpretive Autoethnography/Performance Ethnography**

I used several frameworks to conduct this study, centered on Social Constructivist and Interpretive perspectives. Interpretive Interactionism, as philosophical framework and method, directed how I framed, conducted, interpreted, and presented my project. Interpretive Interactionism "attempts to make the meaning that circulates in the world of lived experience accessible to the reader, . . . capture and present the voices, emotions and actions of those studied. The focus of Interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences. . . . Interpretive interactionism speaks to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal trouble" (Denzin 2001, pp. 1–2). Soyini Madison's Critical Ethnography principles also guided this project, in that the goal of my research is not only to listen to and study a group of women but also to advocate for gender equality, to try to expose the likely oppressive nature of the myth of motherhood, and to share the results of this work with other women by writing in a style that is accessible and respectful of their experience. This study is based on autoethnography. My life as a mother informed and guided my research into the subject of the shock/myth of motherhood. But beyond insight alone, I studied my own experience as a mother,

as a participant, along with the other women's narratives (see Laurel Richardson, Carloyn Ellis, Adina Nack, Susan Krieger, Sophie Tamas). To that end, I used notes I took during the first years of my children's lives, journaling I did as a way to collect information on my own experience, memories, pictures, emails I wrote over the years, and unforgettable feelings. My attraction for interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2014) derives from my conviction that any objectivity claim is an illusion and that personal stories matter. As a researcher, I chose to use my life story, contextualized, critiqued, and analyzed vis-à-vis social context and cultural practices (Jones, Adams, Ellis, 2014 ; Bochner and Ellis. 2016),, to help better understand sociological problems, in this case gender equality.

### **Case studies**

This study is based on the lives of three mothers, each an intrinsic case (Stake, 2005) studied independently and approached according to the method of instances (Psathas, 1995). I embrace the presupposition of the Universal Singular (Sartre, 1981). I will explain here how I selected these women and conducted the study.

The woman at the origin of this study is me. I realized, early in my motherhood, that many aspects of this new experience were very much unexpected, in stark contrast with what I imagined life as a mother to be. The ideas of the shock and myth of motherhood imposed themselves on me as I lived them. Later on, through speaking with other women, I found that my own inadequacies and illusions were not the source of the shock—rather, that feeling of surprise was widely shared. I decided then to explore this subject by formally interviewing in depth other women my age. We, the participants, are similar in many respects—race, class, gender,

sexuality, age, education, number of children, life plans. This homogeneity permitted the exchange I stage in the play: the three women, relating in many ways to each other's stories, start talking, opening up, sharing their experiences and feelings. They are all white women; Kate is American, Marie is French, I am both. I interviewed the other two separately; they never met and did not hear about one another. These mothers are typical of a generation of independent, educated women, who have benefited from the feminist battles of the 1960s. Had we been born half a century earlier, we would probably have been programmed to be happy stay-at-home mothers from the start, but thanks to the second wave we were raised very differently. We were taught that we could do anything with our lives, we went to school and were encouraged to study, and we were told that there were no limits to what we could achieve professionally. We were equals to men, who would now share housework and the boardroom. Each of us realized after having a child, however, that this was not quite true. It is this surprise, this myth that I wanted to try to understand better through the case studies. The three of us, independently, acculturated in different countries, believed we would be equals to our male colleagues, to our partners and husbands at work, in society, in the family. According to our stories, however—not so much. Names and identifying attributes have been modified to respect the privacy of the three participants and their families.

I am Delphine, French but also a recently naturalized American. I was born 40 years ago in the North of France, in an upper middle-class family. My father was an anesthesiologist and my mother a former nurse who stopped working when I was born, to raise me and my younger brother and sister. Staying at home to raise her children, like her own mother did, was her choice. The only thing she wanted was to be a mother, full-time. On the contrary, I, like most French girls born in the 70s was raised to have a career and a family simultaneously, in a country that

offers generous maternity leave, affordable childcare, and a school system that is in sync with the parents' work schedule. In my mind, growing up, it was obvious that I would have a good job like the boys in my class, especially considering that I was a very good student. After attending public school like most French children, I entered Sciences-Pô, one of the French elite schools focused on political studies, with the goal to get entry in the best and most selective journalism graduate school in the country. At 25 years old, with my Master's Degree in hand and after a short internship I went to work in Paris for the main French national news magazine, writing on social issues that I was passionate about. Professionally I had accomplished my goal; I was where I wanted to be, on the best track to a prestigious and exciting career. But at that time, I was also in a relationship with a man that I had met four years before while studying abroad in the United States, my senior year in college. It was clear for me during that year in California that it was just a parenthesis, an adventure, an enriching experience, but that I was going back to graduate school to become a journalist and work in the national press in Paris where I would have a family a few years down the road. I knew that I wanted children, but having a career was the first step, the first building block of my adult life. The children would come after that, in my early 30s. I would have both. I knew it. I had even made a plan, in case I hadn't met the right person at the right time, to have children on my own. I would raise them and could meet a partner later on. I did not think at the time that would be more difficult than that. As long as I had the money, the job, the life experience I thought, the rest was a question of organization. But my plan did not turn out that way: At the end of my year abroad, I went back to France and during those two years in grad school I and my boyfriend traveled back and forth between France and San Diego. As soon as he was done with his PhD and I got my MA, we moved to Paris where we both worked. The plan was to stay there and start a family, but he was not happy there and not

satisfied with his professional prospects in France. He convinced me that our lives would be better if we moved to the United States where he could find employment as a university professor. Besides having achieved what I had trained for professionally, I agreed to follow him to his dreams and ambition. I was flexible and could free-lance, write, and it was time to start a family. I spent the next 15 years raising two wonderful boys who are now 7 and 10 years old, first in vibrant Los Angeles, and then for the past 10 years in a small Midwest campus town where his job took us. While raising our small children, I studied for a PhD in sociology, working part-time as a TA and RA. I volunteered at my children's schools and activities, sat on boards where I created an elementary school, and helped produce ballet performances my children took part in. The next step after getting my PhD was to spend my time writing books and expand my mother's retail company to the US. At the time of the interviews, if I could be anything, I would be a published writer on social issues, education, and women's rights. I wanted to write in French, to reconnect professionally with my country. I wanted some peace and some time for myself to rebuild a carrier. It was the plan, it was supposed to be my turn, but my husband, the main provider, soon to be Full Professor, did not see it that way anymore. He wanted the family to move California to a more prestigious university. I felt for the first time that my choice to forgo my career and follow my husband might be turning into a trap; that I did not have a say and that what mattered above all was his career. From his perspective, I did not have anything to loose professionally and I could work anywhere he wanted to go. While I thought my marriage was as equal as they get, I realized that on most important decisions I was always compromising and following my husband's career. I am a feminist and always made sure the second shift was shared. I organized everything but my husband and I shared the daily housework, childcare, carpooling. I was surprised early on to realize that besides this sharing of

tasks, mothering took a lot more work on my part, that it was physically and emotionally draining, and a lot more demanding than what I expected before having children; a lot more difficult to combine with work than I thought. I found nursing exhausting, as was the lack of sleep for many months with children who did not go to bed easily. I did not expect them to be sick so often, to miss childcare and school so many times. I did not foresee being so scared for them, such as when my oldest son had a febrile seizure and I thought he was dying, or when his brother fell off his bike and came home with blood dramatically flowing down his neck. Both events were more scary than serious in the end, but this fragility made me realize I would have this weight on my mind, this worry forever. I never wanted to be a stay at home mother but once a mother I could not imagine raising my children with a full time career, at the cost of my children's well being. Motherhood was obviously an obstacle to my professional career but I convinced myself that this motherhood parenthesis, advancing my education and preparing a different career while having some time home with the kids was the right thing to do. Moreover, putting my husband's career first at that time sounded like a good financial choice for our family. I never thought of this as a risky arrangement for me and trusted our partnership, until a few months ago when I realized that because I did not have a career, I did not have a say in the trajectory of the family and was expected to follow in his steps, move where he wanted to move, spend money the way he wanted to spend. I tend to justify my choices by saying that I find more value in the richness of a varied life course, thinking in terms of life phases rather than a more traditional linear path. Additionally, for me, no career is more important than raising happy and well-adjusted children. When I compares the French and American model of motherhood and family policy, I feel a lot is lacking here in the United States, but know that things are not perfect in France either, where most of my employed girlfriends end up doing most of the work at home.

They just do it with more peace of mind. The only remedy to this in my opinion would be to force men to be more involved, thanks to mandatory paternal leave for instance. Sexism and gender stereotypes in France are the biggest barriers to gender equality and a more peaceful motherhood.

Marie is a close friend since college 20 years ago. We went to the same undergraduate school, where we became very close friends, a friendship that continued afterward. I decided to ask her to participate when I realized how little I recognized the mother I thought she would be. Having known her at our entry into adulthood and since, I was interested to delve into her life story of the past decade, leading to our motherhoods and current situations. Marie grew up in the North of France, in a middle class family where both parents worked outside the home. Her mother got her PhD in sociology when Marie was in high school but worked as Director of a beauty school, a business she started with a friend and ended up running alone until retirement. She worked a lot and instilled her daughter with principles of independence, feminism and the importance above all of having a career and not depending on a man to earn a living. She regularly helped Marie with homework, making sure she was a successful student, which was the case. Marie went to public school and then passed the entry exam to a very selective political studies school. She got her bachelor's degree and continued to study communication and marketing in graduate school while working in the PR office of a TV newschannel. She spent her 10 years career there, climbing the ladder to head PR of one of this media group division. She spent long hours at work during that time and could not imagine how to raise children on such a demanding schedule. Her main focus until she quit in 2009 was work. After that, she took a less demanding position at a production company run by a friend, that was better suited to her while she was pregnant with her first child. In 2012 when her daughter was born, she went on

maternity leave, which was coming to an end in 2015 during the interviews. Even though she had the opportunity, she did not plan on going back to work as before. Almost 40 years old, she wanted to be available physically to take care of her one-year-old baby boy and 3-year-old daughter. This is very different from what she imagined growing up. She always thought she would have a career and not depend on a man to earn the money, the exact opposite situation she was in at the time of the interviews. She was surprised to be relying on her husband for her living expenses, but said it did not bother her because she felt what was most important was to be able to take care of her children, and not working outside the home made this possible. Her husband earns a very good salary which makes her life comfortable and enables her to hire a lot of help from a full time nannie and cleaning lady. Today, she says the career she had is enough for her; she “did it” already and she is proud of it. It was demanding, exciting, but incompatible with motherhood and she says she had hit a glass ceiling anyway. Ideally, if she could do anything she wanted, she would like to work for a non-profit helping women and children, and start a retail company. Her life is socially exciting due to the position of her husband, but she is in the shadows and it seems to bother her at times. She expresses that she is sometimes uncomfortable, when asked what she does for a living, to have to respond that she takes care of her children at home. She found the physical and emotional part of pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing all consuming and overwhelming. For all those reasons she insists she will not have another child. She does not want to go through pregnancy and childbirth again, which was physically traumatic for her. She did not breast-feed because she did not feel comfortable doing it. It was important to her to be back the same as before physically, to take care of the husband, to remain attractive and not put baby first all the time. She was making sure to cultivate her couple that she felt could be endangered by an all-consuming motherhood. She went on trips early on without her babies,

reluctantly, to please her husband and keep the family strong. The need to be available 24/7, to have a human being dependent on her at all times without break is one of the most challenging aspects of motherhood. She also feels the pressure to do more, teach more to her children and compares herself to other mothers whom she feels do a better job than she does, or are more available, less tired. To make things worse, she is married to a man who falls into traditional gender roles. He does not do any household work or childcare. Her way to work around this is to hire a lot of help: she employs a nanny 35 hours a week and also a cleaning lady. Her children are in public childcare several days a week. She knows that she could not have continued her career in PR and raise children the way she wanted, by being present and available each day. Her career demanded insane hours, as she explained and she would not have seen her daughter if she had accepted the amazing job she was offered at a national radio station in Paris just before she was pregnant with her second child. Being present for their homework everyday, teaching them by talking to them a lot is extremely important to her. She does not want them to learn from the nannie, as it happens in some well to do families, because she feels that a nanny is not a good enough role model and educator for her children. She had abandoned her career she described as incompatible with motherhood before having children, so in a sense she did not give it up because of motherhood. She had however clearly anticipated that move. She frames this as a choice, a new phase in her life, with more freedom; and she insists that she is very happy about her choice. This gives her a sense of agency, like many women who opt out and frame their decision as theirs only. She has a close relationship with the nannie who spends a lot of time in her house, by her side. Now that she has two children, Marie is often with the oldest and the nannie with the baby. They call each other by their first name and the nannie seems to be very close to her children. The nannie has a daughter who is a senior in high school and occasionally

babysits their or their friends' children. Marie knows that she is very privileged and lucky to be an affluent French mother, who benefits from a lot of help from public services and private employment of household staff. But she would like to see her husband participate more in the second shift. She is infuriated by the sexism and expectation from men in her social circle to be served by their partners and wives. More gender equality in the home is the most sensitive issue in her motherhood. She lives in a beautiful house in an upscale Provençal village. She was enthusiastic to participate in this project and tell me her story of motherhood. She is still in the early years, in the midst of the big discoveries and surprises, which participant Kate and I experienced a few years ago. The insights made possible by Marie's and my closeness, friendship, and history together gave me a more detailed picture of her experience and choices than if she were a stranger.

Kate, who was a stranger to me before I asked her to participate is a 45 years old American woman, mother of a 10-year-old girl and a 7-year-old boy. She grew up in the United States, in Rochester NY, feels at odds with the economic model and rejects the inhumane lack of social and family policies, issues she has written extensively about in blogs and articles. She grew up in middle class catholic family. Her parents were poor when they met and very young; they married at 18 and 19 years old. Her dad is an engineer and executive who was professionally very successful. Her mother was a homemaker, keeping a perfect house, baking cookies and meeting her girlfriends for wine or tea in the afternoon. She suffered from bouts of depression and seemed to regret not to have had a career. She wanted to go back to school but never did it, and Kate felt that at times she harbored some resentment towards her husband and children for her situation. Kate paints her as an intelligent woman whose potential was wasted in a way. Now that she is a mother herself, she admires her dedication and realizes the work that

was put into keeping such a spotless house and organized household, a model Kate feels she does not measure up to. As a child, she did not aspire to be like her mother; her father was her role model, her hero. He died of cancer when she was pregnant with her first child, which was a major trauma in Kate's life and tinted her motherhood with post-traumatic stress and depression. Younger, she attended high school in England and loved the experience that made her feel everything was possible professionally in her future. She also saw that another social model was possible that did not involve spending all your time in an office convincing everyone that you are very busy. While growing up, her mother and father made her feel that she could do all she wanted, that she was smart, talented and as a result she had no doubt she would be successful. She always knew that she would be married and have children at some point, "because that is what people do" she says, but her future motherhood was never in her mind until it happened. After college, where she studied journalism as an undergraduate, she worked a few years as a regional editor and reporter for suburban newspapers. She was then employed as marketing manager for Xerox where her father worked, until 2005 after her daughter was born and she decided to stay home with her. She soon felt isolated and started blogging on her motherhood, which led to a new career in freelance writing, editing and marketing online, mostly on parenting. She is now working freelance for a main employer: SAP, a big German software company that provides a good and consistent income and gives her control over her schedule. This is not what she wanted to be when she grew up, when she dreamed of writing, reporting and adventure. But she seems happy to have a job that she makes fit into her motherhood and not the opposite. When asked what she could be if she could be anything she wanted, she just replies that she wants a break, wants to stay home for a while and not have to run, worry and stress about money and bringing the bacon. She seems very proud of the free-lance career that she

carved for herself but she is a bit burned out. The other thing she would like to be different is her location. She hates the town and the Midwest in general and yearns to go back East in what she feels is a more vibrant and socially warmer place. She is waiting for her husband to finish his dissertation to go back with her family to Rochester. She followed her husband to the Midwest, but from now on it is clear to her that her husband and family will follow her. She will go back with or without him. Pregnancy, childbirth and the early years of her children were very painful for her in many ways. She suffered from post-partum depression with both her children. She was also very ill at the end of her second pregnancy and almost died of an anaphylactic shock from an iron infusion. Her first daughter was diagnosed with OCD when she was 7 years old and Kate almost died a second time after a hysterectomy, which was followed by an infection, sepsis and then a clot that traveled to her lungs. While mothering, she felt judged for not breast-feeding and not being the typical perfect mother in general. It is surprising, even to her, based on her upbringing and early ambitions, that she fell into very traditional roles. She, who previously only had eyes for her work and adventure, started taking on the role of stay at home mom little by little. She felt compelled to stay home with her daughter, even though she did not love the day-to-day grind. She did the night feedings at first because she did not work, but kept those responsibilities after she got back to work, event though her husband, a doctoral student, did not work. At his request, she protects his time to write, and does most of the housework and organization. She does not use housework help consistently but at times has hired cleaning companies, and baby sitters that provided her for a few hours of writing time during the day. In order to make her work-life compatible with her maternal responsibilities, she chose to work freelance and make her work fit into her motherhood rather than the opposite. She feels that she could not have been employed and having raised her children at the same time. She says that

they were sick all the time, so she would have probably been fired from a typical job, and the illness of her daughter makes her presence by her side very important. She thinks that American family policy and the corporate world are wrong on many aspects: she wants more maternity leave to give mothers the months needed to recover from childbirth. She demands more affordable childcare, a more relaxed work culture, and universal healthcare. She yearns for a system closer to the European socio-economic model that she experienced as a teenager and now with her German employer. I first read about Kate through her writings on the local parenting website she had launched soon after moving to the Midwest. I was going to ask her to recommend participants, but I soon realized she was the one I wanted to talk to. All the writing she published over the years, her daily journal and blog posts, gave me precious insight into her experiences, which she expanded in our interviews.

Kate and Marie both jumped at the chance to speak about their experiences when I told them about my research project. After the birth of my first child, I found that most mothers I met (through my children's activities, at school, at birthday parties, and so on) had the same reaction upon hearing about my research subject: They were keenly interested in the enterprise and discretely shared some of their lives and feelings in impromptu conversations. During the formal interviewing with both of my participants, we often had to cancel, reschedule, or postpone a meeting because a child or one of us was ill, or work demands collided with family events and obligations. It would have been easier to give up, or insist on fewer sessions, but they both kept at it. I met with Kate in a cafe five times for a couple of hours each, and I interviewed Marie in her living room for about as much time. But I had a deeper access to both women's experiences and emotions than through those interviews only—with Kate by reading her blog posts<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> I collected, read and analyzed more than 200 of Kate's blog posts. Some are just a few lines and others a page. A citation accompanies the few that I cited literally.

articles, written as her motherhood unfolded, and with Marie, by being close friends before and after children.

*October 24 2014*

*Hi Delphine!*

*I'm so sorry to do this but I have a sick kid today. Can we reschedule again? I understand if you need to choose another subject. Otherwise I'm happy to meet next week.*

*Kate*

Kate and I had several false starts, with many failed attempts to meet when one of us had to cancel for illness, travel, too much work. But finally the day comes. I arrive at a campus café that has been Kate's office for the last few years. She needs that physical and emotional distance from home, at first to escape the chaos of the kids, more recently to get space from her husband, who writes his dissertation from home. She sends me a text saying she will be 10 minutes late. In the meantime I order a mint tea and make myself comfortable at a booth near a window. It is her usual spot, she says, when she gets here, hurried and apologetic. I start by explaining my project, and she seems very interested and excited to participate. Obviously overwhelmed, overworked, overstressed, she found my subject "important" enough to give me those precious hours. But the decision may have been for her benefit as well: an opportunity to share, an attempt at changing the status quo, however disillusioned she says she is.

Meeting with Marie for 2-hour stretches was not easy either: *"I am sorry I couldn't make it this afternoon, it was a war zone here today,"* says one of her texts. I was her neighbor for three months, and we barely had time for those one-on-one interviews. I list here some of the

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questions<sup>5</sup> I asked both Kate and Marie. In the flow of conversation, many other questions arose. I also adapted the questions based on what was said during a previous session. Along with all the joys and wonders of motherhood that are visible from the outside, the interviews exposed buried feelings, desires, regrets, surprises, difficulties. They revealed inner thoughts and coping strategies:

- "When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?" As they talk, I listened to see what happened to change their trajectories.
- What did you think motherhood would be like when you were in high school? College? Graduate school?
- What did others tell you about motherhood, and what did you observe about being a mother from family and friends?
- Now that you are a mother, how would you describe what it is like to be a mother?
- How do you feel that you are doing as a mother?
- What are two things that you would change about being a mother?
- How did having children affect your career or career goals?
- Did you face obstacles at work after becoming a mother?
- Did having a child change any other life plans?
- Did you expect that change?
- Ideally, where would you like to be in your career now?
- If you could do anything that you like, what would you do?

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<sup>5</sup> Before starting the interviews, I submitted my study to the UIUC IRB, which approved my protocol.

- Who helps you with the children each day of the week? What type of help do they provide?
- Is your life as a mother different from what you expected before having children? How is it different?
- Were your expectations of motherhood different when you were in high school/college/ graduate school/when you got married? Did you discuss these expectations with your partner before having a child?
- If so, what contributed to this misperception?
- Would your experience as a mother be different if you knew from the beginning what you know now?
- If you could change something in your situation as a mother and working woman, what would be different?
- Is the participation of the father in taking care of the children what you expected? How do you feel about the way you share parenting tasks?
- Do you talk honestly about the difficulties and disillusion of motherhood, if any, with your friends, partner, colleagues, and family?
- Do people around you understand what you are experiencing as a mother?
- Do you feel that other mothers are more or less in the same situation as you? Why or why not?
- Where do, and where did, you get your information on mothering? What do you look for in those sources ?

Through the interviews I also identified life circumstances that affect women's expectations, through questions such as these: Did your mother work? Full-time? What was the view of your mother's parenting? How was her work–life balance? Did you ever babysit for working mothers or provide childcare or work as a camp counselor? What are your parents' occupations and education? I also spent a session with each participant making a life-history calendar (adapted from Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987), which gave me a timeline of major life events over a 15-year period, ending with the present. After I gathered all the information from interviews, journals, and memories I transcribed the recorded interviews, analyzed them, and started writing the play. I explain the process below.

## **Ethnodrama**

This work is my first attempt at ethnodrama<sup>6</sup> (see Saldana, Denzin, Madison, Tamas), a format where my study's findings are analyzed and presented in a play. I chose that methodology because it incarnates the participants' stories, animates them, making the reader aware that the issues discussed are not merely theoretical but affect real people. I am deeply convinced that this format of dialogue and actions is the most efficient way to get my message across to the reader, even if the drama is only read and not actually performed on stage by actors. The women tell their—normally hidden—stories themselves, directly, in their own voices. They expose the

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<sup>6</sup> "Ethnotheatre employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or the researcher's interpretations of data. This research-meaning, to investigate, in its broadest sense-can be conducted by artists, scholars, or even by the participants themselves in such diverse fields of study as sociology, anthropology, psychology, education, health care, women's studies, justice studies, ethnic studies, cultural studies, political science, journalism, human communication, performance studies, and theatre. The goal is to investigate a particular facet of the human condition for purposes of adapting those observations and insights into a performance medium." (Saldana, 2005, p1)

motherhood myth and let their masks down. The play is one day in these women's lives, but it also condenses 20 years for each woman in that exchange.

Before structuring and writing the play, I analyzed the interviews, blog posts, and articles as well as my own documentations on my experience. Following this immersion in our stories and based on the emerging themes, I structured the play in three acts, divided into several scenes. I used dialogue from my interviews: Some of the sentences in the play are reproduced verbatim, others are edited to fit the format, and a small part of the dialogue was made up (small talk mostly), based on what I imagined one of the women would say if she were in the situation. I made a point to be truthful to Marie's and Kate's personalities and the views they expressed to me. I also used excerpts from blogs, news articles, emails, and journal entries. The play was written specifically and solely for this dissertation, where I felt I needed to explain through dialogue more than I may have for a different readership. The play can be performed or read. When I rewrite the play for publication, I will imply more than I say, and show more than I tell. Every act should be seen as a chapter representing a different theme of my findings. After writing the play, I framed it with two more traditional chapters linked directly to the myth. I anchored my study in the third-wave and feminist-standpoint approaches and emphasized its role in the stalled feminist evolution.

## **Style**

The style of the dissertation, an autoethnographic performance, is supposed to be accessible, direct, and readable by nonacademics. I use a language that might seem informal, unadorned and simple compared to the typical academic text, and this is to achieve a goal of

clarity and proximity with the people directly concerned with the issues presented. I observe third-wave feminist principles that avoid jargon and call for interdisciplinarity. This work is sociological in its nature, but I want to borrow from and speak to other disciplines. The third wave also emphasizes that every experience is unique. This is true not only because of major differences including race, gender, sexuality, age, and class, but because even among those categories, each experience is different and can't be generalized, which is why I avoided drawing grand theories from my participants' experiences. In their stories, these women expose what I call the Motherhood Myth, which both experienced. I report that which is a reality for at least the three of us, and for some of our friends, but I am not saying it is true for everyone. As much as I attempt in the last chapter to link our motherhood narrative to trends established by previous sociological studies, I can only speak for the three of us, trying to understand the "how" rather than the "why," as Denzin's Interpretive Interactionism manual instructs (Denzin, 2001, p. 44, 71). However, I agree with sociologist Susan Krieger that "none of us can speak for all women, but we can certainly share our different kinds of insights and borrow understandings from one another where that seems helpful." Like Krieger, in talking about the existence of myth and explaining that it contributes to the stalled gender revolution, I generalize, because as she points out, "Although I claim no universality I think similarities exist among different women's experiences, despite crucial differences of race, class, culture, and more. I think similarities appear because women occupy subordinate statuses in our various contexts, and because we have had certain types of functions through history, some associated with reproduction and physical attributes, and others not" (Krieger, 1996, p. 1). I believe that the best way to understand an issue from all sides and in depth is to multiply the types of studies using different methods and theoretical approaches. My present contribution falls into the domain of the personal, critical,

performative, epiphanic. Those types of stories have the power to raise consciousness, deeply needed today by women, many of whom seem to have gotten used to inequality.

