

INTRODUCTION

MONSTERS ON THE BUS

There's a monster in my head

There's an animal screaming down upon my neck

Oh no you better get up my friend

There's a monster in my bed

There's an animal screaming down upon my neck

Oh no you better get up my friend

What a mess we're in

– *Boy & Bear*
Milk & Sticks

I ease back into the lounge on a quiet Saturday afternoon, watching a recorded episode of *Law and Order: SVU*. The house is calm and peaceful.

But not for long.

Suddenly a blood-curdling scream shatters the silence, followed by a high-pitched voice.

‘Ryder, you’re doing it wrong!’

Not again, I groan inwardly. Pausing *Law and Order*, I drag myself off the couch and head towards the bedrooms. I walk into Ryder’s room to find Adison sitting on the floor, her brother an arm’s length away. He is clutching his head, tears rolling down his face.

‘What’s going on in here?’ I ask.

‘Ryder’s not doing it right,’ Adison scowls, crossing her arms.

‘Adi hit me!’ Ryder cries.

‘Right Adison, time out in your room. We don’t hit.’ I pull Adison to her feet and she goes limp in protest. *Of course*. I pick her up and lug her to her room.

I tell her she has five minutes’ time out, one minute for each year she has been alive (so the books say). I know full well that as soon as I walk away from the door, she’ll be out again.

I take a deep breath, muttering obscenities to myself, and return to the lounge. I’m sure our house is called the ‘Screaming House’ in our neighbourhood. And not

just because of the kids.

I constantly wonder how I got here. It feels like it was only moments ago that I was desperately wishing for a baby. Now suddenly I have two kids talking back to me, telling me what to do.

I know I had babies, but when did I become a parent? No one told me that this was part of the deal. Somehow, when you're thinking about having kids, you really only think about babies. Cute, adorable, smiling babies. Speechless, motionless, happy babies.

Then time passes by and you find yourself at the shops, toddler and pre-schooler in tow, un-showered, wearing no makeup, and buying ice-creams at ten in the morning just for a moment's peace and quiet.

And when your partner comes home and asks, 'What did you do today?' you push your reply through gritted teeth.

'I did what kept me sane.'

I am a wife, a mother, a daughter, and a sister. I have a house in the suburbs, a dog, a cat, two fish, and a seemingly perfect existence.

Well things don't always look the way they seem.

Within me is a battle. Constant, unwavering, heartbreaking.

I have depression.

Nine weeks after the birth of my son, our second child, I had a breakdown in my kitchen. My daughter, my mother and my three nieces all witnessed me hit rock bottom.

My then almost three-year-old daughter was crying incessantly, following me around our house like a shadow. I was begging her to stop crying, just for one minute. My son was sleeping in his cot, due to wake at any moment. My mum and my nieces were running around the lounge room; they had just arrived for a visit. I hadn't showered, had yet to eat breakfast, had slept less than five hours the night before (which was a good night's sleep), and had no idea what I was actually trying to achieve, when I started screaming at the top of my lungs for my daughter to just *SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!*

It was the worst moment of my life.

My daughter cowered away from me in fear.

My mum scooped her up out of my way as I ran crying into my bedroom, grabbing my phone on the way.

The house, at least for that moment, was silent.

I rang my husband, sobbing. 'You have to come home.'

'What's happened?' He panicked.

'You have to come home, I can't take it anymore.'

And the tears just kept coming.

My husband came home and found me curled

up on the floor of our bedroom, phone still in hand; crying, catatonic.

I saw my GP two days later and was diagnosed with postnatal depression.

What followed were months of trial and error in my pursuit of 'happiness'. That's what we all want, right? That's what I thought. That I had to be happy. All the time. That if I wasn't, there was something wrong with me. I wasn't normal. Isn't that what depression is? The failure to be happy?

I really wasn't sure.

I was always so cheerful. But that wasn't it.

I didn't like who I had become. This *Crazy Mummy* had taken my place.