The play is a multilayered rendering of my work, observations, interviews, personal experiences and reflections, readings, and analyses over the year. All the analyses and comments in this manuscript stem from my own experience, interviews with women, observations of popular culture, debates in the media, and feminist/gender scholarship readings. The methodology that I use is not traditional, and the form is not either. This dissertation is a space of experimentation, my attempt to create something new on many levels while building on the existing body of work in sociology.

A few words on what might be perceived as weaknesses of this study<sup>7</sup> The issue of recall bias can be raised, but women's perceptions are at the center of this study, and the participants' memories, exact or not, testify to their experience of the event they recall. Moreover, they are still living their motherhood, and a lot of what they talk about happened today, or yesterday. I also am aware that I claim to work for social justice, while this study is centered on a privileged population (middle and upper-middle class, educated). Nevertheless, gender inequality is a social injustice, and a realistic view of motherhood would by extension benefit all women, especially those who live in the hardest conditions, through more understanding from employers and public policies that are more family friendly.

I trust readers to make their own conclusions, to question or agree with some of my own interpretations and analyses of this problem. I am not imposing knowledge, nor do I pretend that this issue is settled as a result of my inquiry. This study is one small piece of a complex puzzle.

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<sup>7</sup> Because of the fact that I use my own story in this work, the lack of objectivity of the researcher can be seen as a problem. This is however inherent to the frameworks and methods I chose (autoethnographic, Critical Interpretive). I recognize and disclose my subjectivity, as that of any researcher, and believe that my insight is a strength of this study. Readers are aware of it and are expected to use their own critical judgment when reading this work.

## Chapter 3

### Third-Wave Feminist Mothers Kill the Myth

*"Feminism doesn't do much better than Christianity, that proposed the impossible model of the virgin mother. Feminism which enabled so much progress couldn't deal with maternity . . . by putting everything on the freedom of the Women subject, it considered maternity as a . . . purely private matter, that everyone deals with in her own way. 'Be a mother and shut up!'"*  
(Knibiehler, 2007, p. 243)

My inquiry into the myth of motherhood is a sociological one. It uses Mills's sociological imagination and raises issues such as the second shift, agency, and other pillars of sociology of gender and the family. But the reach of these issues of gender equality is also multidisciplinary. This is the direction that feminist researchers, who have a goal of social justice in mind, must take in order to address inequality issues. For this reason, I root my approach in the third wave of feminism, a model that pushes for collaboration between academia and the rest of the world and

that speaks to women directly in their own language. By telling their stories, mothers can reveal the myth, raise consciousness, and hopefully restart the stalled gender revolution where the second wave left off. In this chapter, which is a prologue to the play I wrote on the shock and the myth of motherhood, I will introduce the third wave and its importance as a framework in a quest for more gender equality, for mothers in particular. The use of this framework reaffirms my choice of using individual cases and stories to enlighten my subject of inquiry. The women whose stories I chose are just three among many others. They don't represent all mothers, but many mothers may find similarities with their own stories, validating their experience further and giving them insight into their own lives. I also want to draw a parallel between the third wave and the sociological framework of Intersectionality, which make my approach even more relevant to the discipline.

Third-wave feminism is not a term typically used in the social sciences, including sociology. It is a label adopted by historians to make sense of the feminist movement, and it is discussed extensively in philosophy and English academic circles. The wave metaphor has been used to describe the latest version of the feminist movement, one that was officially born in the 1990s. It was coined by Rebecca Walker (daughter of writer Alice Walker) in an article in *Ms.* magazine about the 1992 Anita Hill hearing, which she ended by stating, "I am not a post-feminist feminist. I am the third-wave." The same year, Walker cofounded the Third Wave Foundation, which still works today for gender, racial, economic, and social justice. In the following years, several books that are considered the founding anthologies of the third wave were published, one of them by Rebecca Walker (1995), who edited *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Barbara Findlen gathered 30 essays in *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995), and then came *Colonize This! Young Women*

*of Color on Today's Feminism* (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002). These books, collections of personal stories from women who did not recognize themselves in the previous feminist movement, gave a voice to women who felt ignored by mainstream feminism and let them define "their" feminism. They write about their individual struggles, their personal issues, and what differentiates them from the generic American feminist (race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, cultural background). Many of the testimonies are from women of color. According to many of them, along with other activists and sociologists before (e.g., Collins, 1990; Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Anzaldua and Moraga, 1983), race and ethnicity are central to understanding the nature of the oppression they are submitted to, racial oppression that is compounded by gender, sexuality, or disability. In *Colonize This* (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002), women with various racial and ethnic identities (Black, Latina, Indian, Arabic, Korean among others) write of their individual struggles with sexism and racism, which are shaped and experienced within their specific communities and collide with the American mainstream feminist message. In her testimony, Soyon Im ponders, "While feminism gave me a community of other like-minded women, it didn't give me any clues on how to resolve the two different cultures, how to be both Korean and American, how to speak to my own mother" (p. 137). Stella Luna reveals the difficulties that Chicanas have in overcoming the guilt of being HIV-positive in the Latino community, "a culture that reduces women to their bodies" (p. 83). In a final example of the type of issues raised by these third-wave feminist narratives, Siobhan Brooks writes of her upbringing in the projects, raised by a mother with schizophrenia on welfare, and how her kind of experience is mostly ignored in women's studies. Mothers need to keep writing their stories of motherhood and mothering, all kinds of motherhood, including that of my participants, who are expected to have it all.

Later, to give more substance to the movement that was considered by its critics a little too personal and diluted in anecdotal narratives, more analytical and political books were published: *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (Baumgartner and Richards, 2002); *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Dicker and Piepmeier, 2003); *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Heywood and Drake, 1997). In *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Munford and Gillis 2004), the authors offer more of a theoretical analysis of the third wave. They consolidate its central ideas and clearly position the movement against postfeminism, rampant in the media and young women's minds. A chapter of *Catching a Wave* denounces the "False Feminist Death Syndrome" that permeates TV and print and gives a false sense that feminism isn't needed anymore. Third-wave writings violently reject and criticize the books of Katie Roiphe (1993), Naomi Wolf (1993), and Rene Denfield (1995, 1997) who claim that women have won equality and deplore that feminism portrays women as victims. This is exactly the discourse that pushes women, mothers in the case of my study, to hide their struggles, that takes away from them the right to ask for justice. To make sure that third-wavers are not confused with postfeminists, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake spell out the difference: "Postfeminist characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave." During the maturation of the third-wave movement, academic scholars in history, philosophy, women's studies, and occasionally sociology dissected the movement in the journals of their disciplines and analyzed its substance, name, goal, and methods. Aikau, Erickson, and Moore (2003), for instance, informed by their own experience with feminism, described the multiplicity of third-wave feminists and the inseparable connections between the successive waves. In fact, the third wave has been perceived by the previous generation as an unfair and unnecessary rejection of the

second wave, based on a false stereotype: critics say that third-wavers merely reject the caricature of the bra-burning, man-hating feminist prevalent in the media and popular culture. But the third wave does not reject the second wave ; instead it repositions the feminist movement in a different context, with an intersectional and inclusive approach. In *To Be Real*, Rebecca Walker explains the difficulty for today's women in identifying with feminism: "For many of us, it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad." This incompatibility called for a new definition of contemporary feminism, one that first and foremost aims to recognize and take into consideration women's differences. The third wave, very similar to intersectionality in that respect, is concerned not only with sexism but with all types of oppressions—racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism— and stresses that for many women, these characteristics intersect to create a complex case of compounded injustices. Third-wave feminists fight for social justice in a broad sense. According to these principles, there is no typical third-wave feminist, no single representative "Woman" to embody the movement. Third-wave feminists use personal narratives, individual stories as a way to disseminate knowledge about the condition of women, and they recognize the need for development of theory and quantitative studies by academics, so long as the theory is made readable and accessible by most women and takes that diversity of experience into account (Walker, 1995). They reject binary thought and welcome complexity and contradiction (cf. Collins, 1990)—contradiction within the movement, where not all women agree on all issues and where several feminist theories coexist

(cf. Barkley Brown, 1992), and contradiction within the individual, who is allowed to behave in ways that may be considered traditionally unfeminist but still call herself a feminist. This means that you can be a feminist and wear lipstick, shave your legs, not oppose porn, or like rap music, as long as it is your choice and desire.

### **Third Wave and Theory**

The third wave is a potpourri of previous coexisting or consecutive feminist ideologies. Those ideologies epitomize the notion that "feminist thought resists categorization into a tidy school of thought. Interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interlocking are the kind of adjectives that best describe the way feminists think" (Tong, 2009). The young feminist movement includes, welcomes, and recognizes the existence in one movement of different ideas from different strains of feminism, sometimes contradictory on specific issues such as femininity, motherhood, and pornography (radical cultural/radical libertarian feminists). Third-wavers pick and choose the aspects that matter most to their lives among different feminist theories and disciplines: psychoanalytic, multicultural, postcolonial, etc. The apparent contradiction is not a problem; on the contrary, it is actually necessary in order to create a movement that takes into account the complexity of reality, the differences in women's situations and oppressions (Heywood and Drake, 1997). This approach is a product of the poststructuralist and postmodern heritage that third-wavers adhere to, consciously or not: the rejection of binary thought and oversimplified explanation, categorization, and universalization of women's experience. It is not "women" against "patriarchy," but a multiplicity of feminine identities and experiences striving for equality in a complex climate of latent, covert, or obvious sexism doubled of racism, immersed

in a postfeminist culture. This acceptance and need to account for differences and multiplicity of oppression is mirrored in academia, within sociology, in the intersectionality theory developed by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) and *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology* (1998).

### **Intersectionality: "Third-wave" sociology**

While there is no direct relationship between intersectionality and third-wave feminism, they appeared around the same time and share a cultural background, many of their inspirations, and some of their ideas and goals. The enduring inequalities experienced especially by poor minority women, despite a vigorous and in many aspects successful feminist movement, have led activists and academics to combat these injustices. It is also clear that by nature, sociologists, whose role is to observe, analyze, and explain social phenomena, naturally mirror movements happening in society, such as the third-wave. Intersectionality is a theoretical framework, coined in 1987 by Kimberle Crenshaw, who described the relationship and coexistence of multiple oppressions. This concept was then further developed in sociology by Patricia Hill Collins (1998), who introduced the idea of matrix of domination, where "race, class, gender and sexuality are mutually constructing systems of oppression." In the intersectionality framework, these intersecting oppressions are believed to shape each other and to be reproduced by social institutions such as school, government, and the workplace. These oppressions change with time but do not disappear. According to intersectionality theorists, to analyze oppression by class, by race, or by gender separately does not represent actual individuals' situations. Race, class, gender, and sexuality, which were previously studied as discrete layers of oppression, have to be

studied together in order to understand the nature of these intertwined oppressions and to eventually inform public policy (Shields, 2008). The inherent complexity of the framework means this task poses many methodological problems to sociologists using it. Qualitative studies seem the most able to capture the complexity of such interwoven inequality (see Acker, 2006), but quantitative studies that give a macro-level image of the state and reproduction of inequalities (Mc Call, 2005) are very valuable and all the more challenging due to the amount of data necessary. Complexity and specificity of women's oppression are as central to intersectionality as they are to third-wave feminists.

With the ideas and methodology of the third-wave imprinted in the theoretical framework of intersectionality. Third-wave feminism and intersectionality contribute together to giving a new shape and substance to contemporary feminism, a social movement not only for gender equality but for social justice in general. The emergence of third-wave/intersectionality, born in the streets as the offspring of the second wave, inspired by the work and ideas of scholars as well as activists, seems like a natural evolution of the feminism movement. Although very critical of some aspects of second-wave feminism, the third-wave has the same end goal: it takes advantage of the gains made by the previous movement and bases its ideas on the theories that were borne at that time. Those of the third-wave have been inspired and influenced by the same thinkers and activists, especially women of color and lesbians, who raised their voices to make the exclusive "Woman" category irrelevant. Moreover, intersectionality scholars and third-wave feminists are the product of the same cultural and ideological context, dominated by postmodernism and poststructuralism, two schools of thought that resist categorization, binary ways of thinking, and oversimplification. In an article in *Social Problems*, Raka Ray, then a sociology professor at Berkeley, noticed the attraction of younger sociologists toward a poststructuralist framing of

feminism, which she says, makes other academics uneasy because of a lack of clear feminist political project. On the contrary, Ray sees in this theoretical move an opportunity to expand sociology. Here is how she views the added value of such an intersectionality framework: "those inspired by post-structuralists such as Joan Scott (1999) take this one step further and emphasize not just the interactive and intersectional effects of race, class and gender, but the discursive and material co-constitution of gender, race, sexuality, and class within different contexts." In short, postmodern and poststructuralist ways of thinking are a background influence for both third-wavers and intersectionality researchers, a key to understanding and eventually ending those coexisting oppressions. Claire Snyder explains the impact of postmodernism on the third-wave approach to feminist theory: "Because it responds to a fragmented postmodern world that has moved beyond grand narratives like Marxism and radical feminism, third-wave feminism does not attempt to present a unified vision with which every woman can agree. Consequently, third-wavers do not feel the need to spend a lot of time constructing ambitious theoretical analyses or justifying on what grounds they are acting; they just do it. Others can join them or do their own thing"(Snyder, 2008). Third-wavers such as Rebecca Walker and Leslie Heywood, among others, call on academics to write feminist scholarship accessible and useful to all women; to avoid jargon, categorization, or generic rules that oversimplify social phenomena. As I will detail later in this manuscript, these comments illustrate a specificity of third-wave feminists and many intersectionality scholars, who view standpoint theory as a way to account for differences, specificity of women's experience, and the pragmatic goal of social change.

In terms of timeline, there are no clear boundaries between the second and third-waves, because of the large contributions of feminist figures such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Gloria Anzaldua. These women are bridge builders between both generations of

feminists in the sense that their ideas are the foundation of the third-wave, but these women clearly belong to the generation of the second. In fact, many women are unable to choose which movement they belong to, claiming that they are a 2.5 (Purvis, 2004), or "a feminist between waves" (Kinser, 2004). This can be interpreted as a refusal to minimize the gains made by feminists in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s but at the same time an acknowledgment that something was missing from that feminism and that it surely does not fit in today's cultural context. Theories, frameworks, and methodology have all changed since the times of liberal feminism, but the progress in terms of gender equality in education and access to the public sphere is a product of the second-wave. The genesis of the third-wave movement and the development of the intersectionality approach constitute another demonstration that ideas, guiding principles, and theories are molded out of a cultural and social context. These young feminists claim the heritage of feminists of color who raised their voices for the recognition of their difference, of every woman's difference: Frances Beale, the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Patricia Hill Collins were among the first feminists to claim that difference, to insist that race, class, and gender oppression cannot be analyzed separately. This illustrates that the boundaries between the different waves and between the public space and academia are not set in stone and that they perpetually influence each other. This process of continuity is presented in sociological analysis as well. In an article about the contribution of African scholars to intersectionality, Assata Zerai unveils the process by which subjugated people are denied access to the creation of knowledge and thus social change: "If we blur the distinction between academic and organic knowledge, we create a space in which we can begin to appreciate the contribution of non-academic ways of knowing. . . . [It] is the blurring of this distinction that has facilitated the proliferation of feminist inquiry within the social science"

(2000). This aspect of intersectionality, also expressed by Collins (1998) and DeVault (1995), corresponds with third-wave feminists' belief in the necessity of listening to personal stories, of women in particular. This line of communication between subjugated peoples' narratives, academic writings, and elaboration of theory that can be used by activists to change social justice is central to intersectionality and third-wave feminism.

### **Standpoint for social justice**

The choice to look at interlocking systems of domination goes hand in hand with specific methodologies that take complexity into account. One of those methodologies is that of Standpoint Theory, employed or advocated by many feminists (Collins, 1990; Smith, 1987, 1990; Zerai, 2000). Standpoint Theory presupposes that an individual's personal experience can best unveil the mechanisms that lead to injustice and oppression and thus change it. Similarly, the works of third-wavers rely on personal narrative, women's individual stories that have to be understood as specific cases of oppression and shouldn't be generalized to other groups of women. Another methodological specificity of third-wave feminism and intersectionality is that of an actual change in society, which is precisely what third-wave activists hope from the academic contribution. Feminist scholars have in common a pragmatic agenda toward social justice. The goal is not to perform a detached observation and purely theoretical analysis but to create more equality among people, to put a stop to oppressions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and age, and to uncover all the mechanisms that contribute to maintaining groups of people in a state of subjugation. Feminist sociologists such as DeVault and Collins recognize the need to use all the resources for social change, which means encouraging

interdisciplinarity and crossing the borders of academia to activists, writers, and the media. This approach has been a specificity of feminist scholars across disciplines since the '60s; it remains a priority of the third-wave. But is this sociology? Feminist sociologists, especially those who work on the margins, away from the traditional liberal feminist conceptual framework, hear this question a lot (DeVault, 1999), due in great part to their specific type of qualitative methods. Auto-ethnography, and critical ethnography are considered unorthodox in many sociology departments, although they are favored by some "third-wave sociologists," who base their research on personal narrative to unravel the intersection of multiple oppressions (sexism, classism, racism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism, and so on). In *Liberating Method*, Marjorie DeVault presents her vision of feminist method that in many respects matches the third-wave mantra: interdisciplinarity–complexity–specificity. She insists on the need for interdisciplinarity and a permanent exchange between activism and research.

"I see feminism, at its core, as a practice of speaking truth. Its central ideas have arisen from systematic attention to previously unacknowledged experiences that women began to speak together. Its character as a public movement depends on an insistence that women's talk is not mere gossip or folklore, but rather the basis for grounded knowledge of experiences obscured and distorted in the past. . . . The truths of feminism are smaller, more tailored, and more intensely pointed truths than the discredited 'truth' of grand theory and master narratives. They are truths that illuminate varied experiences rather than insist on one reality; they seem, to many of us, more sturdy and useful than abstract and ostensibly universal formulations."

Third-wave feminists could not have said it better. In *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Patricia Hill Collins tells the difficulty of writing in a

language understandable by everyone, and not just academics. Her need to justify and defend her choice of style speaks to the unusual nature of that approach in the social sciences (1998).

### **Contribution to women's lives**

The nature of the third-wave is to refuse generalization and categorization, to welcome differences and contradictions in women's experiences and views. There is thus no neat theory or category to analyze—just principles, methods, and goals. More precisely, the goals of many contemporary feminists, whether in the street with the third-wave or in academia in sociology, are to fight inequalities and change the social order to increase justice. One contribution of the third-wave to women's lives is to counter postfeminism by providing a new image of the contemporary feminist, who doesn't hold women to unreachable standards but demands gender equality in both private and public spheres. Young women must be able to identify with a movement or a coalition of different individuals with a common goal in mind. Criticisms of the content and substance of the third-wave movement are numerous, but most overlook the fact that young women today need to feel included and recognize themselves in the contemporary feminist image in order to develop a consciousness and join the movement to act against oppression. For instance, many feminists from older generations claim that the third-wave has not invented anything and that the movement is nothing more than daughters' rebellion against their second-wave mothers—a mere generational divide. This argument, however, underestimates the need for change in the feminist movement and the differences among women's experiences.

Younger feminists are also accused of falling prey to the media backlash that painted a caricature of feminism; second-wavers deny that they are rigid, boring, man-hating, or "femi-Nazis." I would argue, though, that the mere fact that such images managed to take hold in the minds of young people, many of them raised by feminist mothers, is enough to welcome a change of reference. Moreover, the women who came of age in a politically conservative era surrounded by technology and nourished by TV and pop culture are the best armed to prevent new stereotypes. Most women don't know about "wave" labels, don't necessarily put words on their conviction that sexism and racism are still very present and unacceptable, but as the face of feminism adapts to the cultural moment, they may in the end recognize themselves as feminists. Even more importantly, a change in the feminist approach, whether it is called third -wave, or second wave 2.1, was inevitable given the state of remaining inequalities. After all of the gains made since the 1960s, gender inequality is stuck, especially for the most marginalized: poor women of color. Despite great advances, such as the large number of (white) women in higher education, and the opening of many careers to women, glaring inequalities remain. One of the subjects that third-wave feminism and academics must address further to advance gender equality is motherhood, the subject of my research. As I will develop in the last chapter, third-wave feminists are blaming their "second-wave mothers" for robbing them of the experience of being mothers by insisting that only work and career matter (Walker, 2008), or for tricking them into believing that motherhood and jobs are totally compatible, that women can do it all. If gender equality in the workplace between upper-class men and white upper-class women has made great progress since the '50s, it is far less equitable for women with children, especially poorer women and women of color, who are at a clear disadvantage in terms of work opportunity, career advancement, salary, job security, and quality of life.

One last aspect requiring acknowledgment is that most of the discourse on oppression is still in the hands of relatively advantaged women and is generally not accessible to uneducated and marginalized women who are the most affected by the issue. The objective of third-wavers and intersectionality sociologists is to erase the inequalities endured especially by a voiceless marginalized population by tackling the matrix of domination (Collins, 1990). This is why personal stories that may seem trivial are in fact indispensable in order to give voice to these women. As third-wavers advocate, the role of sociologists is to give a face to this multifaceted and compounded inequality through quantitative studies, to give voice to women who are never heard, and to pass this on to as big an audience as possible, which is not an easy thing to do. The third-wave feminists who write their stories of unjust treatment and discrimination already have a "feminist consciousness" and a certain level of education, and they are privileged compared to the most marginalized women. Still, among those writers are women who may have been lucky enough to have access to that education but whose own families are underprivileged, living firsthand race, class, and gender oppression (Hernandez and Rehman, 2002). They undertake what Patricia Hill Collins, the mother of intersectionality theory in sociology, exhorts us to do in *Fighting Words*: "I regret that the audiences that I would most like to reach may not be able to read this work. However, perhaps my efforts to make the ideas in this volume accessible will encourage many of you to use whatever positions you occupy as parents, students, scholars, lovers, neighbors, editors, siblings, journalists, teachers, and street intellectuals to make theoretical ideas in general, and perhaps those in this volume in particular, more comprehensible and therefore more important to more people than just a select few" (Collins, 1998).

The gender revolution is stuck, as I will explain in my last chapter—especially for mothers. The third-wave philosophy, methods, and ideas have a part to play in exposing the

motherhood myth. On the web, in mass media, through popular books, in academia as I am doing now, the more women who speak to counter the false oppressive narratives such as the myth of motherhood, the more they will be heard by other women, who may feel inspired and entitled to speak their true experiences.

## **Differences Matter**

"I prefer personal testimonies because they build empathy and compassion, are infinitely more accessible than more academic tracts, and because I believe that our lives are the best basis for feminist theory" (Rebecca Walker, 1995).

The goal of this dissertation is to reveal the gap between women's expectations of motherhood and the reality and to expose a myth of multiple facets (women having it all, the good mother, "fluffy" motherhood, the family-friendly society). Before I let the women in my study speak, and as a prologue to the play, I want to put forward an unorthodox and controversial proposition for a change of framework. I want to challenge the idea that for true equality, women have to be like men. I believe, on the contrary, that differences between men and women, especially around motherhood, have to be acknowledged and considered valuable to society. Women's specificity and needs—especially as linked to their motherhood—have to be recognized and accommodated, and society should make sure women have a place in the public sphere, equal to that of men and compatible with women's invaluable contribution to a flourishing society: the making and raising of its members. Such a commitment would require enormous cultural and policy changes, but the first step is to recognize what it takes and what it

means to be a mother in France and in the United States today. This subject is delicate and sensitive. I am not sure how to articulate it so as not to be misunderstood as betraying women, feminists in particular. I hear the criticisms already: "How can you call for equality but stress these inherent differences, which can then be construed as weaknesses and an excuse to push women out of careers and the workforce?" The accepted discourse is that women have gained so much in the last century that we should not push our luck complaining and looking like failures, that emphasizing biological differences will make us look inferior and inept in the workplace.

But ignoring or denying these differences is not helping resolve the issue of gender inequality, and women end up losers anyway because they appear inadequate in this lost battle: there is not enough time, enough energy, enough resources, enough emotional peace for contemporary working mothers to fill all the roles attributed to them at home and at work. This is why I want to highlight one hypothesis discussed at the margin of academic circles: Maybe we should be moving away from universalism. As a solution to the stalled gender revolution (see chapter 7 for more details), feminist scholars such as sociologist Barrie Thorne suggest that it is time to shift the conceptual framework of gender equality away from universalism to take into account differences between genders, or at least one difference: that women bear children and are the primary attendants to their babies' needs. Using the word "biology" when talking about women's rights is akin to feminist treason, but it appears clear from mothers' accounts that parenthood, especially in the very early times, even with more paternal involvement, does not have the same impact on men as it does on women—to begin with, because of the toll of pregnancy and the physiological changes it brings. As necessary as universalism was at the beginning of the feminist movement, it could now be hurting working women, who, as feminists have demanded, are treated like men. This treatment is not a good thing, considering that at the

specific moment of the arrival of a child, a moment in conflict with work and career trajectories, women's lives are turned upside down, and that this is addressed in most cases as a negligible event on the work front, a short and temporary nuisance that lasts only a few weeks at worst (there is no mandated paid leave in the United States, and not all women qualify for the 12 weeks of unpaid leave mandated by the Family Medical Leave Act, or FMLA). "Intensive mothering" and the "second shift" are responsible in great part for the upheaval in mothers' lives, but other biological and emotional realities that even women don't foresee before they become mothers are to be accounted for in family policies. Judith Stacey expressed this need for a paradigm change in a discussion about the "Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology" (2006):

It may be time and worthwhile to ask what sustains the passionate feminist investment in "anti-essentialism" in its hard form and especially the antipathy that so many feminists retain toward the slightest hint that there may be biological contributions to social differences. Why should feminists reject out of hand the possibility (in my view, the overwhelming likelihood) that chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy contribute to average differences in what we identify as female or male traits, interests, behaviors, and desires? Difference should not be the enemy. Domination, exploitation, injustice, and unfair interpretations of difference are the problems, and these are abundant all around. It is on the "social construction" of the meaning and consequences of these average differences that we need to do our work (p. 481).

Stacey's view is still taboo, but it would merit being thoroughly explored in future research and policy making if the lives of working mothers and their families are to be improved. For now, the latest social signs point in the opposite direction, to maintaining the "treated like men" status quo. For instance, to help women circumvent the biological clock—an obvious

obstacle to career success—Facebook and Apple recently came to the rescue, offering health coverage to women for egg-freezing. This way, they can be even more like men at work and become mothers well after nature would allow. Hurray! Let's all be mothers at 50, if that's more practical for business. That should make things better for society, right? This discussion leads to a question: Can the acceptance of women's differences be reconciled with the economic model of the United States? Is there any way to be a modern society and respect women in their differences while treating them like men's equals? Northern European countries who are economically striving free countries and more respectful of women, families, parenting offer an example that both are possible.

To put the expectations of motherhood in sync with its realities, we have to acknowledge that at least around the time of motherhood, women are not the same as men. Even beyond the physical, they don't have the same experiences or go through the same changes. My work presents women's narratives of mental, emotional, and internal changes when they became mothers, changes that, based on my observations, are usually obscured, denied, or mocked. This chapter highlights the importance of putting women, children, the family at the center of society, next to business, profits, productivity, politics—not as an afterthought, or as background noise. For this I would like to allude to the work of two French scholars, who are in my opinion symbols of opposite philosophies on the place of motherhood in women's lives. Let's start with the model I reject, put forward by Elisabeth Badinter, French philosopher and feminist, in the book *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (2012). I agree with Badinter's diagnosis of the situation for new mothers today, but not of what should change to improve it. Her research probes the effect of motherhood on women's work and career, and she highlights how much women underestimate the effect children will have on their lives:

Before making their decision, few are the women (and couples) who weight with lucidity the pleasures against the pains, the benefits against the sacrifices. On the contrary, it looks like a halo of illusions shrouds the maternal reality. The future mother fantasizes only on love and happiness. She ignores the other face of maternity made of exhaustion, frustration, loneliness. . . . By reading the recent testimonies of mothers, we measure how little they are prepared for this disruption (p. 25).

Badinter deplores a revolution that puts maternity back at the center of women's life, a move she feels is detrimental to women because it goes against gender equality. She cites the growing and more demanding duties of motherhood, criticizing the breastfeeding diktat and all the recommendations of pediatricians and psychologists who advocate for what they consider is better for the child, such as spending the first few months with the baby, without considering the consequences for the mother, who will jeopardize her career and freedom if she listens but will feel guilt if she ignores. Badinter talks about a return of "naturalism" (the scientific claim of the existence of maternal instincts ; the ecological mother who refuses the intrusion of science at birth, uses disposable diapers and needs to protect her child against noxious chemicals; breastfeeding; the theory of bonding; co-sleeping), about a return to the traditional model, which is detrimental to women. This, she claims, poses the worst danger for gender equality. I disagree with her stance, which negates any differences between male and female. She doesn't see the solution lying in a change of mentalities and social organization around motherhood, but rather in a return to the mothering practices of the '70s, less demanding and more compatible with work. I insist instead that we should work for change in society, building gender equality (in both the private and public spheres) around the societal need for reproduction, and leaving women to

choose what type of mothering they and their children need. I would try to reinvent a place for motherhood and mothering in women's lives.

On the other side on this debate is feminist historian Yvonne Knibiehler, who asks, in the title of her memoir, *Who Will Take Care of the Children?* Her lifelong views on feminism (she is 94 years old) have made her an outcast among mainstream feminists, who chose to ignore differences between men and women. She believes that the failure of feminists was to build or claim equality without taking into account the fact that many women are also mothers at some point in their lives, and that the working environment and society did not change to accommodate women's reality. The result was a system that makes life miserable for most women who both work and have children. Motherhood, she says, is the main obstacle to gender equality. "Feminism has to rethink motherhood. With this, it will be given everything else" (2007, p. 9). She adds: "I am sure, and have always been, that the difference between genders relates to procreation. The woman is not different from the man, it is the maternity, real or potential that differs from paternity, real or potential" (p. 211). Other feminists who see maternity as the main obstacle to gender equality put forward two solutions: helping women not to be mothers (contraception and abortion), and requiring that men take as much care of children as women (which didn't work). This is not enough, and more feminist support is needed for mothers. The conclusion of Knibiehler's book set my research on its current path when I read it in the early days of my own motherhood: "We live in a cruel society, which prevents parents and children to be happy together. Feminism could help women not to be mothers when the authorities wanted to force them. This was very good. . . . [T]oday, we need to help also women who chose to be mothers, as it was their right. They represent 80% of a generation."

Society needs to change to accommodate motherhood, rather than the opposite, and several third-wavers have put their efforts in that direction. Here are a couple of examples, essays written by women who propose a feminist mothering, third-wave style (each to her own story, her own solutions, but sharing common problems and common goals). In *Feminist Motherline: Embodied Knowledge of Feminist Mothering* (O'Reilly, 2008), Fiona Joy Green lists the challenges faced by feminist mothers and asks them what they would change. The mothers interviewed all point to a lack of social support for mothers. "They are not mine, you know," says a mother. "They are just the next generation and they could be anybody's kids, really." "I think we should adapt society more to tolerate children." In *Rocking the Boat: Feminism and the Ideological Grounding of the Twenty First century mothers movement* (O'Reilly, 2008), Judith Stadtman Tucker is convinced that "we can't give up the fight for women's rights until women's equality in every aspect of social life is fully compatible with women's reproductive potential and desires" (p. 201). She highlights the difficulty in combining both liberal feminist and maternalist frameworks and calls for a new method, such as a "care ethic" or "reproductive social justice" framework, to challenge the ideological problem, "the myth of individual autonomy, the cultural construction of gender difference, and the delusion that, in a good society, the worlds of work and family can be functionally and emotionally separated and governed by opposing values."

There is a huge amount of scholarship on motherhood and mothering (O'Reilly, 2007), though mostly not in sociology, which unfortunately doesn't seem to permeate the outside world or have much effect on women's daily lives. This is where the third wave can make a difference. By bombarding every space with women's stories—online, in the movies, at the theater, in academic journals in all disciplines, in popular books, at political rallies—there is a greater

chance of being heard and creating change. My contribution to this enterprise is to stage, in a play, three women who share their experiences of motherhood and how unexpected most of it was for them.

## **Prologue**

A thick cloud floats around motherhood. From the outside the cloud appears white and fluffy, but at times it feels dense and unbreathable from the inside, like being in a plane flying through what looks like cotton candy from the ground: once you are in the middle, it is just gray and blinding, nice to look at from afar, but toxic close-up. This cloud-like myth not only smothers mothers, but it prevents women from climbing the professional ladder up to the top, along with the men. In the next three chapters, the three acts of the play, the women who are part of this work will talk to each other because their stories, their experiences, speak to each other. They are from different cultures, have different social backgrounds and experiences, were raised by mothers—one of whom worked outside the home, another who wished she had, and the third who was happy not to.

All of the words of the play may not have been said in this order, and I took the liberty in this fictional setting to rearrange the interactions, but the substance, the women's personalities, the details of their lives, what they said to me, and what I witnessed in their contacts are all fully respected. My interpretation and analysis transpire through the crafting of the piece. I had this conversation with each of them separately, and it was a pleasure to make them meet on paper. They are a triangle, three ambitious women, in their early forties, with a couple of kids each, finding different ways to exist in society as women and mothers. Marie, Delphine, and Kate are

in an airport, waiting for their plane. The location is unknown; all that matters is that they are stuck. Here is a short presentation of the characters, setting and time of the play :

Delphine: 40 years old French woman who has lived in the United States for 15 years. Mother of 2 boys, 7 and 10 she used to be as a journalist in a French newsmagazine. She is finishing her doctorate in Sociology in Champaign Illinois. She is wearing yoga pants for comfort, casual sneakers, and carries many bags with her (kids backpacks, plus one extra duffel bag each).

Leo: 10 years old. Delphine's oldest son.

Luca: 7 years old Delphine's youngest son.

Marie: 39 years old French woman who had a career in PR in TV broadcasting, which she put an end to after having children and relocating from Paris to the south of France. Her children are 1 year old and 3 years old. She is very good-looking, stylish, thin, with long brown hair. Her nails are done a deep brown. She is wearing a casual yet elegant outfit: jeans, fluid shirt and ballet style shoes. She is traveling with her two little kids with the nanny, Anne, who is there to help her. Her phone beeps frequently with text messages that she responds to while speaking.

Jules: 1 year old. Marie's Baby boy.

Lola: 3 years old. Marie's daughter.

Anne: Marie's Nannie.

Kate: 45 years old American woman. She used to be a journalist, a dream of hers since she was a child. She later had a job in marketing until 10 years ago when she stopped working to care for her daughter. Now she works freelance in web related media and marketing. She styles her hair in a ponytail and wears plain clothes: black tee shirt and jeans. Her earrings are silver diamond studs and she wears a wedding ring. Her laptop is always open and within reach, as is her phone that she checks often for messages and tweets.

Setting :

The 3 women are at a check-in gate, in an international airport, waiting for their planes to go back home (Delphine and Kate) and on vacation (Marie). There is a storm outside and the plane is stuck on the ground. The first two acts take place at the airport. The last act is in a restaurant at night where they have dinner together.

Time: One day

ACT I (Not According to Plan)

Scene 1      Airport gate; mid morning.

Scene 2      Airport gate; mid morning

Scene 3      Airport gate; noon

ACT II (Safety Jacket, Maternal Salvation)

Scene 1 to 4   Starbucks; early afternoon.

ACT III (Grounded)

Scene 1 to 3 Restaurant of a hotel; evening.

## Chapter 4

### Act I: Not According To Plan

#### **Scene 1: Cultural and Generational Disconnect**

(Travelers are waiting at a departure gate in an international airport. Half the seats are empty and the travelers are not sitting too close to each other. An American woman in her mid forties is taking several seats, surrounded with Ipad, computer, coffee, and muffin. Her space is a mess; she is talking on the phone. In front of her, a Franco-American mother is sitting, giving instructions to her two boys, 10 and 7, who are walking back and forth between the seats, in an attempt to fight boredom.)

DELPHINE

(Yelling)

Leo, Luca, stop running! One...two...

(The children who were playing tag on the other side of the room are making their way back, still fooling around playfully. A man reading a paper looks annoyed and a young couple texting on their phone look at each other and sigh)

DELPHINE

I said no running!

(Luca trips on Amy's feet; that causes her to spill some of her coffee on her clothes)

DELPHINE

(To Kate)

I am so sorry!

(To her children)

See what happens when you run around people!

KATE

It is OK, it's just a few drops, don't worry. I know what it is like, I have two kids around the same age, and my boy is a tornado. I know what you feel (laughs)

DELPHINE

Thanks for understanding. I hope the delay won't be too long or else it will become a challenge to keep them civilized.

KATE

Well, it's tough for them you know. We always ask little kids to be quiet, to be nice, to stop moving. But they have so much energy! It's like people forget they were kids themselves once. Are you going to Chicago?

DELPHINE

Yes, but then we have a 2 hours drive to Champaign, a campus town south.

KATE

I know Champaign! I am going to South Bend Indiana myself. A little closer from O'hare but same kind of sleepy-town I bet. (Raises her eyebrows)

DELPHINE

You don't look so happy to live there, what brought you to this place?

KATE

My husband. He convinced me to follow him there to pursue a PhD. I left the East coast for what I thought would be there 3 years, it has been 10 and he is not done yet...I hate this town, I hate the Midwest. What about you? You have an accent; you are not from here either.

DELPHINE

I am French; I followed my husband too. I was a journalist back home. Charlie is a Professor and when he found a position here 10 years ago, we moved from LA and I started a PhD in sociology.

AIRPORT SPEAKER

Due to bad weather conditions, all departures from O'hare are delayed at this time. Traffic is expected to resume at 12:50 pm

DELPHINE

Again! It is the second time they push my flight. I am so exhausted, I need to get home and take a break.

KATE

Given the frigid temps and bad weather outside, I am bracing myself to spend most of the day here. I just hope they will manage one more day without me at home. I prepared the planning up to this afternoon, but after that they are off-script; it could get ugly (laughs).

(On the seat in front of them, Marie, an elegant and beautiful woman, accompanied by 2 small children 6 months and 3 years old and an older woman, Anne occupies several seat with what looks like expensive baby gear and trendy outfits)

MARIE

Anne, étant donné qu'on est encore là pour un moment, on pourrait peut-être donner le biberon à Jules? Je crois qu'il a faim.

ANNE

Je m'en occupe

(Anne takes a bottle from the bursting diaper bag and starts feeding the baby boy in his stroller.  
Marie reads a magazine and answers her daughter's incessant questions with a big smile.)

YOUNG WOMAN (To Marie)

Your baby is so cute. I am sorry you are not able to breastfeed, it is such a beautiful experience  
and so perfect for the baby.

MARIE (looks surprised)

Thank you, but what do you mean, I don't understand?

KATE (very loud, to the women)

I can't believe this! The breastfeeding police! This is so inappropriate and rude!

YOUNG WOMAN

Oh, and it is OK to hurt your child's chances in life?

(The woman leaves angry and superior)

MARIE (to Kate, with a French accent)

What was that about? Did she just attack me for giving a bottle?

KATE

Sorry for reacting that way. I couldn't breastfeed and was pilloried for that, by people I wouldn't  
know. When my kids were infants and toddlers, I felt very scrutinized, every time we would go

out in public. People say stuff all the time. They'll give you looks in the check out line; or I had people, strangers, tell me that I shouldn't bottle feed him in public, like: "Well why are you bottle feeding?" "Well I don't know: what colored underpants are you wearing?" It's the same question. In this country, when you are a mother, all the rules are gone, the social norms. You can say anything about someone's parenting now in public to their face. That's not okay and it does make you feel bad. I have such a knee-jerk reaction when I read or hear about breastfeeding.

MARIE

Well thanks, but don't worry, I don't care what people think. It is not really a issue in France, where I am from. No pressure.

DELPHINE

Well, maybe people don't get in your face in France, but with all those articles, news programs, expert books, you still feel pressured to have a natural birth, place your child in that specific position to sleep, carry it on your hip all day, feed him this and not that... It kind of feels like your body doesn't really belong to you anymore once you are pregnant.

MARIE

Did you live in France for a long time?

DELPHINE

I grew up there and left 12 years ago. I had my kids in the US but most of my friends and family are over there. And I go back regularly. It does seem easier to be a mother in France: people

don't ask you why you don't breastfeed for one! But still, the more laid-back attitude can turn into judgment as well.

KATE

How's that?

DELPHINE

I felt a big cultural gap with my French friends. And as a matter of fact, most of them, including my family, thought that I was breastfeeding for too long, after the first few months.

MARIE

Oh yes, I confirm, that's frowned upon. You pass for a smothering mother if you breastfeed longer than 3 months.

DELPHINE

I was also following advice of a pediatrician who recommends using a pacifier.

MARIE

Boo! Not good!

DELPHINE

I swaddled my children to comfort them and my mother in law and a few friends were ready to call child-protecting services.

(Kate bursts laughing)

DELPHINE

They slept in our bed as infants and then in our room for months: shocking! In a country where babies are seen as mini adults, who need to learn independence, discipline and self soothing from the beginning.

KATE

It is funny; it is the total opposite of what it is like here!

MARIE

Come on, it is not that bad!

DELPHINE

This summer, while walking the street of Montpellier, I was complimented by a woman for asking Luca to pick up a wrapper he had dropped on the pavement. This was meant to be nice and positive but it is the same message. I did a good job, so I got a sticker! My sister who has a child with ADHD is very self-conscious in public. She told me that she now never judges a mother based on her child's behavior because you cannot know what is going on behind the scenes. "It is so difficult" she says. But before having children she had theories and lessons to give to everyone raising children!

MARIE

Like many of us I guess. I am not proud to say it but I am guilty of that too. I would never make a comment out loud, but sometimes I judge other peoples' parenting. I am sure we all do that.

KATE

At the beginning maybe, but wait: How old are you kids now?

MARIE

They are 1 and 3 years old

KATE

That's the easy part. That's what I tell my friends who are having babies. Like, literally, you have to feed them, change their diaper and, when they cry, you pick them up.

MARIE

The easy part, are you kidding?

DELPHINE

Well, I wouldn't call it easy, but at least you kind of expect some of it. But when you think it will all be back to normal, you're in for a big surprise!

KATE

the first years, you're really tired. That part sucks. But it gets much harder, much harder when they can walk and talk. That's when it's really hard.

(Leo gets up and talks to her mom, interrupting her)

LEO

Mom, can I...

DELPHINE

(To Leo)

Leo, wait a minute, I am talking.

(To the women)

My biggest surprise was after they started going to day-care. I thought it would be a new phase, where I would have time finally for other things, for me, for work. But no, once in daycare, they are sick ALL THE TIME: Colds, flus, stomach bugs; they have a fever half the time and have to stay home. They don't, sleep, so you don't sleep, and then you get the cold and don't sleep some more. And it can get crazy: Leo had the swine flu, with a seizure from the fever followed by a 911 call, hospital visit, and then had psychotic side effects from tamiflu which he had to stop. Lice, pink eye, ear infections ringworm kept them from school and me from work. And those are not even serious illnesses... (She crosses her fingers).

DELPHINE (looking at Leo)

What did you want Leo?

LEO

Can I have the Ipad now? You said we could watch a video if we played nicely?

DELPHINE

OK, go ahead, but choose something that both of you like. I don't want to hear any fighting, or the Ipad disappears, all right?

LEO

OK, OK.

KATE

It is funny. I just read this book by an American mom in Paris, Pamela Druckerman, about how French mothers raise their kids better than Americans.

MARIE

Oh yes, she was all over TV a few months ago. It was good for our ego. (proud smile)

KATE

Well, it is a best seller in the US. She lists all the things that French mothers do better than all of us. And you just gave me a live example!

DELPHINE

Really, what did I do?

KATE

You didn't let your child interrupt the conversation. Me I just let my kids and my husband walk all over me.

DELPHINE

More lessons on what we should be doing better, right? More standards and rules to follow. So what is the French recipe?

KATE

In short: stop being your kids slaves, don't try to control every step of there development, teach them patience and frustration, put them on your schedule, feed them real adult food.

DELPHINE

Did she forget : “ be sexy for your husband. Lose the baby weight quickly. Don't become too engrossed in your newborn and rekindle the flame immediately or else your darling might go look elsewhere, and you will be the only one to blame.” These are the guidelines in France for new moms. In women's magazines, on the radio, the good French mother has to be a good wife first! How macho is that?

MARIE

But I think it is important. I want to look good for my husband. And we have to be careful not to be completely focused on our children. That's a threat to the marriage. Then, when the kids are gone, there is nothing left in the couple.

DELPHINE

Do we really need to worry about that, having that pressure in the first year of our baby's life? Do I have to focus on losing weight, strengthening my abs, being romantic, wearing heels and make-up right after delivering? Honestly, it was the last of my concerns. It was hard enough to live through the exhaustion, the tediousness of breastfeeding, the physical pain of the whole thing. Really, I didn't need more pressure on the seduction side, and I am glad I was spared that.

KATE

You were safe here, surrounded by mommies in Jogs, overweight, running around and playing with their children. I hated playing with my children, dolls and pretend tea. How boring!

DELPHINE

Then why did you do it?

KATE

That's what a mother does!

MARIE

Not the French kind

(Marie Kate and Delphine Laugh. Marie moves closer to Kate and Delphine to be able to talk to them more discretely)

MARIE

If I listened to my mother, it was all going to be easy and natural. Even Childbirth would barely hurt! I don't know if it is because they had less pressure then, or because, as she says, she was younger, or maybe she just forgot... but I swear, our experiences look so different! She even said that being pregnant was the best time in her life. She never said anything about the nights, pain, and worries.

(Blackout and end of Scene I.)

## **Scene 2: Tsunami, No Warning**

(The 3 women moved and are now sitting on the floor in the corner of the room to be more comfortable. Their legs are crossed. The children stayed with the Nannie on the seats: Leo Luca and Lola are watching a movie on their Ipads. Jules is asleep in a stroller that Anne is rocking)

DELPHINE

I looked at older pictures the other day, and was struck by the way I looked a year after the birth of Leo.

(She takes her phone out and searches for a picture)

Look at this one from 2006; not so long ago; I look scary don't I? Or ill...an obvious abandon of standards: I am too fat, have bad hair, dark circles under the eyes. Charles is like me, see, but Leo is adorable. When I watch this, It is like I am watching someone else

MARIE

Don't exaggerate; it is not that bad! But it's true that it does not really look like you today.

DELPHINE

Exactly! It is like it just wasn't me. It makes me realize how tired we must've been, how overwhelmed. I don't fully remember. It is hazy.

KATE

The blurred memories, that's the reason why we do it again...and again! (Laughs). There is no other rational explanation. (She raises her hands in the air in disbelief). Pictures capture the good moments; they make memories so sweet and special.

DELPHINE

Well, except this one I just showed you.

KATE

But see how your son is smiling. Maybe you don't look your best but this is a happy moment.

DELPHINE

That's true, look at him (smiles). He is so cute.

KATE

I am telling you, pictures play tricks on our memory. Personal journals on the other hand are a way back to the truth of the experience. I wrote a blog almost daily for several years after the birth of my daughter, Clara.

MARIE

Is it online? Can we see it?

KATE

I don't know. There is so much private stuff in there: the good, the bad and the ugly. And you've seen; my face (laughs), I can't hide. Nope, I just couldn't

MARIE

I understand. It is private.

KATE

But, I remember it exactly the same when I read it. I remember all the bad things, because that's how I am. But I'm so glad I wrote that down, because I would have forgotten those moments, they were so small, but to have captured it feels like a baby book for them. Like, I remember that feeling of holding my son in the middle of the night and finally falling in love with him after a couple of months. When he was born it was really difficult, it just was, and I remember not feeling the same intensity of love for him that I felt for my daughter right off the bat. But I remember one night, holding him in the middle of the night and just finally falling, you know,

and I remember writing about that. I like to go back and read that post because that was just really special.

DELPHINE

You are giving me goose bumps. It is precious to have those moments. I wish I had done it. I did write once in a while, but honestly, most of the time I had no juice left at the end of the day.

KATE

I wrote that blog because I needed it. For my sanity, to feel less isolated. I found motherhood to be very isolating. Through my blog I met this community of women who felt the same. It was amazing.

DELPHINE

I don't want to sound whiny and am not complaining that it is hard to raise kids. Of course it is hard, time consuming, exhausting at times, and it should be. But so much of it was so unexpected!

KATE

That's for sure. I never thought that my job would be to keep them alive. They are so fragile, anything can happen to them all the time. That freaks me out.

MARIE

I never thought that I would sometimes not feel up to the challenge of spending a whole day alone with my kids!

DELPHINE

I never thought that I would be so protective and borderline crazy when my babies were not with my husband or me.

KATE

I never thought that I would understand why people run away from home, or abuse substances (laughs).

DELPHINE

I never thought that you could love a human being that much.

MARIE

I never thought that the first times I would leave my baby for an hour for a walk in the neighborhood, I would feel like I was stabbed in the stomach and would run back home even though I was exhausted.

KATE

I never thought it would hurt that bad when they hurt.

MARIE

I never thought I would be already dreading that one day my daughter may be groped by a stranger in the subway.

KATE

I never thought it would be that hard. I mean, you expect it to be easy in parts. Some days you're not gonna want to do it. I have a lot of days where I'm just like, "Pfft, nope."

DELPHINE

I never thought that I would lose complete interest in anything other than my babies for so long.

MARIE

I never thought I would stop working to take care of my children. I wasn't raised that way and never considered it was desirable. I thought I would work.

KATE

The list can go on forever. I think before having kids we were in a bubble. It burst for us mothers (and fathers to some extent) but for the rest of them non-mother, they have this dreamy picture of motherhood and babies.

MARIE

Look at this!!!

(She points to a TV screen. The screen shows a typical ad for a baby body product)

MARIE

See that ad for this baby soap, it is all so soft and so quiet, calm, the light is perfect, the mother is so Zen and her house is just spotless. I want one! (Everyone laughs).

DELPHINE

That's the bubble you were talking about?

KATE

Isn't that precious (sarcastic tone)? I am sure motherhood is a shock to everyone. Unless you have a staff of 20 (laughs), and even if you do I think being pregnant, the physical part of motherhood, pregnancy and beyond, it's just shocking; nothing can prepare you for that. Our beloved babysitter just had a baby and I said to her: "everything you think it's going to be, it's going to be nothing like that. There are no words".

MARIE

I agree. It all was a surprise, from the day I gave birth. I find that being a mother is at the same time incredibly simple and extremely difficult. Not complicated, difficult. The easy part is that it is so natural for me to be a mother, and I really feel like I know what to do, even if I have doubts sometimes and I don't feel like the perfect mother. But at the same time it is difficult because I am tired, because it is an abandon of yourself that is so intense and continuous. And this was a surprise for me. The negative part, no one ever told me about.

DELPHINE

I am curious, what do you find the most difficult exactly?

MARIE

The least easy is the daily life, the housework, cooking. And my mother wouldn't like me to say that but it wasn't her forte either. We are not very domestic. I can steam vegetables for my children but I can't make a good Boeuf Bourguignon. And I have no pleasure in it at all. But on the other hand, I want my children to eat well and to learn the taste of good food.

KATE

Welcome to the club! I hate making dinner because everybody in my house hates everything. No one likes the same things. You try to make something new, it's like you're feeding them crushed glass (chuckle). "What is this? A vegetable!?" I'm over it. You like cereal? I don't care!

(They all laugh. Kate checks her phone and writes a text)

MARIE

I am a calm and optimistic person by nature, and I have been very surprised by how much I can worry about my children's future sometimes. Sources of anxiety are endless. Depending on what happens in my life at the time, I can catch myself hoping that when my son is 60 years old he doesn't get cancer and suffers a horrible death. Or just the idea that my daughter may be teased during recess and knowing that girls are going to be mean to her... I have to live with the idea that things are going to happen, and that I can't do anything about it. I never knew before how much I could worry. I didn't worry before.