When my thoughts got on top of me, I couldn't dig my way back out. I'd started hiding away in my own mind, cancelling dinners and not going to parties. I would lie and say I was sick just so that I don't have to face the people who I loved, but who I didn't want to share my problems with.

My moment of clarity was when my GP described it as a chemical imbalance in the brain. When something affected me to the point where I felt a genuine sadness, the natural chemicals that help this sadness subside wouldn't automatically kick in, causing periods of depression.

It's something I have no control over. Something I will

live with for the rest of my life.

Now that I had a medical explanation, it felt like a substantial problem (not just 'I'm sad'). So I asked 'What can I do about it?'

My GP explained that I would need to take medication to help my brain enable the chemical changes to take place. I was also put on a mental health plan, which involved a series of visits to a psychologist. The psych helped me retrain my thinking, but I wasn't improving. I was still frustrated at feeling so low all the time. I was quick to anger, and although I was trying my hardest to calm down and not get so upset with the smallest of issues, I still hated myself for being me.

I decided I had to make a change. A big change. I wasn't going to get better unless I was ready to do so. I had to make the first move.

I started talking to family members and let them know what was going on. I told my close friends and I 'came out' at work. And the one thing that kept being repeated was that everyone thought that I would be the last person to have depression.

I received great advice from myriads of people on what they had done, or had heard others had tried, to overcome the dark days. I had nothing to lose, so I took on the challenge.

Music became the soundtrack to my life.

I took on a personal trainer, started exercising to increase the natural good chemical boost to my brain, and improved my nutrition.

I tried fundraising for that inner glow that comes with helping others.

I used tea to calm, and coffee to wake me up.

I stopped drinking alcohol (well, most of the time).

I started going to bed earlier to ensure I was getting more sleep.

I talked, and talked, and talked about what was on my mind. I kept seeing my doctor, even when I felt okay.

I pushed myself to leave the house, even when I was feeling like the weight of seeing people was too much to bear. I forced myself to go to parties, to mingle with friends.

I praised myself for being braver than I wanted to be.

I made time for myself. I spoke to my hubby and told him I needed time just for me – no kids, no husband, no friends, no family; just me and whatever I wanted to do.

I took up crochet as a hobby, something just for me, to help build my sense of worth. And, when all else failed, I took a day off from the world, stayed home and watched a comedy or two to get me laughing. But mostly to distract me from the shitty thoughts in my head.

I tried everything. And even now I find that it's not just one thing that helps me get through the days.

Sometimes it's the music and the exercise; sometimes it's the crochet and the comedy; sometimes it's a little bit of all of them; and other times, it's just the peace and quiet.

But what I've found for certain is that there is no miracle cure. It is accepting that you are allowed to feel shitty, that your brain can have a million different thoughts in a day, but it is what you chose to hold onto that day that shapes your outlook.

I have learnt a lot over the last few years and now I want to share my successes and set-backs in the hope that other parents can save themselves from the guilt and anxiety that follows a new addition to their own families.

Throughout this book, you will see references to the 'monsters on the bus'. This was something my first psychologist said.

She said I was like the driver on a bus (stay with me on this).

Most people's buses are fine – they get you where you want to go without much drama.

However, if you're suffering from depression, you realise that your bus is filled with monsters, and most of them are saying negative things. There are times where there may be one monster that screams louder

than the others.

But, like any bus driver, it is up to *you* to decide if you should listen to them or not.

There are many monsters on my bus. I am constantly trying to drown them out. Most of the time, I get the upper hand, yet there are times where I just need to ride it out.

It is about finding the time to do whatever it takes to make my emotional state my priority. Accepting that depression is, and will always be, a part of who I am.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT HAPPENS ON TOUR
STAYS ON TOUR

But you came in the middle and you fell in my hands

Oh a wonderful woman and an average man.