DELPHINE

Same here! When I was in college, a friend gave me as a present, one of those 'Little Miss' Kids books

KATE

I know, the round and square characters that represent a personality trait. Which one did you get?

DELPHINE

He offered me the yellow smiling round one, with 2 braids on the side: little miss sunshine, which in French is titled "Miss everything is alright". That's how positive, confident and optimistic I was. When it was just me, I always felt that nothing insurmountable could happen to me. That I could get back on my feet, overcome pretty much anything. It doesn't apply to what could happen to my kids. This invincible part is gone, forever.

MARIE

That's called growing up!

KATE

I must have been born a grown up then! (Laughs) I am a worrier since birth. Have suffered from depression since I was a child, but having children is a whole new league.

(Her phone rings. She picks up)

KATE

Hi Sweetie. Yes, there are still delays; it is a mess here. You are getting them ready for school?  
(Pause while she listens) Yes, I told you before I left; it is in the first drawer of her bedroom cabinet. (Pauses and listens). Yes, put him on the phone, hi baby, how's everything? You are ready for school (listens) yes, I will be here soon. I miss you too. Bye.  
(Blackout and end of scene II.)

### **Scene 3: Overconfidence and Cluelessness**

DELPHINE

How could we be so clueless? And so confident!

MARIE

No one told us! We were lied to! (Feigns outrage and smiles)

KATE

Maybe mothers don't tell anything because they don't want to reveal that they made mistakes.

DELPHINE

Or that they were afraid.

MARIE

Or that they felt weak.

KATE

But once you have a kid you are in the club. It's like a wink-wink, nudge-nudge, like we're all going through the same thing. They are a little more open. But I think people talk about it and laugh it off. If you see another mom in the hall at the school and they're like, "How are you?" you're like, "Oh life", and they're like, "Yeah." It's kind of a joke almost, like a shared language. I don't think you ever really let too many people in. But we all feel, "What if we are doing it wrong?" What if I tell you I feel this way and you're like, "Oh my God, you're awful, I'm gonna call the police on you." There's a lot of fear. That's an American thing too I think. We're all shiny, happy people in our little suburban houses and you don't know.

DELPHINE

Just like the serial killer who lives next door, everyone said he was a nice guy. (Laughs)

MARIE

Now that I'm a mother I realize that it's very different to be or not to be a mother. That used to annoy me when I was younger and felt this from women who had children. When you are a mother you are transformed forever you don't have the same priorities, you relativize a lot of things, you stop thinking about yourself. And you can't be that way unless you are a mother.

DELPHINE

Yep, I don't know how you prepare someone for that experience. You have to live it to understand it in a way.

KATE

Even ourselves. We have one: we think we know. And then comes the second child! I knew I was gonna be tired, yes. But I had a three-year-old I had to care for too. So it was like, "Oh my God! You mean I have to stay up all night and then I have to be up all day?" like, "No. I didn't sign up for this." Clara sleep trained herself in 8 weeks, but Max, it was just a battle and he would never nap.

MARIE

I always wonder how they manage, those who have 3 children, those who have 4!

KATE

Even just 2 for me! It was a very different dynamic. And I was freelance; I had no paid maternity leave. There was nothing to take the pressure of. If I didn't work, I didn't get paid, period, the end. It's like getting hit by a truck for me, having two, just like "This is ridiculous!" You forget, and there's a reason, because if you didn't, the human race would just die out.

DELPHINE

My mother had 3 kids, but she was certainly less stressed and conflicted; and she had a lot of help from her parents, and sisters. Also, she stayed home so she could concentrate on taking care of us. I wonder if it would be easier if mothers were aware of what it is really like before hand. If that's even possible to convey such an experience through words?

KATE

Maybe it would be worse at first if someone said to you: "this is gonna be crazy and out of control and you're gonna feel horrible most of the time, and then there will be these shots of pure joy." (Laughter) I mean that's really what it is, it's mostly drudgery and terror and then there's five minutes every day of absolute bliss. It's like being bipolar in some ways. I don't know if it would have made it better, but at least I would have known. I would have known it was unknown. But I think you can't know it until you live it. It is the human condition.

AIRPORT SPEAKER

Attention please, Flight M2005 to Chicago has been delayed further. Please wait for more information in the next hour.

(They raise their arms in despair and resume their conversation)

DELPHINE

When I was younger, I had this master plan, where if I was not in a relationship by 35 I would have a child on my own.

KATE

Of course!

DELPHINE

I swear, I didn't think it would be more difficult than that. How clueless I was! In my head it was totally feasible. Just a question of being ready, having enough life experience, having studied

enough, having a good Job, being able to support myself and flourish in my professional life before having children. To me, maturity and money were the only requirements.

KATE

I didn't even think about those details. I always thought I could do everything. I mean that's what they told us! It's what my own mother told me and she never had a job! "We believe in you, you can do everything, you can be anything you can be an astronaut". Man I wanted to be an astronaut, at one point I wanted to be Reggie Jackson!

MARIE

My mother had a career and didn't prepare me better. She was confident that I would do everything. I didn't think about the details of how I would make it work. At some point though I started wondering how I could fit children in my crazy, non-stop job. She said it would happen naturally, my priorities would change, all would fall into place.

KATE

This is all crazy, unexpected, completely not what I had in mind. I had a much more linear path: I would have a job, get married, have a kid, go back to my job, become very successful, and have a normal life. But this is definitely not what I thought a normal life would look like. I mean, I say that all the time to people: "If you told me in 2002 this is how this was gonna work, I would have been like, 'Yeah, no, yeah, no.'"

DELPHINE

Talk about unexpected! I remember a conversation I had with my mother when I was about 20. We were in the kitchen she was preparing lunch and I'm not sure how it started but there I was, explaining to her that what she did, which is staying with us at home rather than working, was really not necessary. That my friend's mom worked, was very busy outside the house, and Mary and her brother were happy that way. And that I would do the same, no problem at all: I would have my job and my babies would go to daycare and then school, and it would all be fine.

KATE

She must have been so pleased to hear that!

DELPHINE

I know, it's terrible... She never forgot the conversation and she didn't hide her smile when she saw me so glued to my children, incapable of letting them out of my sight when they were little. She was glad her way of raising children was validated, and from her point of view what I did was ideal: I entered a doctorate program so I could be with my kids and still advance professionally or intellectually at least. My mother views women lives in phases; she thinks the solution is to do things successively: so first you study, then you work, then you have children and take care of them, and then you work again.

MARIE

But that's impossible! What happens to your job when you stop for years? Your career is gone!

DELPHINE

Well, I guess you have to reinvent yourself and be creative. I know, Good luck!

KATE

All I can say is that we got so many mixed messages while growing up; The “whatever you want to be, there are no obstacles, but still have a pretty family and make it fit”.

DELPHINE

And I had no exposure to little kids when I was growing up. I babysat a few time but usually they were in bed when I got there.

MARIE

Same here, I only babysat older kids.

KATE

I should have known. I was a Nanny during college to a rich family with 5 kids! And I spent a lot of time with my niece a few years before having Clara, but I think I was in a fantasy of what it was like, because I only got to see my niece when she was adorable and bathed. I would just go home at night but they would have to put her to bed, feed her in the middle of the night and getup at 4am with her. I always babysat too, and some kids were great and some kids were awful but I thought: “my kids will never be like that!”

DELPHINE

I am sure yours are angels (smile)

KATE

You bet! No, seriously, I thought I would just know what to do. But man! It's a lot less idyllic; it is messier, harder. I pictured it to be very calm, which I don't know why because my mother wasn't calm either. But I pictured it as being very ordinary very predictable and structured. And it's extremely unpredictable. I never expected to have a kid who had special needs, that's a big one. My 10 years old daughter suffers from OCD. That didn't happen until Clara was seven.

MARIE

That must be tough... (she is interrupted by the speakers)

AIRPORT SPEAKER (They all stop talking and hold their breath, expecting the worst.)

Due to the extreme weather, all Flights are delayed indefinitely. Please watch the monitors for more updates.

(The women sigh as if they had no more strength. Delphine lies down on the floor on her back and Kate smile)

DELPHINE

I can't believe this, my secret dream for the last 10 years is to be alone in a plane. Just me, and a book, like before. And here I am, stuck in an airport, in a polar vortex, with my 2 children.

(She starts laughing as if this were the best joke ever)

MARIE

What would you say we went to the cafe for a cup of tea and a warm pastry?

KATE

I am in! The climate here is starting to get heavy. Look through the window; it is so depressing.

DELPHINE

It looks like it is turning into a blizzard. They said it was going to be cold and ugly, but this haze and grayish sky are suffocating. It is a lot worse that they predicted. Let's get away from those windows, tea sounds Perfect.

(They all stand up and start gathering their things while the curtain closes. End of Act 1.)

## Chapter 5

### Act II: Safety Jacket, Maternal Salvation

#### **Scene 1: Stuff to rescue**

(The set is an airport coffee shop with three round tables side by side. Adults and children are together but grouped separately. Leo and Luca are playing on Ipads and drinking hot chocolate on the table on the right. On the middle table, Anne is occupying and feeding Marie's children. On the left table, which is positioned in the center of the stage, the three women are drinking tea and eating a piece of cake. They are on Amy's computer discussing an add for parenting gear)

DELPHINE

This is it! The stroller I told you about, I fantasized about it when Leo was born, but I never bought it, it is crazy expensive. Like \$800.

KATE

My God! I hope for that price it also makes coffee and vacuums as you stroll.

MARIE

If it is as good as they say, it could be worth it. I bought this humongous jogging stroller that I can't fold on my own; Just looking at it makes me tired, so I don't take it anywhere. This kangaboo looks amazing. See, you can change the seat's direction so that the baby looks at you and interacts with you.

KATE

When I go for a walk I need peace, not interaction. There is plenty of that the rest of the day!

DELPHINE

Well, I chose the more affordable "Maclaren umbrella stroller", less fancy but great little all terrain. And weirdly enough, I felt like I was shortchanging my kid by not giving him the best stroller that would provide him the most fulfilling experience while discovering the world. That's silly isn't it?

KATE

Yes, like it is going to impact his life forever, start him on the wrong path. It IS silly, but so normal! Look at all the money parents spend for their children, to feel better in the moment, and for a better future: Strollers, Ipads, "Mommy and me" everything, music lessons, drawing lessons, pottery class, private school, tutoring, organic food, organic clothes. And don't get me started on birthday parties! It is like the money is used to muzzle the uncertainty.

DELPHINE

And a lot of money! If I had put my boys in that nice private elementary school where many of their friends go, I would have spent \$96,000 by now. \$130,000 by the time Luca enters middle school. This is crazy! For Elementary school! And we don't live in Manhattan (laughs).

KATE

Well, my kids are in such a school, and it is our fault. We were so clueless when Clara was a baby that we didn't pay attention to the schools in our future neighborhood, and the school is terrible there. I couldn't put my kids in that place. We have tuition help, but at some point our finances were so bad that we were putting tuition on our credit cards.

MARIE

Wow, that's a bit out of hand. This does not exist back home. First, we don't have as much money as you Americans have, and we like our public service too.

KATE

And you let kids be kids. That's a big one.

MARIE

Do you think it is because it is a race, everyone wants their kid to get ahead? Or is it because people are scared and all these purchases are a kind of insurance? Or because they feel guilty to

be busy and buy the best stuff? Or because they don't know what to do and hope the right things will make up for it?

DELPHINE

All of the above. It is good for the economy though.

MARIE

(looks at the computer with the picture of the stroller again and starts scrolling down)

This is so typical! Look at this ad! These European ads that need half naked women to sell anything from yogurt to weed killer.

(An image of a model in bikini pushing a jogger pops on the screen)

KATE

This is hilarious!

DELPHINE

This is doubly typical, the naked woman, slash bomb 26 year old model-mom who runs in a bikini pushing a toddler!

KATE

I think I'll have another cookie and then cry.

MARIE

Read the comments on the facebook page: outraged women who think it is putting unrealizable expectations on mothers. And those who think there is nothing wrong and overweight lazy mother should stop being jealous.

KATE

I am in the first camp, who are they kidding?

MARIE

It is just marketing, come on, she is a model; it shouldn't be taken so seriously.

DELPHINE

But it is one more wall between us and unattainable perfection. Some more guilt with your tea anyone?

(Blackout and end of scene I.)

## **Scene 2: It Takes a Village**

KATE

I told you earlier I was not able to breastfeed. I couldn't do it. I couldn't make it work. My anatomy didn't work. Even if I could, and I chose not to, that's nobody's business. But I went into it fully expecting to breastfeed and I had a C-section. My milk never came in. And everyone

acted so disappointed in me. That I couldn't accomplish this natural thing. I felt under the gun like I was being judged and watched and found lacking.

MARIE

I can't believe it was that bad.

KATE

And then you have a new baby, and your body is different, and you have surgery, and you already feel bad enough about everything. You don't need an extra layer of shame or guilt. Everybody feels that once you're a mom, you're public property. Open for discussion. Your breasts; I mean your breasts are a personal private sex organ. Yeah they are meant to feed babies but that's a private area of my body. You can't just come up and honk my breast. That would be invasive. But people are constantly discussing my breasts. This is insane. I had someone tell me that they were sorry for me that I didn't get to experience birth, because I didn't have a vaginal birth. Like, "Well I had a baby, I had two. So I think they were born somehow and I was there." I had people tell me that and how sorry they felt for me about my motherhood experience. "Hey, this is kind of a private matter."

(She is trembling, about to cry.)

KATE

Sorry, I am going into a monologue here but it hurts.

DELPHINE

Fathers don't get that kind of scrutiny. Nobody gives a damn what they do. They even get praised for showing up, picking up the kids from school. Everyone thinks he is wonderful for helping that much! Which he does. But me, it's just expected, no one thinks I am wonderful for taking care of everyone.

MARIE

I really can't relate here, this sounds so over the top. I never felt such judgment. Well, I can relate to the father part. Expectations are low for fathers, and my husband really honors that and does the minimum required (laughs).

KATE

I feel like everyone is judging me. If I am with my kids and not at work, my boss is judging me. If I am with my clients and not with my kids, my kids are judging me or my family is judging me or society is judging me, or the other moms at school are judging me, because I am not volunteering. Or the teachers are judging me. And what it means is I am lacking because I can't do all those things, perfectly all the time. I can't be at school and be at work and be with my mom, and be with my husband. I can't bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, put on my negligee and you know, help the teacher cut out bulletin boards. I can't, you can't, no one can. But there is this expectation, and I think largely due to feminism movement that you can and you should.

MARIE

Oh please, it's the fault of the feminists now!

KATE

What I took in from the feminist movement as a young girl was that you can do and be anything and everything. And I internalized that as: I need to do and be everything. Because I am a woman and I owe it to women to do and be everything. So I have to work full time, I have to be a mom, I have to be a sexy wife, I have to be a good cook, I have to look beautiful all the time. I have to do everything perfectly because I owe it to the people who didn't have choices.

DELPHINE

I am with you on this. As is Anne Marie Slaughter when she argues we “can’t have it all”. This debate is pretty settled for me.

KATE

But some have it easier than others. I think particularly with the academic moms, I feel like they are doing everything, perfectly. Because they have insane educations, amazing intellects, their jobs are flexible, they can choose their schedules. They can get sabbatical, they take summer off. Once you reach a certain level, which most of the parents at Clara and Max’s school are, they are pretty much running the show. So I am sure they work hard but they also have flexibility in their schedule to go volunteer once a week. Or they have this skill to run the engineering fair, because they are an engineering professor or whatever. I would never get asked to come in and give a talk at school. Here is a perfect example: I was invited to come volunteer in class to help with typing, because that is what I do. I am not kidding. I was invited to help the third graders type their essays, because that was my area of expertise! (Laughs). So that is the perception. So all these

other moms are doing these incredible things like doing research and making an impact, and they're always beautifully put together and then they walk into school in their three-inch heels with home-made cupcakes and I am just like...I show up like this, if I show up at all. Or I'm in the car pool lane or on the phone yelling at Max to get in the car, trying to not let my boss hear, I got him on mute. I never feel like I measure up, and I feel like I'm in some sort of weird competition and I'm never gonna win it.

DELPHINE

Don't you think this is a bit exaggerated? My husband is a faculty, as are several of my friends, and believe me, it is not quite as you describe in real life. There is flexibility but the amount of work and pressure is huge, especially the first 10 years, which correspond to the time you have little kids. But from my French perspective, I think flexibility should be the norm. Academia is more like the normal work rhythm we have back home, with some space for leisure, rest and peace.

KATE

Deep down I know it is the façade. Behind closed doors things are different probably. But it is the impression that I have. The only time I usually ever put make up is if I am going to go to school for something. It is my armor, sometimes I feel like I have to pretend.

DELPHINE

Maybe you too look put together and confident to other moms, and the others see you lucky to have flexibility because you are free-lance choose your hours and are not judged and evaluated all the time.

KATE (making an unconvinced face)

Maybe...

MARIE

For me it is a bit different. I don't feel judged, but I don't want people to think that I am not a good mother.

DELPHINE

Why would they?

MARIE

I lack in some ways, and would love to do more, better: cook better for them, have more energy to take them places, play more with Lola while I don't like it too much. Actually I don't play a lot. I never do crafts with her. I am OK with it, I give her other things, but sometimes I feel a little guilty. I see other mothers who seem to have more energy; they take their kids to the museum. They go for long walks, things that for me feel like climbing a mountain, you know? Getting both kids dressed, put them both in the car, take them I don't know where, then coming back... So no, "we will stay here, play in the garden, and wait for the snack." (Laughs).

KATE

I could have said it myself!

MARIE

Sometimes I think that if they saw me read more, it would make them want to read when they grow up. Or that I should spend more time with Lola to teach her to ride a bike, or put a crayon in Pablo's hand to teach him to draw circles. That I don't do, I am aware of it, and it makes me feel guilty sometimes.

DELPHINE

And then you look at your friend's Facebook pages and their beautifully curated lives on the screen, and you feel tiny and miserable. You don't see the bad parts of course!

KATE

The perfect mother in the age of social media, I hate this! I would show my filthy house. I'd take pictures of my dirty house and put them on Facebook. Like, "Filthy dirty house. That's how we live!". Seriously. My sister is a beautiful photographer, so she'll take these pictures of her family playing board games, or Luke and Jo in matching pajamas, or skiing in the Alps or whatever. I am like, "Oh, God. Look, I know what you people are doing. I know what your kitchen looks like. so, please! "

MARIE

Exactly! I refuse to play that game; I don't post anything. But it is hard not to look at your "friends" posts, and all the interesting stuff that you don't do.

KATE

We need to back away from deifying moms. Why can't we just accept that motherhood is a complicated thing and we're all muddling through it? We need to focus more on the fact that there's no maternity leave in the United States. There are no day-care subsidies. You're allowed to fire somebody at work if they're pregnant and they can't do their job. That's a mothering problem. Whether or not you want to baby-wear or to breastfeed, that is not a mothering problem. That is a personal choice.

DELPHINE

It takes a village, like the proverb says... We mothers need that village to give a hand.

MARIE

I feel so lucky when I listen to you. Lucky to be in a country that give me 12 weeks maternity leave, and an extra 3 years parental leave that I am just finishing now. Lucky to have found Anne, and be able to pay her full time. Lucky to have Jules in daycare and Lola in public pre-school most of the day.

DELPHINE (to Marie)

I don't know how you do it though. Since Leo and Luca were born I didn't trust strangers to take care of them except in the school environment. I was happy that my kids preschool had one-way mirrors in the classrooms.

MARIE

Well, it's not like I have a choice. I can't do everything on my own and my husband is very busy. And when he is home, he doesn't take care of the kids, or exceptionally, when I'm really overwhelmed. I will hand him Jules and tell him "please take him I'm going to take a break, I need to breathe and calm down"

KATE

I was not comfortable with leaving my toddlers in daycare. I preferred to have them home, with a Nanny. Ours was wonderful.

MARIE

Well, if you choose a reputable place, it is very good socially for the child to be exposed to other people. I don't work but still put my babies in public daycare when they were few months old to give them this social experience with other kids. But to be honest, she was 7 and a half months when I transitioned her to 2 days a week and it tore for my heart. I felt it was too early.

KATE

Seven-months! Most working moms in the US have to put their babies in someone else's care just after a few weeks, a couple of weeks. I read this article the other day in the New York

Times, of a mom who reluctantly put her child in daycare because she couldn't afford to lose her health insurance if she quit her job. When she came to pick her baby up, he was dead, of unknown causes. It's the most horrible thing. Why would a society tear apart the mother and her newborn child who is so dependent on her.

MARIE

I agree, it is inhuman. Even me, if I had worked, as I always thought I would, I would have had to put them in daycare at 3 and a half months, and it would have been excruciating. And I would have done it. I never thought before that I would feel that way. Never

DELPHINE

It is a shame that that woman was forced to go back to work so early. But let's be honest, this could have happened anywhere, even at home.

MARIE

This is life. We have to learn to be away from them. And sometimes you just don't have a choice anyway. I went on vacation with my husband when Lola was 4 months old. Friends had organized a boat trip. I didn't want to leave her, but I felt that I really had to do it for him, to be together as a couple. So I left the baby with a babysitter. I was OK for 2 hours, but then I wanted to go back, I needed to be with her physically. I didn't say anything because I did not want to ruin the trip for everyone but at 3pm I was a nervous wreck. But I know that doing this prevented tensions in our couple.

KATE

The problem is that we see motherhood as separate from a woman, do you know what I mean? It's compartmentalized. Until society comes around to this idea that it's part of your person-hood once you have a child, well then things won't ever change. You can't compartmentalize it that way. It's too physically intense, emotionally intense. For instance, your kid is sick, you have to stay home. You're penalized for that in the workplace. My kids get sick ALL THE TIME, if I worked in a regular office I would be screwed; I would get fired because I would be out all the time. Caring for your children isn't optional, even during the hours of 8:00 to 5:00. It's not optional; it's 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

DELPHINE

People tell you all time: "you must be busy, with 2 little kids", but when it comes to it, people expect you to be a mother after hours. No one except other mothers understand

KATE

Exactly! I wrote an article about that on the website Baby Center, titled "What you can't understand if you don't have kids". I was revolted about the recent news about Marissa Mayer deciding to end telecommuting at Yahoo, when we know it is a lifesaver for parents of small children among others. In the comments to my article, some people were horrible to me: Suck it up buttercup!

(The big screen behind them lights up with comments taken from that article. A prerecorded voice over reads them as they appear. Lights off)

VOICE OVER (female voice except for the last one)

“Being someone who has been trying for 3+ years to have children, these types of posts get to me (...) What I can't stand is that I work my tail off just like all the moms I work with do. Yet, they come and go as they please. Not just because their child is sick, but because they have to leave early for soccer practice, recitals that take place mid-day, spelling bees, and the list goes on.”

“Because childless people don't ever get sick or have to care for other ill family members, right?”

“To me, this post sounds like the author just wants special considerations because she is a mom. I get it, I have to work outside the home and it's HARD. BUT just because you choose to have a child does not afford you any special get-out-jail free cards. “

“You just don't want to work. That's all. I've cared for an elderly dying parent while working full time (and received an "urgent" call from work right after he died, on a Friday night, no less), so get off your high horse and stop this irritation ad hominem attack on people who "don't understand." You are narcissistic, and we don't sympathize.”

“I get you have a lot to juggle, one in ten of us would love that opportunity.”

“Your boss, the police, and everybody else, should not HAVE to understand what it's like to be a parent. You took on a job, you live in the same society, you have to obey the same laws, you have to meet the same obligations as everybody else. Having a child, no matter how time-

consuming and difficult, does not excuse you from those obligations. People (mostly) CHOOSE to have a child. Choosing to take on that responsibility, and then telling everyone that they have to give you certain allowances or special understanding because you did is ridiculous.”

“Please people. DO NOT have children if you cannot afford them or if you don't want the burden (by what I mean getting mad at people who don't have said burden). It's very simple, don't have sex or use birth control. But don't be mad at the people who have nothing to do with your choice. This may be why companies really don't want to hire us women.”

“(Male voice) You parents are full of it. The only reason it's a huge ordeal as you claim is because you've got nothing else going on so you feel compelled to schedule various activities for your kids, playdates etc.”

(Lights on)

KATE

I was so surprised by the reaction to that. I thought I would have a lot more support. I get called whiny a lot, when I write like that, and I think the implicit message is that you're not allowed to share those feelings. And I don't see it as complaining about my children, I see it as sharing what it's like to be a mom in today's world and to try the sort my way through navigating the world with my heart outside my body but also having all these other obligations. It's a way to come to some sort of understanding with myself. Sometimes I just need to share these experiences 'cause they're hard, and there's no one to talk to for me about them. So, I write about them on the

Internet. And then I'm always surprised when other women are not supportive, because I know that there are people out there who have those experiences. I don't understand this idea of unless it's sunshine and hearts you can't talk about it. People expect moms to just be like "Oh, motherhood is it wonderful, and I feel so good all the time and I could do everything."

#### DELPHINE

A little help and understanding from other mothers, other women, would go a long way to make things easier and more enjoyable. There is not much of a community of mothers unfortunately.

#### KATE

Except on the web, in mommy blogs. That's where I found my community. I found motherhood to be very isolating, because all my friends had had their children earlier than I did, my sister lived far away, my mother was grieving for my dad, and I was just lonely I think. I was allowed to be home with my daughter but I was like: "nap time, what am I going to do? I've cleaned the house; I've gone grocery shopping, what now? So I started my blog, and I connected with a group of moms across the country, moms who were also writers, displaced from some sort of writer position: journalist, marketer, PR, advertising. And so we formed this weird little collective, that hit two of my main needs at that point, one was to find someone just to write with, and the other one was to find someone who was going through the same emotional things I was going through raising a child; like this overwhelming physical attachment to them. People were willing to share their most intimate thoughts about motherhood under pseudonyms and I did the same. And sharing those feelings that you would never share even with your spouse. I never shared those feelings with my husband I wouldn't have sat down with him and said, I am

afraid what would happen to me if our child died, and I'm more afraid of losing him than losing you. But I am! I could survive without you, I couldn't survive without these children.

(Blackout and end of scene II.)

### **Scene 3: Lost**

DELPHINE (screaming and panting. Lights are off)

LUCA!!!

(Lights up. There is only one spot on Delphine who is alone in the middle of the stage looking scared and running everywhere calling her son's name. Kate enters and runs towards her)

KATE

Don't worry, we will find him. He can't have gone out, it is an airport.

DELPHINE (Panicked, crying)

Oh god, he was just there. I told him to wait for me, why did he leave the restroom without me. He never did that before... Oh no, where is he? Anything can happen with all those people around.

AIRPORT SPEAKER

We are looking for a little boy, 6 years old, wearing Navy pants and a purple shirt. If you find him, please bring him to gate 21.

(Delphine and Kate are running out of stage calling Alex's name)

AIRPORT SPEAKER (Nathalie's voice)

Luca, it is mommy. We are going to come get you so just stay where you are and wait for us.

Don't worry baby, I'll be right there.

AIRPORT SPEAKER (while Delphine enters stage left jogging and looking left and right, panting)

Mrs Delphine Martin, please go to gate 21 immediately.

DELPHINE

OH no, no, no! Something happened. Please, I hope they have him...(she looks panicked, out of breath...)

(She runs out. Blackout for 15 second while the cafe set up is installed, minus Kate Delphine and Luca. Then lights up, Delphine comes back with Luca in her arms and sits at the table. Kissing Luca's head on her shoulder)

LEO (Looking worried)

Mommy, Where was Luca?

DELPHINE

That's why I always tell you to wait for me when we go to the restroom. Luca thought he remembered the way back on his own but went the other way.

LUCA

I didn't talk to any strangers. I wasn't really lost. I was going to come back.

LEO

I was scared we lost him. Like that time in Disney land.

DELPHINE

Yes, since then I tend to overreact when he is out of my sight. He was barely two years old, and just walked out of the stroller while we were reading the map.

LUCA

It is the first time I saw a horse; I wanted to touch it. It was in front of a big carriage.

MARIE

Oh, just the sound of this makes me cringe. So what happened? You found him in one piece obviously.

DELPHINE

I almost died of panic. Charles and I ran around the whole park twice while I imagined all the horrible things that could happen to him, from being ran over by a horse, smashed under a merry go round, drowned in a fountain, and the most likely in my mind: be kidnapped. He was so tiny,

so adorable, perfect and vulnerable, I was sure someone would take him. It lasted about 10 minutes, but it felt forever.

KATE

10 minutes, Gosh! I am sick to my stomach just thinking what you must have felt. With all that's happening today, the perverts lurking behind every corner...

DELPHINE

Well, now that I think of it, kidnapping was very unlikely, but in the heat of the moment it was the only possibility.

MARIE

He was OK then?

DELPHINE

He was a bit shocked when he didn't see us, but fine. The staff found him and took him to a little house where they keep lost kids. Apparently it happens all the time. I already didn't like Disneyland before but now I will never set foot again.

LEO

You said next year we can go to Harry-Potter-land in Florida, Right mom?

(Everyone laughs and smile while Delphine Smiles and kisses him)

KATE

Having children makes us so vulnerable. They're these little, fragile, easily hurt kids. I mean, kids die from the flu, you know? It still happens. I didn't expect to be terrified half the time.

DELPHINE

Feels like you are going about your day with your heart running around outside your body.

KATE

They are so fragile and vulnerable. They can break...

MARIE

And so malleable. It is easy to mess them up

KATE

And they make us so vulnerable. When I imagine the worst, I think about losing them. I think about life-threatening illnesses or random acts of violence taking them from me.

DELPHINE

The worst for me is to imagine them without me. I have to be there. So losing them at Disneyland is one nightmare, me dying is another. I never thought about my death before but now I am very aware that I absolutely cannot die. If I disappeared, it would be devastating for them. Their whole world would collapse. Sometime I catch myself wanting to fast forward to when they are adults, raised, so that finally I am allowed to die (not that I want to). It sounds

ridiculous when I say it! But it is really where I feel the most anxiety sometimes. I don't want them to get hurt, and that would hurt them so much.

MARIE

I lost my father a few years ago, and it hurt anyway you know. But I see what you mean. For a kid, that's life changing. I only think about that when I am in plane with my husband.

KATE

I came close twice. Loosing them, and them loosing me.

(She opens her computer and types while speaking).

MARIE

Twice!

KATE

You wanted to read my blog. Here is one post wrote when I was pregnant. Max almost killed me.

I went into anaphylactic shock with him when I was 37 weeks pregnant.

MARIE

(She reads from Amy's computer. The sound comes off through the speakers as she reads)

*They couldn't find his heartbeat.*

*She held the doppler on my heaving belly while my back arched, muscles contracting painfully, involuntarily. I was, I think, screaming.*

*Where is it? Where is he? Max! Where is he? Oh, where is it? You can't find it!*

*My face was hot and wet. My lungs ached from trying to expand. The oxygen mask fell out of my nose and hands were on my head, in my hair, on my shoulders, many sets of hands. Shhh, lie back, you have to relax, Kate! Lie back sweetie! Shhhh, it's OK, you're OK, you're breathing. I can't breathe, I'm suffocating. The room is going dark. I look at my obscenely dancing legs and there is blood running from a gash in my left thigh. The first epi pen pierced my skin, but my flexing muscles pushed it out again, body struggling against the impending darkness. The second dose took, but only after what felt like breathless hours.*

*They said I never stopped breathing completely.<sup>8</sup>*

KATE

Stop reading out loud please.

(Marie closes the computer, shaken. Everyone looks at Kate)

KATE

They couldn't find his heartbeat... I was severely anemic and my doctor at the time decided it was a good idea to give me an intravenous iron infusion, because I was going to have a C-section. I had a reaction, and there was no doctor on-site, the nurse was in the other room, they had to give me two epi pens, and they couldn't find Max's heartbeat for five minutes. My husband was abroad. And my toddler was at home with my mother-in-law who didn't drive. It was horrible. I passed out. I remember waking up and my back was arching as I had gone into labor, from the epinephrine, I remember I had two bruises on my leg, and everybody was panicked. I remember the nurse running, and knocking over a tray.

DELPHINE

That's every mother's nightmare. You are both OK now, right?

KATE

Thank god. I cross my fingers.

DELPHINE

I too had a big scare last year. Of a different kind, but it shook me to my core.

MARIE

What happened? If it is not too personal of course.

DELPHINE

I think at this point we are over personal. The masks of the perfect, all together, unwavering mothers are down.

KATE

Yes, and it feels good. As we said earlier, we need more of that. Stop pretending. Stop hiding.

MARIE

This polar vortex situation helps. We are stuck here in the airport, we don't know each other, and we won't see each other again (smile). I had very difficult births but this is a bit too private to go into details. I'll spare you that. So what happened to you then?

DELPHINE

Well a year ago, I was taking antibiotics for a common bacterial infection, and the second day I woke up in the middle of the night with excruciating pain in my forearms. Like they were crushed in metal glove filled with pins and needles. It was a rare side effect from the medication. My immune system was attacking my own nerve cells.

MARIE

That's horrible!

DELPHINE

Over the next few days and weeks the pain spread, my whole body was burning, arms and legs tingling. I read all I could about that: some people improved, other didn't and a few wasted and died. Of course, in my mind I was going to be one of those. I was in front of my greatest fear, abandoning my children.

KATE

What was that medicine you took? I don't want it, ever!

DELPHINE

Nitrofurantoin. The pills are yellow and black; they look like hornets! But you know what, after I got better, nothing other than my children and my family mattered. I stopped working on my dissertation for a while. I made home-made pasta, ravioli, bought pastry books. I wanted to enjoy every second with them, give them everything and not miss a beat or worry about a deadline.

MARIE

Nothing is more important than those children. And we are lucky to be with them and not have to work.

DELPHINE

Well, I was still working. But it is the same every time something serious happens or almost happened. The pendulum goes from one extreme to another. I throw myself into work and feel the need to preserve my independence and professional side, while feeling guilty for not spending time with my children. But then when their health or safety is threatened (Leo having seizures, Luca lost in Disney...) all that seemed important looks futile in comparison. They always talk about balancing but it such a bad analogy for motherhood! There is no balance.

KATE

I feel like it's a giant game of whack- a-mole; do you know that game? Where you pop one mole down and one pops up. That's what motherhood has been like for me; it's been like one giant game of whack-a-mole. And I never expected to have a child with a serious mental illness. I thought scraped knees, the flu, friend troubles, boyfriends, heartbreak. That kind of stuff I expected. But I did not expect anything like this. It's so uncontrollable. It feels out of control.

MARIE

It is because it is. We don't control everything but at the same time we control a lot. So much so that it scares me. Now when I see an adult that is messed up I think about the child that he must have been and how his parents must have damaged him. No wonder so many people are neurotic and crazy. Their parents have such a big influence on them. Sometimes I want to take all the children in my arms and protect them.

KATE

Well, thanks! I am on the other side of this. I'm constantly afraid that everything out of my mouth they're gonna say to a therapist in 40 years: "My mom said to go away!" But that's true, I've literally said to Max, "Please, just go away." You know around 7 o'clock I'll say "You know listen, I really need 20 minutes to just get undressed by myself." And like sometimes I'll just say, "I'm going to take a shower and I'm gonna lock the door. So if you need anything, you need to talk to your father first." A very clear direction. But then, I feel very guilty. I feel like I should be Mother Theresa. Just be like all the time. "Come to me. Flock to me. Use me, abuse me."

MARIE

Remember the book, "Bringing up Béb "? French mothers don't abandon themselves to their children, and the kids are fine with that. You can feel better, you won't mess them up for existing and being yourself.

KATE

Thanks for that. But you just said it yourself that they are so malleable and...

MARIE

This is different. I think children are better if their mother is happier.

KATE

Our culture perpetuates that. I mean attachment parenting is a perfect example of non-stop physicality, emotional availability. I mean, you sleep with your kid!

DELPHINE

There is question of age though. It is one thing to be fusional with your baby, but it is another to have no boundaries with your 10 year old.

KATE

I give up! Whatever I do, someone will tell me it is wrong. We can't even agree among the three of us. I'll just feel guilty and live with it (laughs).

(Blackout and end of scene III)

#### **Scene 4: Round-The-Clock and Forever**

MARIE (To Kate)

So you were not on vacation in Europe?

KATE

Vacation? No! I was working with a client in Germany. I am a freelance web-marketing content developer and I write for a parenting blog. It works really well but you know, I'd love to be on vacation; even better, not work this year. (Chuckle) I'm really over it! (Laughs)

DELPHINE

Work is overrated, huh!

KATE

It is! It's really overrated. I would like to be able to take a good amount of time off and just be with my kids. I feel like I don't spend enough time with them and they've said that a lot lately in a lot of different ways. For instance Max, my little one, has been extremely clingy, like physically wanting to be on me all the time. Last night he said, "I need to cuddle and it needs to be device free." So, "Don't bring your phone. Put your phone down, put your laptop down, turn the TV off". Sort of, "focus on me mom, just on me."

MARIE

Everybody wants a piece of you, right?

KATE

Yep, and I am not as strict about dividing between work and not work. I'm just... I'm tired. I don't want to get called to Munich with two weeks notice. I don't want to go to New York for a trade show on a Sunday. I don't want to worry about the stuff at 8:00 at night while reading a

story to my kids. I would like to take a year off and just kind of rest. Be completely with them. Hit the pause button for a year, even just to think about what to do next.

MARIE

Sometimes it's difficult to find the energy. Yesterday, I was very tired and I let Lola watch TV longer than I should have. I knew it's not very good and I don't need anyone to make me feel guilty, I do it myself.

KATE

We'd all like to be more organized than we are, but it's hard when you're pulled in so many different directions, especially with technology. Every time this dings...

(Points to her phone) And I keep it on me because I have an elderly mom who lives far away, so if someone calls from my family I need to take it. But more often than not it's a work call, so it's easy to keep working, while you're doing all those other things, and be distracted and lose track of stuff. There's not as much demarcation between work and home. And for me there's none.

DELPHINE

But it gives the flexibility of not being behind a desk all the time. I think it is so freeing, to be able to do your work remotely, when the time is right.

KATE

But it is too much. Every single day I woke up last week and thought: "Oh my God, I want to run away from home." How fast can I get to Hawaii? Or, if I sneak out in the middle of the night they'll never know I'm gone.

(all laugh)

And I don't feel guilty about that, because I have a particularly needy family. my husband, my daughter and my son are all like an emotional black hole. There's no amount of love I can give them, verbally, physically; it's never enough. Occasionally I will say to them, "Okay, you need to give me my space, I need a bubble." Or "Please leave the kitchen". Like, I'll be cooking and Max will be dancing around me, I mean, you know. "Mommy I love you!". "Mommy can I tell you something?" "Mommy the solar system is 800,000 miles wide" It's like, oh my God... I can't...

MARIE

It is tough I agree. When you are a mother, for the first time in your life someone else's life counts more than you. For the first time in your life you have thoughts like: if one of us must die I want it to be me, which I never felt about a man that I loved before, or about my parents. You want to suffer for your child, put your child first and foremost without questioning it. But it is sometime painful to give yourself to your child. Totally. Not being able to go to the bathroom because you have to take care of your baby, or ending up there with him in your arms! Not having one moment of intimacy because you have your kid with you all day, being exhausted in the middle of the night and of course still getting up, it's pushing the limits of self-sacrifice. For me it's a total abandon of myself, and I'm not sure that is the same for fathers (laughs). Giving all of myself to them is sometimes difficult.

DELPHINE

And it never stops. There is no break, no more insouciance. Never. When we don't take care of them physically, they are on our mind. Even when they leave, I worry about them. It colonizes part of brain. Mothering may be transitory but motherhood is permanent.

MARIE

And then again, it really never stops. Even when they're adults and gone from your house. I told you, I worry already about what will happen to them when they're 60!

KATE

No need to go that far. I worry about what's going to happen to max tomorrow, because he is 6, and Clara was 7 when she had her onset of OCD, and it happened overnight. He is high strung and anxious like we all are. I just can't see another kid go through that. I don't think I have the capacity for it. The emotional, physical, intellectual... It would push me over the edge. It would really do. It's definitely much scarier in that way than I thought it would be. And dealing with that illness, it's a full time job: I take Clara to therapy every other week. And when we are not in therapy, we're practicing therapy at home. She's on medication. So, it's a lot, and she's my baby. I have to figure out how to prepare her for a world that doesn't look kindly on people who are different. She's different.

(Silence for a few seconds, Delphine and Marie look sad and compassionate.)

KATE

I think about the immediate future, like you know, girls being mean to her and not having enough friends, and I think when she's an adult she'll be just fine because she's gifted in a lot of ways. She's a beautiful artist; she knows what she wants to do with her life already. Middle school is going to be really hard tough...

AIRPORT SPEAKER

Due to the extreme weather conditions all departing flights are canceled for today. Please contact airline personnel to be reassigned on a different flight tomorrow and make lodging arrangements.

(The 3 women are starting to pack their things and get up from the table they were occupying)

DELPHINE

We are stuck. Et merde!

KATE

At least now we can make plans. I am going to call my husband .

(She dials her phone)

KATE (to her phone)

Hi Hon', I'm not going anywhere tonight. Plane's been canceled.

(Silence)

KATE

You know what, just take something from the freezer! Or call for pizza, or go to the restaurant. Honestly I don't care, I have enough to take care of here, I don't know where I am sleeping tonight, there's already a huge line at the counter. I'll see you all tomorrow. Yes, I will call them before they go to bed to say good night. Talk to you later.

(Marie is texting on her phone frantically, while Anne the nanny takes the kids, Lola by the hand and Jules in the stroller. Jules is crying uncontrollably as he doesn't want to leave his mother)

MARIE

It's okay baby, I'm right here, just wait with Anne for a minute.

(The situation around the table is very chaotic. All are talking at the same time, we don't hear what they say, they're getting up putting kids in the strollers packing coloring books and markers filling their bags, the baby's crying, the boys are fighting, Delphine spilling drinks on the table by accident, Kate trips on a bag. Delphine puts her hands on her ears. Amy's down in pain, and Marie sits back and puts her head down on the table)

LIGHTS OUT

LUCA

Mommy, I need to go pee.

(Blackout and end of Act II.)

## Chapter 6

### Act III: Grounded

#### **Scene 1: Couple Redefined**

(30 seconds before curtain opens we hear restaurant noise. The set is a restaurant round corner booth. The lights are soft, centered on the table. The rest of the stage is dark. On the table are candles and silverware. The three women enter stage right following a server who seat them at the table.)

SERVER 1 (while the women are sitting)

Your server will be right with you.

KATE

Thank you. We need some wine

SERVER 1 (smiling)

She will be right there (exits stage right)

MARIE

The trip that never ends...

(Another server, a young woman, wearing black pants and a red tee shirt enters stage right and distributes the menus. Kate dives into the menu right away)

SERVER 2

Hello, my name is Janet; I will be your server today. What can I get you to start?

KATE

We will have some red wine. This one please (pointing at the wine menu)

DELPHINE

Could you please bring a tapas plate with the drinks?

SERVER 2

Of course, I will be right back.

DELPHINE (to Marie)

Thank you for sharing your nanny. She is wonderful. It is great to have a little break amid all the chaos.

MARIE

I don't know what I would do without her! Literally. But your kids are great, they are so well behaved. They were very good today, despite all the commotion.

DELPHINE

They enjoyed it! It is Ipad marathon day! They are rationed normally so they enjoy the feast. Your kids were not too demanding either. Thanks to Anne the fairy...

MARIE

Maybe but I am exhausted still. The unknown, finding ways to keep them busy. I don't like when they miss their naps and eat junk food all day. I don't know how other women do without help. I really don't.

KATE

You just don't travel with them, like me (laugh). This way you avoid the packing of 3 people, putting everything in the suitcase, making sure you don't forget the overly excited and needing help.

MARIE

I feel like I am always complaining and finding it hard. My friends seem to be doing ok. I have friends who cook very well when I can't cook, and I have the impression that they do a lot of things when I feel overwhelmed. I was already under the water with one kid so I'm even more with two, even though I don't work and have professional help. So I really wonder how do they do it?

DELPHINE

We all pretend. To keep up appearances. To me, you look very relaxed, you look like you never were pregnant, you are fit, sophisticated.

MARIE

This doesn't count; all my friends look pretty, are full of energy. I feel like everyone is doing well but me. At the same time I am a perfectionist, and it is important for me to look good for my husband. If only it could motivate him to help more around the house.

KATE

Don't we all wish that (laughs)

MARIE

No, but mine is special, really. He comes directly from the 50's. I knew he was like that but I didn't think it was going to be that frustrating.

(Amy's phone rings. It is her kids' school. She looks at her phone)

KATE

It's school. (She picks up the phone)

KATE

Hello, yes this is she. Is everything all right? (Listens 5 seconds) No, I am sorry, I will not be able to bring Clara's lunch. As I told you several times on the phone and by email, I am on a business trip in Munich, Germany, so if anything goes awry, please call my husband.(Listens). No, YOU call my husband, I am on business trip and I have to go now. Thank you.

(She hangs up the phone and puts her head in her hands)

KATE

Can you believe this? It was the school secretary. She said she forgot. Of course she forgot, because she would never think to call my husband first! (Chuckle) I can guarantee you if my husband was in Munich, nobody would call him for school matters. Ever!

MARIE

It is unnerving isn't it?

KATE

You say that so calmly, like it doesn't bother you. You remind me of a woman I worked for as a nanny when I was in college in Boston. She had 5 kids a lot of help at home and a lot of money

thanks to her surgeon husband. It was chaotic, her house was a mess, but she seemed happy and her city life was exciting. I guess the help and money make the sexism more bearable.

MARIE

I have help but believe me, I would prefer a little less in exchange for my husband to be more present with the children, with us.

KATE

Let's talk about my husband!

MARIE

You'll never win on this one. I didn't think that nowadays it was possible to meet someone like that. (Laughs). And I so wanted a husband who would share the chores and the parenting with me! But that's whom I fell in love with (smiles).

DELPHINE

Is it that bad?

MARIE

Worse! (Laughs) For his defense, he does not do anything in the house, but he hires people. For example, he always said when I was pregnant that he would not get up at night, but that if I wanted he would gladly hire a night nanny.

KATE

I didn't even know that job existed. Is it like those wet nurses they had in the renaissance?

MARIE

Well, in our social circle it is not uncommon. Some of our friends had one, but I didn't want to leave my little babies who need me so much with a stranger. I hated the idea; I wasn't raised that way. I never would have imagined that I would be able to function on 3 hours of sleep a night for 3 months, but I did it.

KATE

I would take the nanny! And the sleep. Any help I can get. If I had the money I would pay them to make dinner, to help with homework, to fold the laundry (nothing takes more time than folding the laundry!), and ferrying up the kids around? That would be heaven.

MARIE

Nannies don't replace your husband; their dad. I would love if we could do more things as a family, because there are some things that are heavy on my own and would be really nice to do with him, such as walking down to the village with the kids. I can do it alone but it would be a lot easier if he were there because he can take one and help me and it's just more fun. Sometimes it is too much for one person. For example, while preparing lunch or diner, when I have both hungry kids around me crying. It creates internal stresses that wouldn't be there if he helped. The whole process would be more peaceful; food would be ready faster. I'm not even asking him to help me prepare dinner, just asking him to take one of kids to help them patient.

DELPHINE

Aren't you tired of having to ask, nag or be mad?

MARIE

I accept part of it because he works and I don't. And he pays for help. A lot of it: We have a Nanny 35 hours a week and a cleaning lady 16 hours a week. And also, I know that's how he is, and I don't want to fight all day. There is some frustration but I am lucky in so many ways that I really can't complain.

KATE

35 Hours a week! You ARE lucky... And you Delphine, you didn't say anything. Are you hiding something? Someone?

DELPHINE

I can't complain. We share household work as much as one can hope for.

MARIE

So he helps a lot? Even with children?

DELPHINE

Yes, not without a few conflicts over the years. And I still do more, more of the little repetitive things, the discipline, and all the organization. He absolutely doesn't measure how much mental

work and energy it requires to plan, prepare, organize activities, school events, choose clothes, rent the instruments...

KATE

...select the right doctor, schedule the dentist visits, buy the presents, and wrap them! write the thank you card, organize play-dates.

MARIE

Decorate the house, plan a diner party, frame pictures and make memory books.

DELPHINE

Plus a million other invisible things. He does not even know these exist. But he does his part of the actual physical work at home. Because that's what we agrees on from the beginning and I demanded it.

KATE

Ok, you are right, we are not talking to you (pretends to turn her back. Teasing)

DELPHINE

And I don't mind doing this invisible work. Let's be honest, I like to choose and decide and set things up the way I like. I just know for a fact that he, and most people except mothers in fact, don't measure how much time and energy is put into this crafting of the mundane day-to-day life. It does not count. For instance, when we talk about potentially moving to another city, he

doesn't hear my argument that I don't want to start organizing our lives all over again at this time. "I'll help you" he says...

MARIE

Yeah, right! he probably has no idea what that entails. I just spent the past 2 years building a house- 2 actually, and organizing our lavish wedding while raising a baby and an infant. Imagine the amount of attention to details, research, scheduling it requires. This was more than a full time job and it looks like I didn't do much really. But this is what makes our daily life as sweet and pretty as it is.

KATE

I have to write a PDF when I live for a trip, or they freak out! When Max was born and I had a C-section, I had to tell my husband, "I can't empty the dishwasher, I'm physically incapable of emptying the dishwasher, you have to do it." And then that became his chore, but it was only after I said to him, "I physically cannot do this, it will just not get done unless you do it,"

MARIE

Antoine would let the cleaning lady do it. He would have hired her full time, god forbid he had to take on such a mundane responsibility!

(Ambiance noise fades and lights focus on the table)

KATE

When I was not well, my husband was so capable. I will spare you the details but I had a big health scare a couple of years ago after complications from a hysterectomy where I almost died twice: from sepsis after an infection and a week later from a clot that lodged into my lungs. During that time my husband sort of went into this Mr. Mom “I’ll do everything mode” because he had to; But if he only has to do it occasionally, it's like he gets amnesia.

(They are waiting for the rest of the story, riveted as if they were watching a movie, leaning forward towards her)

KATE

I felt under-appreciated and abused and I felt like I was taken for granted. And then, when I almost died, everyone was like, "Oh God. Mom really does everything!" My husband had to learn how to pack the lunches, and get them ready for school, and tuck them in at night. So, the demands on me lessened a lot during that period, and I was like, "Okay, this is what it feels like to be me, even though I'm sick, and I'm injured, and hurt, and I can't do anything, I think I remember this from before."

DELPHINE

Before you met him, or before you had children?

KATE

Before we had children, it was different. I always did the food shopping and made dinner, but he did all the housework. It stopped when I quit my job to take care of Clara. That was when all of a sudden everything else became my job. It was like a definite before and after. When it was just

us, we were fine. We didn't even have to talk about it. We just naturally divided things because we were both working and I preferred to cook. He preferred to clean. He took care of the bills. I made more money than he did. It just sort of worked, I don't know why. But once we had the kids, everything just sort of went crazy when I started to take on a more traditional role in the house. Outwardly traditional.

DELPHINE

Does he know that studies show that the couple's sex life is better when husband share the housework!

KATE

I know... If we shared more, everything would be so much easier. I wouldn't be as frantic, and I don't think I'd be as protective of my few minutes that are just mine. I think I'd spend more time with the kids outside of our structured day if I felt like I didn't have to do all the work. Like Saturdays, my husband will say, "Well, why don't you just sit with us?" Because who's gonna do the laundry? Who's gonna go grocery shopping? Who's gonna clean the basement? Who's gonna do all this stuff? So even on weekends I don't stop and spend time with them. I mean I'm with them, but I don't spend time with them. I don't sit down and play a board game, or read a book with them, or contemplate life, or talk about the solar system, or whatever. I'd say, "Go do something" and "I'm busy." If we shared more of that weekly stuff, I would have more time for them, more emotional capacity.