See that makes me the lucky man

I won't be deserving, but I won't be denied

See, I fell in this position, I will still teach my kids pride

Because failure's a part of it all

And if failure don't hurt then failure don't work at all

– *Boy & Bear*

Big Man

Deciding to have a baby was a big step in my life. I wanted to be ready. My husband, Adam, had been asking if we could start trying the year following our wedding, but I wasn't ready to stop playing soccer, and wanted to wait one more year. So we did. I was only twenty-five – we had plenty of time.

My friends were all at the same stage; starting to get married, thinking about having kids. I wasn't under any pressure from my family; my sister already had two beautiful girls. So why worry?

So I played another year of soccer and, at the end of that season in 2006, Adam and I made the conscious decision to start trying. I doubted it was going to happen easily – I only had one fallopian tube.

At the age of twenty, I headed over to England for a four-month holiday to visit friends and to see the sights.

I quickly fell in love with London, and my four-month holiday stretched to fifteen months. I worked in a bar in the centre of town where we would drink as we cleaned the beer lines, taking pills, speed and, when we had the money, even cocaine. Then we would continue to party at our staff housing afterwards, and would generally not get to bed until the sun had come up the next day (if we slept at all).

And I met Brad. Older, experienced Brad, the bar

manager who was so sweet to me when we were together. When we were at work and around other people, though, it was a different story.

He picked up girls at the bar while I worked, flaunting them in front of me. It was crushing – we were only together when we had taken something.

It wasn't healthy for me, but what did I know? I couldn't help the way I felt. I even befriended one of his girlfriends. She was lovely, from Slovakia, and had no idea that I was sleeping with Brad. I didn't know what else to do.

Weeks later, it all got too much for me – I was living a double life. Friends with this girl one day then sleeping with her 'boyfriend' the next. It had to stop.

I moved to Greenwich to work in a backpackers' hostel and bar where I connected with friends working in the area and met the local students. Best of all, Brad wasn't anywhere to be seen.

But, after only three weeks in Greenwich, I suddenly became violently ill.

It was my night off and, instead of having a drink at the bar, I was curled up in bed with a fever. Then the severe cramps started and I could barely get out of bed. I managed to get myself to the bathroom and found that I was bleeding, heavily. I couldn't remember when I had last had a period, as they were never regular anyway.

I managed to clean myself up and go back to bed, but I was in so much pain I couldn't straighten my legs or stand up.

Thankfully my roommate popped into the room to grab something. Through clenched teeth I asked her to go down to the bar and get my best friend, Nathan, urgently. She raced off in a panic and, minutes later, was back with Nathan in tow. When he saw how much pain I was in, he took me to the hospital in a taxi.

Nathan stayed with me while they made me comfortable and took bloods. After an hour, Nathan had to return to work, but he made me promise to call him when I knew what was going on.

My cot was near the nurses' station and I couldn't help but overhear them.

'Does she know that she is pregnant?' One nurse said.

'No, I don't think she has even considered it.'

'Jeez, how far along?'

'Seven weeks.'

'Do you want me to tell her?'

'No, I'll do it.' There was rustling of papers and then the curtain to my cubical pulled open and in walked a nurse.

Oh shit. They were talking about me.

Turns out I was seven weeks pregnant, but the foetus had lodged in my fallopian tube on the way to

the womb, and now it was growing there. It was an ectopic pregnancy.

The nurse went on to say that I would need an operation. I was shocked. I didn't even know what an ectopic pregnancy was. I was still trying to come to terms with the fact that I was pregnant.

They operated on me two days later, and I woke up from surgery in unbearable pain. They issued morphine and I slowly settled down. I was crying from the pain when the doctor came to see me and informed me they had removed my fallopian tube. I couldn't stop crying. The nurse looked at me sadly and rubbed my hand. I felt I had lost a lifeline to one day being able to have kids.

In all of this I was alone. Brad never visited, even though Nathan had told him what happened. I didn't call my parents until I was out of the hospital and safe back at the backpackers'. They were shocked, but I didn't want them to worry. I also didn't want to go home because of it.

It was a major turning point for me. I didn't need to be looked after. I was tough enough. I could do it on my own.