DELPHINE

I suspect you are not alone in the situation

KATE

You bet! Everybody, every mom I know: Working, not working, part time, all the time, doesn't matter. Everybody has just the same things. I have a friend who's husband works nine to five. She works a much more intensive schedule, and they're on the verge of divorce, because he just can't recognize that when he comes home, he needs to pick up the slack instead of being playful, friend, fun dad, and then going to read the paper. He has to help make dinner, do the bath, and all that stuff nobody wants to do. And they're in dire straits because he just doesn't get it. She can't take it anymore. She's done. I think that she figures: "If I'm gonna do everything, I might as well just do it the way I want do it and not deal with the crap."

DELPHINE

So you, what are you going to do?

KATE

First, I did hire a cleaning company. They come every other week because I couldn't keep up, and my husband wouldn't. My house was a disaster so I feel less incompetent. I don't feel good when our house is dirty. My mother kept our house so clean you could eat off the floor. I mean, I would get grounded for not cleaning out under my bed where you could not see anything! But regarding my husband, I have come to a place where I accept that that's who he is. And we've been married for so long. We've been together for 18 years. And he has changed a lot over the years, but this fundamental part of him is never going to change. So I had to decide, do I love

him enough, am I committed enough to our family to overcome this part of him? And I am. I would bet that once the kids are out of the house, things will go back to the way they were.

MARIE

I agree. You can't fight all the time. But it still revolts me. Last night, for instance, after putting the kids to bed, I quickly put together a meal that I reheated in the microwave. He was on the phone, for work, so finally I took my plate and ate in front of the TV and went to bed. That's okay; he works. But when I woke up this morning his plate was still there on the table. And this happens every day! And it gets on my nerves every day! Once in a while I say something but otherwise I just pick it up. I don't want to give up completely but at the same time I can't be angry with him all the time. So I say something when I'm really tired or when he really goes too far like (laughs). I have 1 million of examples, everyday leaving his BabyBel wrappers on the table: he can't put them in trash?

DELPHINE

Doesn't seem too difficult, but you are there to do it, right? But you said you knew he was like that.

MARIE

Well, before having children, we were both working, like crazy, so of course, we had the same life, we ate out most of the time, we each had a cleaning lady so neither of us did their own laundry. Maybe then, when we ate home together, he helped me clean the table and fill the

dishwasher a bit more. But now all has changed, I don't work, I am home, he works all the time and his job is very stressful. And he does not expect me to do it, I swear.

DELPHINE

(Makes a face that shows incredulity) Right...

MARIE

But if you had asked me 10 years ago, before I knew Antoine, how I imagined the sharing of housework, I would never have thought it would be that way. Never.

KATE

Me neither, and the worst is that I am not domestic at all, I hate cleaning almost as much as I hate to cook.

MARIE

I think that universally, women do more than men. I will give you an example that shocks me, and will always do: most of the time, when we have dinners with friends, it is the women who get up at the end of the meal and clean the table and the kitchen. The guys stay seated and chat, and it doesn't bother them at all! Not one of them will wonder if the hostess needs help, which seems the least they can do. I live this all the time, and I can't get over it. Some of my friends have accepted this role completely, but his revolts me, still today, every time.

(Blackout and end of scene I.)

## Scene 2: Emergency Landing Home

(The meal is over and the table has not been emptied yet. while talking, Delphine is cleaning up, piling plates and gathering crumbs.)

MARIE

You know you are at a restaurant, right? It is someone's job to clean the table. (They both smile).

DELPHINE

Job conditioning...

(Kate got another text. She looks at her phone and sighs. She texts back)

KATE

I forgot to call them to say goodnight, and now they don't want to sleep. Excuse me a second.

(Kates calls home)

KATE

Hey Lola, sweetie, you should be in bed by now. I will be home tomorrow. No you will be fine. I know it wasn't planned but those things happen. You can go sleep in your brother's room is you want. Goodnight Lola, goodnight Max.

(She hangs up)

KATE

Anyone else needs me? Work, Check. Kids? Check. Husband? Check.

DELPHINE

So now, explain to me: what is the deal with volunteering in this country? I, too, would love the teacher to come help me sometime do my work when they have a minute. (Laughs) I just come from spending a semester in France, and I didn't set foot in classroom once. They don't even want you there.

MARIE

They would feel that you encroach on their territory, their responsibility. French teachers would find this disruptive, intrusive and overprotective.

KATE

I resisted volunteering for a long time because I felt that exact same way. I felt, especially at my kids' private school: "I am paying you a boatload of money to educate my children, you should be able to do it without my classroom support".

DELPHINE

Bringing a cake for a birthday or chaperone a trip I understand. But the expectation that the mother should come make posters, copies, listen to kids read is so out of line! It is inconsiderate of our lives. Leo's class, In France, went hiking last month and the teacher asked for a couple of

chaperones. In the note, she apologized in advance for asking this knowing we all have work to do during the day.

KATE

It's a political thing here. The moms who are in school all the time, their kids have better relationships with their peers and with the teachers because the moms become friends with the other moms and then there are play dates that happen. And the teacher feels that you're invested in your child's education in a way that maybe a mom who doesn't volunteer isn't, which is an unfair judgment in and of itself, but that happens.

DELPHINE

Luca forbade me to enter his class from the beginning. The only time I went to help the children read, he spent the rest of the day sobbing because I had left. "Mommy, please don't come", he begs every time a teacher asks.

MARIE

I don't know how I would take that? (laughs)

KATE

I wrote a post last year for a blog about school volunteering saying, "I work during working hours why would I come to school". I'll send it to you. It was very funny, but made me look bad again. It's just sort of about how you get guilted into doing these things, not only by the teachers but also by your kids. So the kids are now little weapons in this game. Like Clara will come

home and say, "Emma's mom was in school today, how come you never come to school?" and I'm like, "Oh, 'cause I'm feeding our family." I'll literally say to her, "If I don't work, we don't eat." (chuckle) "I get paid by the hour. That's how it works." She's like "Oh, I wish you were able to come" She told me that when she grows up she wants to be a stay-at-home mom like my sister. I was like, "Okay, go for it, find yourself a surgeon to marry, and go right ahead my dear. We'll see how much you like that."

DELPHINE

So, how did we end up at home doing something other than planned, me studying, you Kate freelancing, and you raising your children? What's your story?

KATE

I always wanted to be a writer, from a very early age; I think part of it was because I was told I should be. Storytelling was always very interesting to me. I was a terrific liar (laugh). When I imagined myself as a grown up, I would live in New York City, I would have a dog, ride a bike and maybe write books. When I got older, at 8 or 9 I wanted to become a reporter, be an observer. And then I had this romantic version of course of what that's like: you're rich and you live in a penthouse (laughs), and you travel all over the world, you're a war correspondent and you wear a vest and people shoot at you, and you're very brave (laughs). When I went to college, I studied print journalism; I wanted to focus on magazines. I wanted to be a writer for Newsweek or Vanity Fair, or Esquire. I wanted to write like Nora Ephron or Tom Wolfe. I was very passionate I'm still very passionate about it. It's just my life took a turn that did not allow for that life (laughing, not as joyfully as before)

DELPHINE

What happened?

KATE

Life happened! Kids and getting married, it always took a secondary backseat to my career. That's why it feels so surprising to me that I'm in the situation that I'm in today. But I always knew I would have a companion, I thought I would have children, but it certainly wasn't "I'm going to be a mom", it was "I'm going to be a journalist", and I might get married and I'll probably have kids because that's what people do. But when I was thinking about the future, that was never part of my vision. I knew it would probably happen but I never thought about what it would look like.

MARIE

So, what happened, how did you end up at him?

KATE

One reason why I quit my job was because I felt like I couldn't function at work because I was so sleep deprived. And I had a maternity leave and my husband didn't. So I was like, "Okay, I'll do the night feedings because you have to get up in the morning." And then that never changed even though I had to get up in the morning, too. I also quit my job because I didn't want to leave Clara with anybody else. I wanted to be her mom; there is that primal feeling. And I was learning and figuring it all out and I sort of took all that stuff over because of that instinct, and then I never

relinquished it again. And I did feel like it was unfair, but I didn't say anything because I thought, "Well, I'm the mom." and I fell into that gender role thing, too. Like: "Oh, my husband's going to work." I don't think I ever thought it meant I would become a housewife; that was never my intention. (Laughter) I wanted to be home to raise my child. I didn't want to have to clean the toilet by myself all the time. And it stayed that way since then, even though my husband hasn't worked in years.

DELPHINE

So you earn the money, do the housework and manage the kids. That makes pretty much everything right?

KATE

Yes, he doesn't realize how stressful that is. He is anxious about his work but can't identify with the pressure that I have everyday with deadlines, accountability. His career still figures very prominently in the work-life balance in our house. It still takes precedence, because he'll still say to me, "I need to protect my time, so I can't go get the kids if you have a meeting at 3 o'clock because I need to work on my dissertation." But he never works on his dissertation. Or if he does, I'll come home from picking the kids up and he's napping, even if he was working when I left. So there's an expectation that I will juggle everything around his time, and God forbid I impose on his time with any kind of household or childcare task. It's infuriating, and it's a big cause of conflict for us right now. All of that trickles down to the kids, because then they see us acting like everything is a hassle and hard and they react like everything is a hassle and hard. So

it's this terrible cycle that we get into, and I don't know if it'll ever end until they're gone, out of the house.

MARIE

How many more years? 10?

KATE

Something like that! But at least, professionally and financially it is good finally. I have a lot of momentum right now. I had a big company contact me this week and say, "What if we wanted to hire you at a director level." I was like, "Uh, I don't know." How do I answer that question? I don't know. I haven't worked for somebody else in ten years on a regular basis. They're asking me how much I charge but I don't know, "how much you got?" (laughter "I'll take as much as you can give me.")

(Everyone laughs)

KATE

But at this point I either need to do it full steam or decide I'm not going to, and that's hard. Because part of me really wants to do it just to show that I can and because it's fun and the other part of me knows that it will be a big, big issue for my family.

DELPHINE

Here we are again! (sighs)

KATE

I think I would love it though. If my husband had a full time job and he wasn't as emotionally difficult as he is right now. He's super needy right now, 'cause he's going through this really emotional process and it's like having a third kid sometimes. So I have to spend a lot of time pumping him up and something's got to go. And I can't get rid of them. (Laughs) I don't think. I don't want to! But if I were on my own, I'd probably just work all the time, because it's so interesting to me right now and so fun. I feel really energized when I do it, almost like I did when I was a young reporter, it just feels very fresh. I'm not bored. And I've been bored, professionally, for a long time.

DELPHINE

What about you Marie?

MARIE

I am very lucky not to have to work, and to be able to take care of my children. But I feel that something is starting to change: Up until now, I didn't care that I wasn't working. And I'm still okay with it. But now I sometimes feel a little embarrassed and uncomfortable socially when people ask me what I do and I respond that I raise my children. That's why I've had this idea recently to create a company. I haven't started yet but the only fact to be able to tell people that I'm going to start a company makes me feel better.

DELPHINE

And your children are still young. This feeling will probably get stronger as they grow.

MARIE

I can see that happen (smiles). But I have to be there for my kids. Before, when I was working a lot I wondered how I was going to do to help my kids do their homework. That's my obsession. I have to be home with them for their homework. Because my mother who was very busy, always helped us with our homework, and I think that if I was always such a good student, it was because of that. At work, I was watching Ondine, my superior who had older children. She was in the office until 8pm everyday, and her children would call the office when they got home from school to talk to her. She made her choice, but I am sure that her children suffered from that.

(Delphine serves wine to everyone and smiles)

MARIE

After 15 years in the same job as head of PR for one of the main French TV news channels, I had the feeling that I had reached the glass ceiling. I couldn't go higher without sacrificing my personal life. And I didn't want to. For about 10 years I was aware that if I continued working exactly the same way, which I have loved and found exhilarating, I would end up like those old PR directors, who look bitter and don't have kids. So it had to change. I didn't want to look back and find it was too late. I always wanted a family and children. But when I was younger, I never thought it would be an issue.

KATE

And couldn't you do both, or do it differently?

MARIE

I don't see how. You have to be at work early in the morning and late at night, and even the weekend sometimes. That's how I worked anyway. So, maybe when you are a mother you can leave at 6 PM but at the same time those last two hours are those where you can go talk with your boss because he stays until late. Those last hours are as important as the rest of the job. And how would I do that today? I would leave at 6pm if I had to, that's what mothers do but you miss those precious two hours where a lot of things are happening. In my early thirties I often wondered, " what am I going to do? This is not going to work." But honestly, even when I asked myself this question, I never thought that I would stop working. Not working means that you're going to depend on a man, and I never thought that in my life!

KATE

Motherhood is a gender-based barrier in a lot of ways, which is why I circumvented the traditional route. I mean I made my professional life fit into my motherhood rather than vice-versa. I didn't try to shove my motherhood into my professional life. I don't think I would've been happy any other way, I know I would be miserable if I had to get up and go out of the house everyday and leave my kids at daycare until 5 o'clock and. I have to take Emmy to therapy for two hours every week. I couldn't do that if I had an office job. I can't imagine doing anything different today.

DELPHINE

Let's play what if; What if you could waive a little wand. If you could be anything today, what would your life look like?

MARIE

I am so lucky compared to others. I had my career: been there, done that. I can see myself directing a charity for women or children, and lead a company. But I am happy and so lucky to be where I am.

DELPHINE (sarcastic mocking tone)

That's what you always dreamed of...right?

MARIE

No! If someone had told me that I would be in that situation today, I never would have believed them; ever. I was raised to have a career, I was a feminist, believed in egalitarianism. I always thought I would work. I like to work. Staying home with my children never crossed my mind. But that is where life took me.

DELPHINE

How did that happen then?

MARIE

I never went back to work after the birth of my first child. I extended my maternity leave. And that was the time that my husband's work took us to the South of France, Which I was very happy about because I didn't want to leave my baby but if I were still living in Paris I would not have been comfortable staying home. I was lucky that this decision to stay home was easy to take

that way. But professionally, I felt like I had done it all, so I thank life for the timing. I wanted to spend my energy in my personal life.

DELPHINE

Excuse my French but this is bullshit. We were all ambitious, with great education, drive and potential to be very successful. We were raised as boys and were told by parents, school, TV shows, we played on the same field as them. We were on the same team. And now we are so “lucky” to end up home, earning no or little money for 2 of us, or you Kate, doing everything half well, eaten by guilt and resentment?

(Silence, they both look at her empty eyed and sad)

DELPHINE

Denial isn't helpful.

MARIE

All this looks so secondary compared to raising children, taking care of them and doing everything to make sure they end up all right. Since I quit, I have been offered several positions including one as communication director of a major national radio station.

DELPHINE

Oh my God! That's amazing! You said no?

MARIE

I was excited for three days by this job. I couldn't sleep. I was going to do it. Then Antoine said to me "Marie, you know that we are closer to having a second child than you going to work there?", and he was right. I was worried I would regret it, but I have not, I was relieved. Even for my daughter. Working there would mean having a crazy life. It would mean putting her in daycare all day and just seeing her late at night just before she goes to bed for a little kiss. It meant having fights with my husband because we would be completely exhausted and that we wouldn't see each other. It was just impossible. I'm positive that this was a choice that saved my personal life and my family.

DELPHINE

Do you realize that in the last 10 minutes you have contradicted yourself several times? I know it's hard. Making the choice when the options are limited. But you said that you chose to be home, that you were so lucky to be able not to work, but that you couldn't continue working in a job you loved at the risk of destroying your family. I don't really see a choice here.

KATE

I understand what you are saying, Marie. A similar situation presented to me. Four years ago, I interviewed for the head parenting editor job at the Huffington Post with Arianna Huffington, herself (proud smile). I wanted that job so badly, I wanted to be in charge of that parenting website so badly. But, I couldn't move. My husband kept telling me that he would be done any minute. (Laughs). So I said, you know, I could move in a year, or I could move in six months, and I will come every month, for a week, and be there on site. It just wasn't enough. I'm glad now that I didn't get the job. I don't think it would have been good for my family. I don't think

living in New York would suit us. I don't think that the salary would have been enough to support us. We would have been ultimately miserable. I think I would have worked all the time, we would have had to live outside the city and I would have had to commute. And I don't think until long after the disappointment had dissipated, that I really thought about what it would be like to do it. What I'm doing now works so much better for us.

MARIE

All I know is that I don't want a career anymore. I think that with children it is not possible. Not given the kind of education I want to give my children. And I feel good about it because I had my career before having my children. I proved to myself all that I had to prove. I went to the end of a cycle and then could start another one. I thought for a long time that I could do everything. I started to realize about 15 years ago that there was going to be a problem, and naturally after a while my priority became my personal development and my family life. I turned a page.

DELPHINE

And when you wake up, what happens?

MARIE

I just want more freedom. I need freedom for me, also for my children

DELPHINE

Because you want to be there when they do their homework!

MARIE

Exactly! (Big smile)

DELPHINE

I believe that you feel that way today, but be careful that it doesn't become a trap.

MARIE

How's that?

DELPHINE

Well, take me for example. In my early twenties, after graduating from the best journalism school in my country, I worked as a journalist in the main French newsmagazine, in the department I dreamed of. It was the perfect job, and in all likelihood the start of an exciting career. But my then boyfriend could not find a job in my country that matched his professional ambition. So we both decided to come to the US where his chosen career was. I was more flexible, I could try freelancing, write, and I liked the freedom this would give me, as well as the adventure across the world. But it is not that simple. Now the question is, how much does my professional position (which is what it is because I gave up my career) weigh in our family decisions? We have a conflict these days about the next step. Who gets to choose if we move or not, and if so where? When? Is an opportunity for his career an opportunity for both of our lives? Does his vote count more than mine because I am not on a career track, and I can follow without too much damage to my non-career? Because he now earns way more than I do?

MARIE

I can understand that logic; you have to be practical. I like ambition in a man.

DELPHINE

This is not logic, it is a vicious cycle. I gave up a lot of myself for my family. And I am happy I did that, it all worked out well up until now. But when does it stop?

(Blackout and end of Scene 2.)

### **Scene 3: My choice**

MARIE

Sometimes I freak out when I realize that other women my age have a noble prize, have written successful books.

DELPHINE

You feel like you are too late, and missed the train.

KATE

I don't regret any of it. I mean, I regret the sadness and the illness and all that stuff, but I don't regret that this is my life. I don't have any regrets, really. I think I've become very resilient through this, and I wasn't always a resilient person. I think motherhood gave me that, and now I can give that to my children, especially my daughter.

DELPHINE

Don't you think it is what we call in French la "méthode coué". That our only choice is to convince ourselves we made the right choice, to rationalize after the fact. It is a well know and efficient human psychological ability, in order to go forward and not be miserable. This gives us a sense of agency, we took the only acceptable choice that was given to us and made the best of it.

KATE (annoyed look)

Possibly, but don't forget we've know each other just a few hours, so don't jump to conclusions about me. All I can say is that nothing is more important than those children.

DELPHINE

I am sorry, I did not want to trivialize. I agree with you. I felt the same many time; every second I thought they were in danger or that something serious happened. But still, why pretend that there is nothing wrong. If raising children, future citizen matters to society, and equality is deemed necessary to women's freedom and happiness, then why not try to make both compatible?

MARIE

I am sorry to tell you that but this is a utopia. It would take a cultural revolution.

DELPHINE

Exactly, that's what it would take. We had the civil rights movement, we had the feminist revolution: We need the motherhood revolution. The end of pretending that it is all roses and love and cuddles, the end of hiding the amount of grunt and work and exhaustion and worry. We need to raise a new feminist consciousness.

KATE

I'll tell you what it would take. It would take changing the whole mind-set of the American society.

MARIE

And even in France, where mothers are better accommodated, motherhood is not seen like the storm that it is. Mothers are still more likely to work part time or not at all, and are penalized in their careers. I have seen it.

DELPHINE

What needs to change then? Let's make a list:

(She rips part of the paper tablecloth and starts writing)

KATE

1: Childcare in America is a disgrace. The way moms are treated with policy is horrible. I mean we're like the last Western country to not have decent paid maternity leave, it's ridiculous, I don't know how anyone can expect you to recover in less than eight months from having a baby, I mean it's a major medical issue. It's a physical.

DELPHINE (writing and mumbling to herself. As she writes, what she writes appears on the screen behind as if she were writing it live)

Childcare is a disgrace...

KATE

We have a crazy puritan work ethic that our country was built on, and it's getting worse.

DELPHINE (writing and talking to herself)

...Do away with the crazy puritan work ethic...

KATE (speaks faster and faster, more and more animated as she speaks this text.)

Working is a status symbol here. Being busy is a badge of your worth. My dad worked in a European office while we lived in London, he was the American and everybody else was European. He was like: "They take this break at 4 o'clock and you don't come in until 10. They're off for eight weeks in the summer, how do they get anything done?" Because they don't work for the sake of working, they work to get things done. And I find the same with my main client, a German company, when they are gone, they are gone, but when they're in the office, they work. They're not talking on the phone in these ridiculous meetings; they're not sending emails. They're doing a task and getting it done. Americans don't think that way: unless you're constantly showing some sign of engagement, whether it's through a phone call or an email or finishing a task or assigning a new one... We have all this weird software to manage projects and milestones and it's nuts, it's crazy. And we impart that to our kids. That's why we give them so much

homework. Clara doesn't need eight pages of math a week. She knows how to do long division. But it's a sign that she is a productive person and it's pointless. It is training her to work nine hours a day, or 10 hours a day.

What sane person would go to work from 7:30 in the morning to 3:30 in the afternoon, work all day with a half an hour off, maybe, and then come home and do three more hours of work at home? It's insane. It's out of control. And that's why I left the traditional workforce. But I feel myself being sort of sucked back into that, because unless you act that way, you're not a good person. You really are judged and I think that's something that moms who stay at home struggle with. And that's why women who have left the workforce to stay at home professionalize their motherhood. They approach it like that. "Yeah I have to go to mom and me class." "I have to breastfeed for 12 hours or 13 years." Or "My kid have to know Japanese by the time they're three." You bring that same ethos to your parenthood; it's not healthy. (Panting and hot because she spoke so fast)

DELPHINE

So, after the puritan work ethics?

KATE

Paid family leave.

DELPHINE

I will add the next one: Mandatory paternal leave so that women are not penalized at work when taking the leave. Once men do this, it will matter, and become an accepted and expected thing to do when you bring a child into society.

(She keeps writing her list that appears on the screen)

DELPHINE

Longer school day, free public school starting at 3 years old.

KATE

We need to adopt a more European model, have that European mindset where home and health comes before productivity.

MARIE

French are capitalists too, a softer version maybe. We need to focus less on short term gains and see the big picture.

DELPHINE

My model is the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Denmark, Sweden) that are a lot less sexist and take good care of their families. And they do well economically, so it is not such a utopia after all.

KATE

Oh, believe me. To achieve all this, there has to be a revolution, a rebellion or revolt. It has to be an uprising. Those are the words I use because until we all get together and decide that we're not going to put up with this anymore then it's never gonna change. And we can't seem to harness that. We fight. There are factions in that group, there's the feminist and the attachment parent; and the lean-ins, and the lean-outs. Can't we all just say that we're fed up of this bullshit?

DELPHINE

Can't we?

KATE

We had 20 first graders slaughtered with a machine gun, and we still can't get people to have background checks. What does it take? That's how numb everybody is, we are just numb, everyone is so numb to everything. It's just like: "Oh that's just the way it is, kids get killed," "Moms don't get paid enough, oh well." I don't understand it, I really don't.

(For a few seconds, the women stare blankly at the table, looking exhausted, and sad)

DELPHINE

This myth of the easy, perfect, sweet, organized, fulfilling, amazing motherhood hurts women, our children, and our families. The damage is psychological, financial, and emotional. How many mothers do you think suffer from depression in silence?

KATE

I know I did. I had severe postpartum depression, and am still seeing a therapist.

DELPHINE

Just recently, a health panel has recommended that women be screened for depression during and after pregnancy. It has to be more widespread than we think: depression, anxiety, OCD, sadness, psychosis. Some of it is hormonal but not all I bet. Lowering the pressure, killing all the myths would cut it down.

KATE

I am sure many women struggle, but they don't want to talk about it a lot, because they don't have choices. I made specific choices. I chose not to work outside of the home. Great sacrifice in some ways, personally and professionally and financially, but the need to be home with them or to have them in my home, superseded all of that for me. And my mom was home with us so maybe that's why I feel that way, I don't know. I never expected to feel that way. I certainly expected to send my child to daycare after my maternity-leave was up. Period. The end. And then the reality was quite different for me. But it was my choice.

DELPHINE

Is it our choice though? Did we really choose that freely? I know I did what I thought was best for my kids.

(The 3 women leave their table, walk towards the end of the stage and sit there.)

DELPHINE

I didn't choose to become financially dependent on my husband.

MARIE

I didn't choose to spend most of my days alone with my kids.

KATE

I didn't choose to clean the house by myself, all the time.

MARIE

I chose to be happy over being successful and independent.

DELPHINE

I chose the well being of my children over my career.

KATE

I chose to adapt to keep my family together.

DELPHINE

Thank god we had a choice...

(Blackout. The End)

## Coda

I remember the scene as if it were yesterday. We are in our mid-20s, having lunch on a sunny day in the patio of a Paris restaurant. I come from my office in the main French newsmagazine *Place Montparnasse*, where I am a writer. She is wearing an elegant suit, as expected for women in her position (associate head of PR for a French news channel). Over our two giant salads, I tell her about my last interviews in a migrant camp, and she describes the movie premiere event that she is organizing. We feel on top of the world.

Marie and I are long-time friends. Fifteen years after our power lunch, we are eating together again, this time in her beautiful home in the south of France. Neither of us are calling the shots at work. We are making crêpes for our beautiful, amazing children, who matter to us more than anything else. We still have professional dreams, projects, but the interruption for mothering makes them more uncertain, elusive. Her Lola, age 3, tries to convince my boys to paint their faces for the crêpe party. They are all wearing little cardboard hats; everyone is happy (except the baby, who is crying. Pink eye. Not enough sleep. Grumpy). Marie and I met in 1993 at Sciences-Pô, one of those elite French schools, where we studied together. We both spent a year as exchange students at UC San Diego, then went to different graduate schools in France, I in journalism and she in communication. We then lived and worked in Paris at the beginning of two exhilarating and promising careers. She moved up the ladder in the main TV channel for 10 years, up to the glass ceiling she felt she had reached. I quickly left for where my husband's career took us, to the United States, excited to craft a different path for myself, compatible with our family project and my personal aspirations. For this play, placing Marie and me in a scenario where we don't know each other symbolizes the fact that our younger selves would not

recognize each other; this, I believe, as a result of motherhood. All of my male friends from political studies and journalism school are doing what they had envisioned for themselves back then. Only a few of my girlfriends are. At what cost, I wonder, for those few?

I met Kate only two years ago, but she could have been with us at that lunch. In one of her blog posts, “that girl,” she recounts finding an old picture of her and her friend, taken when she was a college senior in journalism school, for her final project, a mock teen magazine. She writes, “When I found this I had to stop working for a minute. My friend lives in Australia now, married and with a couple kids. The last time I spoke to her was 1995. I look at my face in this photograph and I see a very young girl who had very big plans. Now I know her story, and it isn’t quite the one she expected to write. As embarrassing as this photograph is, I’m glad I found it. It captures a part of my life that would be so easy to forget. I don’t want to forget that girl.”

What will they tell their daughters? What choices will their daughters have? None of these three women had dreamed of having children and how they would raise them. Until the biological clock started ticking, their dreams and goals were of professional achievement, career, discovery of the world, adventure. They did not expect having children to derail their visions, but they adapted early to bend their ambitions to the constraints of being mothers (following their husbands, resigning from demanding careers, going freelance). They changed even before they had to, in anticipation of necessary sacrifice. They chose their children, and they insist motherhood is what they wanted—probably a way of finding agency, rationalizing choices to be able to live with them. At the beginning of the play they are essentially mothers, but as the day develops, we see their dreams and who they were before, who they are as women. Everything written here is the perceptions of those women. The narrative is their reality, and their contradictions: Marie, in the same interview, explains how she was not interested in her career

anymore, that she had done everything and was finished with it, regardless of her children; she also conceded that she had realized early on that the glass ceiling prevented her from going higher and having children. She chose to stop working, but was her career over anyway? But then there is the personal level—the need for independence, for freedom, for purpose that motherhood seems to bring to these women. From this point of view, the change in trajectory may well offer a chance, giving time and opportunity to the women to rethink, recraft, learn to adapt, grow stronger as Kate says, or gain freedom, as Marie claims.

In the play, Kate is the woman who speaks the most, for several reasons, not the least her personality—she speaks a lot and really fast in real life. Her children are older than Marie's, who is just entering motherhood and has less experience to share; Kate also went through a lot in her first 10 years of motherhood ( the death of her father, her daughter's psychiatric illness, depression and postpartum depression, life-threatening complications of surgery that almost killed her). She is the one who depends on the American system to work and raise her children, a system more challenging and stressful than the more family-friendly French model, where the community is involved via public daycare and schools. Kate and Marie are the play's main characters. I am the connector—I ask questions, I doubt, I use my experience to make sense of theirs.

From the discussions with my participants, my observations, introspections, and analyses, it appears that the nature of motherhood in France is at odds with that in the U.S. today, with its cultural fetishes of speed, productivity, where being ultrabusy is valued. Many women in the U.S. have both careers and children, but we learn from studies and reporting that the combination comes at a cost—psychological, human, and financial. The women speak of the unexpected aspects and nature of motherhood, of several myths that coexist and have a detrimental impact on

mothers' lives. The last chapter of this manuscript will lay out the myths and their consequences on gender equality, meaning equality not only in the workplace, in society, but also in the private sphere, in the family, at home. Such equality encompasses physical health, mental health, happiness, leisure time, and peace of mind.

## Chapter 7

### The Myth Stalls the Revolution

#### The Motherhood Myth

*myth* |miTH|<sup>9</sup>

*noun*

*1 a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically **involving supernatural beings or events***<sup>10</sup>.

• *traditional stories or legends collectively: the heroes of Greek myth.*

*2 a widely held but false belief or idea.*

• *a misrepresentation of the truth.*

• *a fictitious or imaginary person or thing.*

• *an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person or thing.*

*ORIGIN mid 19th cent.: from modern Latin mythus, via late Latin from Greek muthos.*

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<sup>9</sup> Oxford American College Dictionary.

This notion of motherhood myth, at the origin of the shock of motherhood, is my contribution to the sociology of gender and motherhood. Not one but several myths transpire through the performance of my play, situations that the three participants have lived and shared with friends, acquaintances, and strangers on the web. Motherhood's ideal fits perfectly into various definitions of myth: The "good mother" is a supernatural being, a fictitious or imaginary person. There is a widely held but false belief that motherhood has to be magical, sweet and fulfilling at all times, that women today can have it all. But this notion misrepresents the truth that mothers I have met throughout my research and in daily observations for the past 10 years express with disbelief. The motherhood myth obscures the actual realities of mothering that are revealed only when women become mothers themselves. The myth is the model that women internalize as their reference before having a child. It is what society thinks motherhood is like, and what it should be. There are multiple images of The Mother, images that coexist and differ based on the person holding them: from my study, for instance, it appears that for the French husband The Mother is first and foremost a sexy and dedicated wife. To her boss, she is an employee who had to take a small break to give birth but will be right back the same as before. To her colleagues she is a woman who made an individual choice to have a child and should assume the burdens without complaints and bear them privately. To her child's teacher, The Mother is a person wholly dedicated to her child's schooling and ready to volunteer (potentially a full-time occupation if a mother gives in to the pressure of volunteering for each activity that touches her child: PTA, private-school board, classroom parent, fundraising, soccer coach . . . ). These roles and the many others that The Mother has to fill are at odds with the demands of

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<sup>10</sup> Bold emphases are the author's

mothering a child, succeeding professionally, and having personal emotional and intellectual space.

What did each of the three women, the protagonists of the play, discover after having her first child? It all starts during pregnancy, which was a lot more brutal than expected. The expectation that a woman is supposed to continue life as always until the last minute before giving birth and to get right back to "normal life" afterward disparages the vast weight of pregnancy and childbirth. The lack of significant maternal leave gives the false sense to everybody that this human-making enterprise is little more than a big belly to ferry around. It is not! According to the motherhood myth, the birth should be vaginal, natural, happy—otherwise the woman risks being labeled a mediocre mother from the very beginning, hurting her child's chances. At least pregnant women, provided that they act according to what is culturally expected, inspire a sort of kindness and protective warmth in people. But that kindness ends as soon as the little human emerges, replaced, according to my participants, by judgment, unwanted advice, annoyance, and criticism. This creates an enormous clash with the mother's feeling that her child is precious and vulnerable and needs everyone's patience and benevolence. The hidden nature of motherhood caused unexpected feelings in my participants when they became mothers, feelings that forced them to change their plans to go back to work after giving birth, that changed their overall career plans and life plans. Neither Kate, Delphine, or Marie foresaw the generational and cultural disconnect that occurred with their peers and family members instead of support and understanding. They all knew that having a child would be difficult and tiring, but they largely underestimated its intensity. They did not anticipate the fear, the anxiety, the primal need to protect their child physically and psychologically. They did not think about the possibility of accidents and illnesses—some very serious and long-lasting, and often creating

situations incompatible with traditional professional expectations. They expected their lives as mothers to be mostly happy, supported and fulfilled ; instead they often find themselves isolated and miserable. There seems to be a gap between the way they were raised, very much like boys, and the very gendered life they have to lead as mothers, specifically in the expectation to be a perfect mother. They are all surprised by the lack of community among mothers and women in general, by the criticism and competition made worse by Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (which leads to a lot of frenetic scheduling and spending to be sure their children measure up and stand a chance at a good future). They discovered feelings of vulnerability, of worries that never stop—and that, they now know, will last forever. Kate and Marie cohabited with their partners before having children, and the couples shared the second shift, before the mothers began shouldering most of the home workload after baby. They had not expected to stop working to stay home with their newborns. These unexpected realities look small and insignificant when taken separately. But as a whole, the motherhood myth is overwhelming and a major obstacle to well-being, career success, and sanity in a society that ignores the realities of mothering. Some of those realities, such as the anxiety and accidents, are of course part of life, and they probably can't be fully understood until experienced, but they should be acknowledged and accounted for in the public sphere.

The motherhood myth is perpetuated by the expectation of silence and acceptance. Women are not supposed to talk about their hardships in public (Maushart, 1999). But wherever you look on the web, women are yelling. Kate and the group of women she wrote with had an irrepressible need to share their experiences and feelings. One of the many blogs I came upon while doing this research is written by Maggie Dugan, very explicitly named "Maternal

Dementia: Thoughts from What's Left of My brain In a post titled "Train Wreck," she describes the same feelings, tells the same story. Here are her words:

"No one is prepared for how becoming a mother changes your life, but I was exceptionally stunned. I love my beautiful daughters, but I don't always love motherhood. A lot of women feel this way but don't talk about it. We lie to ourselves and to each other. We keep the dirty little secret. We're only supposed to speak of the joys of motherhood, the rewards for our sacrifices. This was never easy for me. I told the truth – how I really felt – and (sotto voce) I think it frightened people. "

### **The Good Mother**

The "Good Mother" is the master myth that deserves a few words. My case studies revealed differences in cultures between the American superwoman and the elegant, independent, devoted, but detached French mother. From my own experience as a French-American woman, and from my observations and discussions with mothers in my study, I conclude that the Good Mother has, among others, the following characteristics in France: First, she receives more help from the government than in the U.S. No volunteering is expected, and there are fewer demands in terms of molding the perfect child, the perfect student (so there is less pressure and stress on the child). But the Good Mother is expected to treat her young child as a small adult, independent and self-sufficient, and to minimize maternal instinct toward her child. Too much care or attachment is seen as detrimental, and women are typically expected to muzzle their protective and caring instincts. The French Good Mother is also a means to her male partner's well-being. Stories abound in the media instructing new mothers not to forget their

husbands after baby arrives. The Good Mother is expected not to gain much weight during pregnancy, to get back into shape quickly after childbirth, to devote time to the husband, and to resume sexual activity as soon as possible for the well-being of the couple. The American Good Mother does not seem to face that pressure, but she is put in an impossible situation to be the perfect nutritionist, nurse, educator, volunteer, employee, co-worker, taxi driver, wife, organizer, classroom parent, and so on. Working mothers are expected not to complain about the pressures of their situation because having a child was their choice, after all. At the same time (and this is another subject altogether), choosing not to have a child is viewed negatively, and the women who make this choice are viewed with suspicion, as selfish or immature. It is inextricable: Motherhood is a choice they are expected to make, smiling at all times.

### **The Myth stalls the feminist revolution**

The main point of this work is to shed light on multiple myths surrounding modern motherhood, myths that make motherhood a shock and more difficult for women, who expect a very different experience. Talking about the gap between expectations and reality is crucial not only for women's well-being but also for society at large, given that the myths regarding motherhood contribute to the stalling of the feminist revolution over the past quarter century. The lack of progress on gender equality is worse for mothers than for other women, and the Motherhood Myth contributes to this phenomenon. In this last section I want to go further than my study does, beyond the lives of the three women who meet in my play, and look at the situation through the academic literature. My women participants are universal singulars. For

each one, her story is hers only, but as other researchers show, it is also shared by many women of the time.

So, what is the stalled gender revolution I am referring to? An academic debate ignited by a *Gender & Society* article by Paula England (2010) featured the existence of a phenomenon she called the "stalled gender revolution." Although some scholars criticized England for understating progress toward gender equality, it is hard to disagree with her alarming statement in light of the statistics and the personal narratives of women—especially working mothers, as my research has illuminated. Researchers of motherhood and gender equality point to remaining and stark gender discriminations, with very little progress on that front in the last two decades. Phenomena such as the "motherhood penalty" and the "mommy track" are examples, among others, of blatant inequalities against mothers in the workplace. At home, along with the so-called second shift, women are also responsible for the emotion work, care work, and invisible work, and when race class and gender intersect, social injustices are multiplied for mothers. Each of these factors of inequity impacts one another, and all are dependent on each other. For instance, men's minimal participation in housework and child care has an impact on the performance of women in paid work and their career trajectories, but the fact that men are advantaged in their careers and spend more of their time in paid employment forces women to shoulder more of the second shift, or to give up their careers because it makes more sense, financially, to keep the husband's salary. Then, as children in the family internalize this inequitable model, it is naturally reproduced in the next generation, sealing the fate of the gender revolution (Chodorow, 1978; Coltrane, 1996). Despite the huge progress in gender equality since the '60s, why has the improvement slowed, stopped, and in some instances worsened in the last two decades? Why does working mothers' condition seem acceptable to many women—and to a

few researchers, who settle for so little progress (Coltrane & Sullivan, 2007; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006)? In order to improve their lives, should mothers aim to better juggle, to compromise, to sacrifice the quality of their paid work or their children's well-being? In attempting to answer these questions, which were raised by the participants in my study, I will show that the stalled revolution is due in part to an unfinished cultural change that resulted in women's becoming more like men but not the opposite. (The definition of masculinity hasn't been altered sufficiently, and the continuing devaluation of feminine values and attributes fuels that status quo). Restarting the revolution is dependent on another societal change, one that would value personal and family time, children, and quality of life more than the competitiveness and productivity that dominate in today's market-centered economic model. A restart also depends on killing the motherhood myth, which, by hiding the actual nature of motherhood, fuels and perpetuates gender inequality and prevent any change to the status quo.

### The Stalled Revolution

England's allusion to a stalled gender revolution doesn't center on mothers (England, 2010, 2011). Before looking into motherhood and gender inequality specifically, we need to look at the more general symptoms of the revolution stalled among all women. In the *Gender and Society* article that sparked so much reaction from sociologists (McCall, Bergmann, Crawley, Graf, Schwartz, Reskin, Maroto, Weigt, 2011), England acknowledges the huge advances made since the 1960s, thanks in part to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), advances that contributed to a change in many women's aspirations, their place in society, and a right to exist both in the private and public spheres. England lists advancements in reproductive rights, access to higher education, entry in the workplace, even access to careers once exclusively male. But all

the progress, she says, is uneven and has stalled in the last two decades. Most of her critics disagree on the amount of stagnation and the reasons for it. Specifically, Reskin and Maroto (2011) and Bergmann (2011) disagree with the emphasis that England puts on women's gendered choice not to enter typically male blue-collar jobs rather than blaming market forces or other constraints (unions and apprenticeship), and they fault the government for failing to prevent discrimination in blue-collar occupations. England is also accused of not taking into account dimensions of race and class in her analysis (McCall, 2011). Graf and Schwartz (2011) find that change among men has been more substantial than England acknowledges, thanks to more similarity between husbands' and wives' financial contribution to the household that, according to them, led to more gender equity. The revolution is stalled, England says, because "change in the gender system has been asymmetric, with women changing more than men." She argues that since the mid-'80s, desegregation of college majors has stopped ; the proportion of women employed stabilized after the '90s (except for single mothers, who increased their employment in that period) ; occupational desegregation slowed for whites, blacks, and Latinos ; and the closing of the earnings gap lost speed as well. Data tell us unequivocally that in general, men and women are unequal in the workplace in terms of pay, status, career paths, and advancement. Positive change toward gender equality has been even less significant in the private sphere, where despite more participation of men in household work, women still carry most of the burden. Another important point is the nonfeminization of masculine activities and devaluation of feminine characteristics and occupations. Women have entered male jobs and careers, but most traditionally feminine professions remain populated by women and carry lower prestige and pay than typically male careers. This applies, for instance, to nursing, where in 2004 only 5.8% of the workforce was male (Registered Nurse Population Survey), and to teaching, with 3% of teachers

being male in preschool and kindergarten and 18% in elementary and middle school (Current Population Survey, 2010). By molding themselves in a masculine environment that tolerated their presence, women changed but the environment did not adapt to them or to the fact that most employees today can't count on a homemaker to tend to their needs.

### Overwhelmed Mothers

While the nature and magnitude of recent advances in gender equality may be under debate, it is harder to deny a stalled revolution for women who have children. Inequality affects working mothers in particular, first because the issues related to the private sphere are multiplied when children have to be taken care of, and additionally because of specific demands of motherhood that conflict with workplace requirements. There has been little change in women's professional and personal lives in the last 20 years, since Arlie Hochschild (1989) first introduced the notion of a stalled revolution. Testifying to the topicality of the concepts and problems raised by Hochschild is the more recent publication *At the Heart of Work and Family: Engaging the Ideas of Arlie Hochschild* (Garey, 2011), which uses Hochschild's conceptual frameworks and theories to analyze work and family synergy, or rather lack thereof. Indeed, the two go hand in hand: progress in the gender revolution at home is essential for progress at work, because women need time, concentration, and energy in order to be competitive and desirable assets in the workplace, but that lack of progress on the home front is also a symptom of the stalled revolution, as it signals that mentalities, gender roles, and feminine and masculine values haven't changed at their core. Since the '90s, the decade in which some scholars consider improvements in gender equality to have stagnated, books and articles have portrayed the struggle of women between private and public spheres (among others, Belkin, 2003; Hesse-

Biber, 2005; Mason 2007; Monosson 2008; Stone, 2007; Spain and Bianchi, 1996). Often, however, be it in the media, popular culture, or among women themselves, the metaphor generally used to describe the struggle is ironically "zen" and centered: women are said to "balance" family life and work. According to the research, though, this notion of being in control does not represent working mothers' experiences. More realistic are the descriptions in *Balancing Act*, where Spain and Bianchi (1996) evoke lives more consistent with a circus act than with controlled equilibrium: the women they describe are overloaded with simultaneous responsibilities as mothers, wives, and workers that are difficult to balance. In the latest study on this issue, titled *The Unfinished Revolution*, Kathleen Gerson (2011) concludes that this idea of balance in today's American social and economic landscape is still a fantasy. My study confirms that notion; Kate expresses it well, comparing the chaos with a giant game of whack-a-mole.

### Time Squeeze

A central element leading to gender imbalance and inequality is the scarcity of time afflicting working mothers, forcing them to juggle their many responsibilities. It is a scarcity that, as the interviews with my participants confirmed, is highly underestimated by women before having a child. The solution lies in society coming to see this "balancing act" as a family and societal matter and not just women's responsibility; as long as it is not the case, Bianchi and Spain contend, "women will continue to pay a higher price than men for negotiating the transition necessary to combining family and employment." And many women have started to choose rather than to combine, as data from the census shows (2011). Today, more women than ever in their 40s don't have children (in 1967, 10% of women between 40 and 44 didn't have children, a number that had doubled by 2010), which signals that more women significantly

delay motherhood; however, contrary to trends in other developed countries, such as Germany and Korea where fertility rates are very low, American women, who have maintained a stable fertility rate in the last two decades, haven't abandoned motherhood yet. The alternative for overwhelmed mothers is to leave their careers, but most don't want to or can't afford to; instead, they juggle with more or less help from their male partners, an amount of help that is the subject of controversy among researchers and will be addressed in detail later in this manuscript. Mothers' lack of time, affecting quality of life, personal satisfaction, sleep, health, and efficiency at work, is a major cause and symptom of gender inequality. Several researchers have investigated the subject since the 1990s, including Hochschild in *Time Bind* (1997) and Gerson and Jacob in *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality* (2004). Although time in the United States is a resource precious to all workers, those who struggle most with it, who need more of it, are employed people with children, and especially mothers. To come to this conclusion, Arlie Hochschild spent three summers observing and interviewing the employees of a Fortune 500 company recognized for its family-friendly policies; she was surprised to find that employees who reported being squeezed for time did not take advantage of these policies (flextime, part-time hours, work from home, and others). She learned that as the company takes good care of its workers and makes the workplace feel more like home, it also expects more of them, especially in terms of time commitment. She observed that family policies were not embraced at all by many middle managers, who needed results and competitiveness, and workers still felt pressured to dedicate as much time as possible to their work for fear of repercussions.

Jacob and Gerson (2004) for their part identified several time divides (divisions and inequalities created by the lack of time and resources available to workers and their families) that testify to the unevenness of the gender revolution: the gender divide, creating inequalities

between men and women; the work–family divide; and the parenting divide, creating inequalities between employees with children and those without them. They argue that over the last decades the workforce has changed tremendously thanks to the participation of women, but society and the workplace have not adapted to the fact that most households are now headed either by single parents, usually women, or by dual-earning couples. Specifically, according to census data, in 2007, there were 13.7 million single parents, 83% of them women, raising one-quarter of the American children under 21 (Grall, 2009). Additionally, in 2007, 66 percent of married couples with children under 18 had both spouses in the labor force (Kerider and Elliott, 2009). Families, and especially women, suffer most from a time squeeze due to lack of affordable quality child care, school schedules not adapted to parents' workdays, lack of parental leave, rigidity and maladapted expectations of the workplace, and the second shift at home (Jacob and Gerson, 2004).

### Work Discrimination

Along with the juggling act and the time squeeze, the "mommy track" is another token of inequality, feared by women who want both children and career. Aisenbrey, Evertsson, and Grunow (2009) identify the existence of a career punishment even for a short time out of work after the birth of a child, and they show that the longer the time out, the bigger the risk of a downward move or reduced chances of promotion. This is consistent with Hochschild's finding that women who take advantage of family-friendly policies pay the price in terms of career. Mothers can keep working for the same employer, but their advancement prospects are compromised by their slowing down, they are evicted from projects they once managed, or they are excluded from work they find interesting (Stone 2007, Mason 2007). The motherhood

penalty is also the subject of a multitude of articles. In a study featuring fictitious job applicants (Correll, Benard, and Paik, 2007), mothers (applicants) were rated by evaluators as less competent and committed to paid work than nonmothers, and later they were discriminated against in job offers or salary discussions. Conversely, fathers were at an advantage compared to nonfathers and were offered higher starting salaries. Added to these discriminative practices, the gender gap in pay afflicts mothers more than women without children. According to the fictitious applicants study, mothers were offered \$12,000 less in salary, or 7.9% less than women without children, and 8.6% less than fathers. Several factors underlie the motherhood penalty, such as discrimination from employers and or the consequences of work interruption to care for children, but some of the motherhood penalty is still unexplained and might be due to women's choice of lower paying "mother-friendly" jobs or is perhaps the result of exhaustion and too much demand from the second shift (Lips and Lawson, 2009; Budig and Hodges, 2010; Budig and England 2001). In my study, the change in work trajectories of the participants illustrates this phenomenon. Each woman modified her work plans when, or even before, her child was born, though none of them expected to do so when they started their careers. The results for them are lower paying and insecure jobs (Delphine and Kate) or even no job at all (Marie).

### Opting Out

The "opt-out" phenomenon, a consequence of workplace inequality and the unfair treatment of mothers there, caught the attention of the media and sociologists. A series of articles published in the *New York Times* under the title "The Opt-Out Revolution" (Belkin, 2003) set out to uncover the reason why, as was the impression at the time, women on the fast-track abandoned their careers in droves to stay at home with their children. In reality, data from the

census bureau invalidated that supposed trend, which was marginal at best (Kerider and Elliott, 2009; Cheeseman, Day, and Downs, 2009). Belkin made sense of that so-called movement at the time as a personal need of successful women to become full-time moms. Wary of this explanation, sociologist Pamela Stone conducted a qualitative study to look beyond the dominating discourse of a return to traditional family values and the idea that women quit their careers because "motherhood is the most rewarding job in the world" (Stone, 2007). Her book tells a very different story: the story of successful women who, once they became mothers, faced insurmountable obstacles in the workplace. Probably because of a need to feel some agency, the women that Stone interviewed rationalized the decision to quit their careers as their choice, but their discourse and life stories told the opposite: the perceived "choice" was in reality imposed on them by the corporate environment and society in general. Women didn't leave their jobs to be with their family all day, but because they didn't have the flexibility, or if they did have some flexibility they were marginalized by jealous co-workers. Almost all women stated the lack of flexibility as their reason to quit, and work, not family, was at the center of their narratives. Husbands, some of whom have very demanding careers, don't always participate at home, and in Stone's scenarios it often comes down to a choice between the husband's career and the wife's. Even though the workplace tends to be more forgiving and even laudatory to fathers, it has not adapted to the new role fathers are asked to play in the family today. All these descriptions are unmistakable signs of a stalled revolution. The study that I conducted addresses that narrative of choice noted by Stone in women's accounts of motherhood. Women speak of making a choice to stay home, to choose a less demanding professional occupation, or to work freelance, but they also clearly state that they could not be both the mother and the worker they wanted to be at the

same time. The two ambitions collided, and the choice was obviously limited. For the women in my study, motherhood won.

#### Lack of family policy

Thus far, this work is centered on middle-class and upper-middle-class women, for whom gender equality is generally thought to be a given. Considering that it is clearly not the case, what is the condition of less privileged mothers, then? Many women who "opt out" have the luxury of a career, are raising a couple of demanding but otherwise healthy children. If gender inequality is a given for them, how much more "unequal" is it for poorer women; for women of color who have to fight inequality on several levels; for mothers of special needs children, divorced mothers, single mothers, or mothers who take care of ill parents (García Coll, Surrey, & Weingarten, 2007). Stone puts it that way: "If they cannot combine work and family successfully, who can? . . . What does it signal to less privileged women, such as single mothers transitioning off welfare, who must work? If elite women, who are opinion leaders, are in retreat from 'doing it all' what are the implications for larger cultural attitudes and norms? What are the implications for women's status and standing?" (Stone, 2007, p. 15). Middle- and upper-middle-class mothers have the means to hire help, some have the flexibility to balance family life and work, most don't work two jobs and don't execute the most exhausting tasks at work like many poorer women have to do (Ehrenreich, 2001). In a society where good daycare can be more expensive than college tuition, poor women can't afford nannies, baby sitters, or cleaning ladies; they can't buy time. Those difficulties accumulate at the intersection of gender race and class, as the poverty rate of families headed by single mothers is the double that for the total population, and many single mothers are African American (27.8% of single mothers in 2008) or Latino

(18% of single mothers) (Grall, 2009). These women, and their children, are the main victims of the very lacking family policy (in terms of parental leave, access to affordable daycare, age of entry in public school), which contradicts the official discourse in the United States on cherished family values and gender equality. For example, the U.S. is one of a handful of countries in the world, including Swaziland and Papua New Guinea, that does not offer paid maternity leave to its citizens. The only option for new parents, through the FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act), is 12 weeks of leave, typically unpaid, that most women, especially poorer women, can't afford, and which, because of rules and restrictions, covers only half of the workforce. Given the bleak state of maternal leave policy, considered a basic right worldwide, it seems premature to discuss the need for paid paternal leave that would contribute to changing mentalities in the workplace about gender roles in the family. Private daycare is very expensive, there is no universal public early childhood education, free public school doesn't start until children are 5 years old (compared to age 3 in many countries, including France), and the school day finishes earlier than the work day, putting employed parents, more often mothers, in a scheduling conflict. This anemic public policy is both a sign and a cause of the stalled gender revolution for mothers.

### Second shift

Sociological research establishes beyond a doubt that the gender revolution is stalled, especially for working mothers, who are at an even bigger disadvantage in the workplace than women without children. As we have seen, this is apparent in the time squeeze resulting from new egalitarian gender roles and the maladjustment of the corporate world to them. The private sphere, the home, is the other major field where inequalities are at play, because the time squeeze

that working mothers endure is due in great part to gender relations in the family. The infamous "second shift" is at the core of the burden on working women's shoulders. In her now classic study, Hochschild revealed that most employed women spend their day at work and come home to accomplish a "second shift" comprising housework and childcare—an extra month of unpaid work per year compared to men. She introduced the concept of "stalled revolution" to describe how society did not adapt to the fact that most women work outside the home. "A stalled revolution lacks the social arrangements that ease life for working parents, and lacks men who share the second shift" (1997, p. 13). In the introduction to the 2003 edition of *The Second Shift*, she gives a grim update of the situation as she emphasizes how little things have changed: the number of married mothers in the workforce with very young children (under 1 year) has grown from 49% in 1990 to 63% in 2001. At the same time, between 1990 and 1995, the number of hours worked increased from 39.7 to 44.5 for men and from 24 to 27 for women, with very little vacation compared to other developed countries. To make matters worse, starting in 1994, men's participation in housework decreased, from an average of 8.2 hours a week in 1994 to 7.1 hours in 1999. Hochschild calls for "a major cultural shift, a 'second' shift toward value on care." In that second shift must be included the invisible work that women do and that is seldom taken into account in studies on housework (Devault, 1991). This invisible work is the planning, shopping, organization, supervision of activities that craft family life. The authors of an article titled "Where Families and Children's Activities Meet" (Berhau, Lareau, and Press, in Garey 2011) counter the myth of equal involvement in children's activities. Though fathers may be seen coaching on soccer fields and driving children to activities, mothers still have the leading role of choosing and organizing the activities. The fact that women are still thought to be naturally predisposed to provide care work is another sign that the revolution is stalled, as they shoulder

responsibilities that could be shared with men but are believed to be intrinsically female. Similarly, many tasks related to childcare are still deeply considered as mothers' responsibilities; waking up at night to meet a child's needs, for example, is a source of sleep deprivation for new mothers and a hardship on their professional lives. An analysis of sleep patterns (Burgard, 2011) reveals that working mothers are two-and-a-half times as likely as working fathers to interrupt their sleep to take care of others, especially when they have babies and small children. The author concludes that this doesn't just affect the health and well-being of women but is an obstacle to gender equality and career advancement. The same kind of gender inequality prevails in the case of urgent childcare (when a parent is needed to care for a child at the last minute, when s/he is sick, for instance), a situation where mothers are again more likely than fathers to interrupt their work to fulfill familial demand (Maume, 2008). Not everyone agrees with this gloomy picture; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie (2006) are among the optimistic scholars who maintain that the division of housework is reasonably improving toward more gender equity. In their book, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, they used time-diary studies dating back to the 1960s to evaluate changes of time allocation in work and family life. Although the researchers uncovered positive developments such as more paternal involvement in childrearing and more time spent with children, they underplay other negative trends. For instance, they applaud the fact that the total hours worked per week are similar for men and women, but they fail to stress that men spend more of their time in paid work and women in unpaid work. This is not a sign of progress toward gender equality, especially given that unpaid work is so devalued and that the consequences of more time spent in the workplace translate to more pay, promotion, status, and retirement. Moreover, they chose to center their analysis on the more favorable part of the study: total hours worked were different in another larger sample where it appeared that for

employed parents, mothers' workload averaged 71 weekly hours compared with 64 for fathers (Damaske, 2007). Women are still the prime organizers of family life, and this adds a burden to their workweek. This organizational load explains certainly in part the feeling of stress reported more by women than by men, along with the impression of constant juggling and multitasking. It appears then that, yes, there is more participation of men at home today, but not enough, and not close to what women contribute. Another sign of the uneven revolution for mothers, observable in the same study, is that many mothers cut down on working hours or work part-time when children are young in order to provide them care. In the competitive American workplace, this burden has consequences for women's career trajectories, advancement, and pay. Finally, to add one more thing to the spectrum of female duties, Hochschild describes what she calls the "third shift" (1997), or the emotional work needed as a consequence of the lack of time available for the children and members of the family. The Taylorized family, she says, is like work, governed by efficiency. Through this concept, Hochschild expresses another weight on working mothers and the consequences that stress and lack of family time have not only on women, but, further, on their children and the whole family. In short, most studies show that today, and in the last 20 years despite the gains of the 1960s and '70s, in couples where both partners are employed, women and especially mothers bear the brunt of family work, organization, stress, and exhaustion, an overload that clashes directly with the demands of the workplace and signals a stalled revolution. The experience of the women interviewed for my work supports those studies and statistics on the second shift.

### Intensive mothering

Studies and essays on motherhood and gender inequality point to different culprits for the stalled gender revolution: feminists' avoidance of the issue, their downplay of the importance of children in women's lives, intensive mothering and a return to traditional values of motherhood, patriarchy and capitalism's conspiracy to maintain mothers at home near their babies and children. The notion of an ideology of mothering that dictates an unreasonable standard to be considered a "good mother," all the while devaluing that function of mothering, is another culprit (Crittenden, 2001; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Peskowitz, 2005; Hattery, 2001). In sociology in particular, one of the frameworks used to explain the stagnation—and what some even see as a regression in the march for gender equality—is the ideology of intensive mothering. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, published when the gender revolution was coming to a halt (Hays, 1996), counters the ideology of intensive mothering, a style that requires huge amounts of time, energy, emotional involvement, and money from mothers to their children, at a time when more women than ever work for pay outside the home in quest of professional and economic success. Hays wonders why the culture of mothering in the contemporary United States hasn't evolved along with society toward a less demanding model that would fit the requirements of the workplace where women now participate. This makes sense, considering that intensive mothering hasn't always been the dominant model, and children haven't always had the status, like today, of precious and innocent beings. According to Hays, the existence of this contradiction can be explained because three dominant groups benefit from intensive mothering and thus maintain women at home as primary caretakers of the children: the state, capitalists, and white upper-class men. The men that Hays targets, often fathers themselves, do not have to share housework and childcare if it is their wives' duty, and they have less competition in the labor market while their wives are so invested in their children rather than their careers. These

mothers, according to Hays, are raising future obedient citizen-consumers, at a low cost for the state (Hays, 1996). To ease women's burden, she calls for more public power for women, higher prestige for caregiving activities, and greater participation of the fathers in "mothering." "All of these solutions are interrelated. The more public power women gain, the more they can demand that men take greater responsibility for child rearing and the more child rearing will likely come to be publicly valued" (Hays, 1996, p. 175). This seems a logical assumption, but women have gained more public power in the last 50 years and this change hasn't happened yet. Moreover, it was presumed that women who earned money would derive power in their couple relationships and that this would lead to a significant participation of men in housework and childrearing, which also isn't the case (England, 2011). Hays could have argued the opposite: although it may be surprising that women still adhere to intensive parenting despite the contradiction, the other way around is true as well, and society doesn't change either, remaining fast paced, materialistic, competitive, and profit oriented, far from adapting to this current view of children. Other explanations such as the rise of single parenthood (mostly mothers) can explain the need to compensate financially and emotionally to make up for the missing parent and other possible lost opportunities (see Pugh, 2009). The competitive nature of American society encourages helicopter parenting and expenses toward children's future; parents invest financially from the beginning to make sure their children have access to good colleges and high-paying jobs. Once again, in this situation the veiled nature of motherhood added to a cultural requirement for intensive mothering maintains the status quo. If all seems to be well and manageable for mothers (after all, women keep having children), why change the type of mothering, the rules in the workplace, the sharing of housework, or the priorities of society?

## Second-Wave Feminism

Another culprit in the stalled gender revolution is second-wave feminists, who have ignored the issue of motherhood and sent the wrong message regarding work and children. Women in their 30s and 40s today, such as those who told me their stories, have found out that contrary to what they thought before having children, they can't have it all—something has to give (Gillespie and Temple, 2011; Stone, 2007; Moe and Shandy, 2010). The movement is also criticized for setting the wrong priorities for women: third-wave feminist Rebecca Walker, estranged daughter of Alice Walker, warns women against the feminist idea that a career is more important than having children. She feels that because she was brought up with these feminist messages she almost missed out on being a mother. In her latest book, *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood After a Lifetime of Ambivalence* (2008), Walker describes the inner conflict between her feminist principles, her work, and her personal life. Around the time of the publication of her book she gave an interview to the British newspaper *Daily Mail*, where she explained how second-wave feminism hurt women and that the movement should be reconfigured to allow women to be mothers and workers and should not expect women to choose between independence, work, and motherhood. "The truth is that I very nearly missed out on becoming a mother—thanks to being brought up by a rabid feminist who thought motherhood was about the worst thing that could happen to a woman. You see, my mum taught me that children enslave women. I grew up believing that children are millstones around your neck, and the idea that motherhood can make you blissfully happy is a complete fairytale." She recounts not being allowed to play with dolls for fear of arousing her maternal instincts, as well as being told that being a mother was a form of slavery. "Feminism has betrayed an entire generation of women into childlessness. It is devastating. But far from taking responsibility for any of this, the leaders

of the women's movement close ranks against anyone who dares to question them." The dominant white middle-class feminist discourse that Walker internalized and then rejected is similar to what Collins presented regarding African American mothers. Black women in the U.S. are subject to two contradictory and controlling messages, images of motherhood that they have to navigate through and that make their lives as mothers all the more burdensome. The dominant white discourse paints them as matriarchs and welfare mothers, counter to the very positive image in the black community, where they are seen as "super-strong black mothers," resilient, capable of total abnegation for their children and the children of the community. The image is so positive, however, that it ignores these mothers' needs as women and precludes individual growth. Second-wave feminists are criticized by white third-wavers today for their failings in obtaining real social justice for women, but they were already condemned decades ago by women of color for not taking into account the racial and ethnic specificities of gender inequality and the intersection of race, class, and gender. The other feminist message challenged by working mothers today is that women can "do it all," a conviction deeply ingrained when women start working, as my three participants expressed, before being faced with the differing reality once in their job. Sociologist Pamela Stone, for instance, found out in her study that almost all women had always thought that they would combine their careers and their families, but they ended up having to choose. The very use of the word "choice" in that context underplays the real constraints and perpetuates a false, positive image of the reality of working mother's lives. " To the extent that we believe—mistakenly, it turns out—that women such as the ones I studied truly have a choice, we send mixed messages that put them in a double bind, make their decisions more conflicted, and circumscribe their lives. Until we close the choice gap, we also undermine

the potential to create changes that would lead to their having real options and being able to exercise true choice"(Stone, 2007, p. 237).

### Cultural shift needed

A crucial shift in mindset must take place for the gender revolution to be restarted: the redesign of masculinity, of male gender roles, and a revalorization of feminine characteristics (England 2010). This is necessary if men are to naturally see housework and childcare as their responsibility as much as their wives' or partners', without feeling emasculated. Moreover, men have a lot to gain, emotionally, by being more involved in the lives of their children, who also benefit from the active participation of their fathers in their "mothering" (Coltrane, 1996). Twenty years ago, back when the gender revolution held many promises, Coltrane, sociologist of fatherhood, predicted a society where fathers would live richer lives, mothers would carry less burden, and new gender roles would be perpetuated through children's socialization in this new dynamic. The revolution he expected, however, is halted, despite his claim to the contrary in the conference paper *Men's Changing Contribution to Housework and Child Care* (Sullivan and Coltrane, 2007), in which the authors deny that the revolution at home is stalled and insist that alarmed scholars were naively expecting of society too fast a transformation. Their arguments, however, are weak and seem very defensive. They applaud the fact that women do less housework today than 50 years ago, without specifying that this is mostly because they have lowered their standards, not because men have taken half the burden. Moreover, as stressed in a critique of their work, they don't mention the invisible work, a female responsibility for the most part.

Women still tend to do the "emotional labor" noticing when things need to be discussed or resolved. They also do most of the "household management" planning, buying presents for birthday parties a child will be attending, scheduling doctor appointments, and marking things that must be done on the calendar on the refrigerator door. Finally, women still tend to do the "kin work," calling relatives, arranging for holiday gatherings, sending holiday cards and so on" (Pamela J. Smock, in response to the discussion paper presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Council on Contemporary Families, 2008).

The revolution is stalled, but the problem is not at home, conclude Coltrane and Sullivan, who point the finger at employers who don't accommodate workers and families and note that family policies are cruelly lacking. Their position on housework, however, contradicts the actual trends, such as those from a study at the University of Michigan (Panel Study on Income Dynamics ; Stafford, 2007) showing that girls 6 to 17 years old spend more time doing household chores than playing—the opposite of boys, who do 30% fewer chores than the girls and are 15% more likely to be paid for them. The same goes for adults: women spend 25 hours a week on housework versus 7 for men. In the younger generation, the seeds for gender inequality at home are already planted and watered, and that doesn't bode well for the continuation of the revolution. Denying these trends and embellishing reality as these scholars do feeds the Motherhood Myth, contributes to the shock of motherhood women experience, and probably stalls the gender revolution. At the macro level, the market-dominated model of society is in itself a huge obstacle to the gender revolution; it would take a major cultural change, a shift of societal priorities to truly make space and time for employed women and families. Motherhood is a handicap in the current model, in which men and childless women get ahead of mothers, who

either give up or live unsustainable lives. As an illustration, economic environment sociologist Joan Williams describes the "ideal of a worker who works full time and overtime and takes little or no time off for child bearing and child rearing" (in Bianchi, 2006, p. 9). In this model, a woman who wants a career in a highly competitive environment may have to forgo having children. As having children is considered a very private matter, an individual choice, women are divided among themselves: those without children on one side, mothers on the other. Asking for adjustments is seen as requesting special treatment, with nonmothers responding along the lines of "You wanted to have children—now deal with it, and don't complain!" This idea is articulated by Kecia Driver McBride in "No, I'm Not Catholic, and, Yes, They're All Mine" (in O'Reilly,, 2008). An academic and a mother, the essayist writes about the burden of the supermom, the feelings of being overwhelmed while pretending to keep things together, of being torn between the two spheres, which are in theory separate but constantly permeate each other. Here is how she analyzes the cultural individualism regarding children:

"Although we should know better, we need sometimes to be reminded of the basics : that parenting is unpaid domestic labor, that is vital for the continuation of our culture, that under capitalism it is unrewarded and marginalized and yet strapped down with the weightiest of ideological burdens. We treat parenting as though it is an individual choice for which we must find complicated, individual solutions when the inevitable problem arises. It is in practice much more than a choice (p. 48)."

Her proposed solution is a concerted effort of scholars, mothers, and feminists to reconceptualize the value and definition of mothering. Like many working women of her generation, she expected that nothing would change after the birth of her first-born, but instead she experienced what she calls "the beginning of the schizophrenia."

Finally, for the gender revolution to start again, women have to require it, which is compromised by the power of the Motherhood Myth: because of the cultural mystification of motherhood, and mothers' fear of looking inadequate or whiny, they don't dare complain. Many sociologists themselves appear to be shy on this subject; though faced with grim statistics, they seem reluctant to call this the gender revolution stalled and content themselves with little progress. An interesting interdisciplinary feminist approach, *Feminist Mothering* (O'Reilly, 2008), offers theoretical tools and ideas for women and scholars to contribute to change mentalities and prevent the reproduction of gender inequality. Stemming from the observation that there is little academic discourse on feminist mothering, O'Reilly worked to establish a theory. She uses the distinction made by Rich (*Of Women Born*, 1976) between motherhood and mothering, the first being oppressive, dictated by patriarchy, the other a possible source of empowerment. "A theory of feminist mothering begins with the recognition that mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life, and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy. Thus a feminist standpoint on mothering affords a woman a life, a purpose and identity outside and beyond motherhood" (p. 11). Other characteristics of feminist mothering are that the mother is not the only one responsible for the childrearing; race, age, class, and marital status don't determine how good a mother she is; mothering has value and is a social and political act (as opposed to private-like patriarchal motherhood). The motherhood myth has to be destroyed to leave room for this true feminist mothering.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

*Revised expectation*<sup>11</sup>

*“Someday I am going to be the editor-in-chief of Vanity Fair.”*

*- Kate, circa 1991*

*“Someday I am going to find a garbage can that I don’t have to  
empty every fifteen minutes.”*

*– Kate, circa 2007*

From big life plans to mundane household tasks, Kate’s characterization of her life expectations before and after children exemplifies the notion of gap between expectations and reality expressed by the women in my study. Each act of the play is a dimension of the shock of

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<sup>11</sup> One of Kate’s blog posts, when her daughter was a baby.

motherhood, each scene an aspect of the myth. Act I is about the most immediate facets of the shock: the generational and cultural disconnects the women experienced while raising their babies, the cultural expectations that seal the myth of the good mother. The second scene of the act is about the unexpected emotional and physical tsunami that followed childbirth and the revealing of the myth of natural, organic, all-sweet motherhood. Scene three is an attempt to grasp some of the reasons for the women's cluelessness, exposing the "can have it all" myth. Act II goes deeper in the intimacy and meaning of the experience, from the consumerist part of raising children as a way of coping to the damages of individualism and competition. It also explores motherhood's deep, never-ending, relentless, and unexpected feelings of fear, worry, shame, and guilt. Act III, the final one, is about the myth of gender equality that these women had internalized while growing up: they are in fact not treated as equals with men, at home or at work, and their lives are different for that—and not for the better. The Motherhood Myth has consequences for the well-being of mothers and their children, and by repercussion their families and society, wasting the talents and resources these women can contribute. Motherhood is minimized by the traditional feminist discourse that ignores the importance of emotions and maternal instinct, but at the same time, The Mother as a concept is sanctified in American culture. American political discourse and public policy contradict each other as well, by withholding family-friendly policies such as parental leave, universal health insurance, subsidized public daycare, public school for all beginning at age 3, and free afterschool care that matches most parents' working schedules.

As I argued in the last chapter, gender equality trends in the last few decades all point to an uneven and stalled revolution, especially crippling to the lives of employed women with children, women who grew up in the 1960s and '70s, when the illusion of women's full equality

with men was fueled by a true gender revolution in the workplace. They flocked to the job market, climbing the career ladder confident that both parts of their life, career and family, would dovetail nicely with a little timing and effort. Instead, studies show that when women don't opt out to find some balance, many struggle with straddling the public and private spheres and feel pulled back from career advancement, not available enough for their families, and misunderstood by men or by women without children. The reaction of career women with children, however, is surprising, as rather than complain and ask for more workplace compatibility with their lives and society, they seem to accept their conflicts and burdens, considering them the norm. A recent book written by two working mothers, a law professor and a journalist, illustrates the astounding reactions of overwhelmed mothers. *Good Enough Is the New Perfect* (Gillespie and Temple, 2010), is a how-to book that offers women strategies gleaned from successful working moms for combining work and family. The advice of these "successful women" is to get rid of perfectionism and wanting to do everything right at work and at home. Although these suggestions are very symptomatic of the resignation of working mothers, they don't solve the real issue underlying the market economy ideology and our overly masculine culture. Moreover, the idea that "good enough is the new perfect" puts career women at a disadvantage in the workplace competition with men, who for their part can just continue aiming for perfection at work, while women need to compromise. A restart to the stalled gender revolution requires women to require, once again, 50 years later, a real equality at work and at home. I note that this prescription is an overview, and the situation needs to be studied separately for specific groups of mothers. Professional white women's experiences differ from those of black, Latino, and Asian professionals. Professionals have the means to hire help or to stay home, means not shared by women with less money. Immigrants to the U.S. may have help from immediate family, or they

may be alone, and childcare practices differ by culture. But it remains true that in general, and in all groups of women living in the United States (and, as my study shows, in France as well), mothers share an unequal burden of the family work and don't have the same work benefits as men or other women in terms of pay, career path, and work experience. And those realities came as a surprise for the women in my study.

I want to address a problem raised by my study and my position on this issue of myth of motherhood: how to respond to the charge that by stressing the mothering difficulties women face, I give them a bad image and risk hurting the cause of gender equality rather than helping. I believe, to the contrary, that telling it like it is would enable women to better prepare and be less disillusioned after they have a baby, through childbirth or adoption. It would also push them to expect, and request, societal solutions to those problems. The solution to insufficient gender equality can't be to pretend that everything is fine and continue letting women bear the burdens associated with the Motherhood Myth at the price of their physical and mental health, happiness, professional development, and financial independence. Raising children, which we claim to be "the most important job in the world," is crucial to society's functioning; it cannot be a private, female responsibility, and it should be compatible with full participation in the public sphere. It is time to look honestly and in detail at what mothering requires today and the toll it takes on mothers and to adapt the workplace and social organization to that reality. The risk of not doing this—beyond keeping women in a state of subjugation and making their lives miserable—is a possible decrease in birth rate, which already cripples societies with an overwhelming Good Mother Myth, such as Germany, or with weak family-friendly policies, such as Korea. The women I interviewed insist that this responsibility of raising emotionally balanced, happy citizens who will as adults contribute to society's success is invaluable, and it is for them

incomprehensible that it would not be central to any modern society. This paradigm shift would involve redefining what success means for a society and appraising the values and characteristics that should prevail. Should a society place value on the well-being of its members, or are they simply agents of wealth production? Is work the only valued activity? This attitude unfortunately prevails in the United States today, with its nonstop working rhythm, pathetically minimal vacation time, and nonexistent parental leave (which according to studies does not correlate with employee productivity). Placing the family, including parenting, at the center of society's priorities is the only way to reach gender equality. Family responsibility and work have to be valued if we want men to share them with women. And the value has to be imposed from the top down, through public policies: Hochschild (1997) showed that even if a company individually provides flexibility, parents—women—don't take advantage of it for fear of repercussions and losing competitiveness.

Though I focused my study on mothers, that does not mean that fathers aren't also in for a big surprise when they have a child. This is another subject, with different problems, that researchers should keep investigating. But men are a big part of the solution, which would in turn help them enjoy their family life. Imposing paternal leave seems the only way to avoid a backlash for women's employment, because as long as men don't take time off from the job to care for their children, women—as mothers or potential mothers—will look suspicious to potential employers and will suffer from higher unemployment rates and lower salaries. This is what is happening in France where the generous maternal leave policy and affordable childcare, weigh on women's employment prospects. This would also give more peace of mind to mothers who go back to work: my husband was the only one I trusted with the well-being of our children when I wasn't there, and I could work in peace because I knew he was with them.

What are the hopes for change? I realize that the short-term prospects are grim, for several reasons. First, the problem is largely invisible. Mothers don't talk about it for fear of looking unprofessional and inadequate, and women are unaware of it until they have children themselves. Women in general seem grateful that their husbands "help" them around the house when they are not just resigned to do everything on their own; some "choose" to take time off or become full-time moms, and the others rely on coping strategies to juggle. Most mothers have also internalized the belief that child rearing and family organization are mainly their responsibilities. A second reason to be pessimistic about achieving real equality is that it would require a deep cultural change, one putting more value on taking time, on quality of life, and on feminine attributes. In such a market-oriented society this won't happen without social policies to set the course. Gender inequality is multifactorial, and advances in one area impact others that then infuse mindsets. However, the change is so slow and stuck in many areas that without legislative help (parental leave, childcare, and educational reforms), the gender revolution will remain aborted. Some support for change in this area has come, though, from the Obama White House: "In today's economy, when having both parents in the workforce is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality childcare more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have—it's a must-have. So it's time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or as a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us" (State of the Union Address, January 20, 2015). In the private sector, several technology companies, including Netflix, Google, Amazon, and Apple, offer, by U.S. standards, dream family benefits, understanding that family life is an important aspect of workers' lives and supportive benefits are necessary to attract and retain employees. (Netflix goes as far as offering a year of paid parental leave.) Change is in the air, and the revolution may be closer than we think. My dissertation

contributes to the understanding of the opt-out phenomenon. Like many other women, my participants had to choose between their careers and raising their children the way they wanted. They all chose the latter. My work reinforces the notion that mothers can't have it all and that there is an incompatibility between the expectations of motherhood and those of a career. Kate's experience demonstrates that because of the Internet it is almost impossible to escape work and that this has made the balancing act even worse. Technology gives some needed flexibility but also creates a third shift of online availability 24/7. My work also contributes to the third-wave, in its intent, in the methods used and in its format. In my dissertation, mothers speak directly to one another with their own words. They don't pretend everything is OK and they make demands to improve their condition. The many similarities in these women's experience of motherhood are also a indication that although third wave-work is very individual and unique, it speaks to a bigger crowd of universal singulars. It shows that personal testimony matters and is not anecdotal.

A goal of this manuscript beyond serving as my dissertation is to reach women, which means that the project has to move to the public arena. After I rewrite the play to be shorter and less academic, I hope it will be performed and that it will be read by mothers in need of a village and a third-wave feminist consciousness. We need public policy, but we also need to keep telling stories, performing lives.

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