

At last! The naked  
truth about what it is  
to be married ...

# THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH



Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees

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## About the Book

### **MEET JACK**

*Dadness.* Women have a sixth sense for it. To them, you're like an old bull in a field at the side of the motorway, harmlessly chewing the cud, watching the world race by, nothing like the wild buffalo stock from which you came. And that's how it should be, of course, after seven years of marriage to the woman you love. But, lately, as I've looked around, all I've seen is temptation. From random women in the pub, to my foxy new boss ... they've left me doubting whether I've really been put out to pasture at all ...

### **MEET AMY**

Motherhood, I've discovered, is the great leveller. I could be a celebrated fashion designer (instead of the finding, cleaning, bum-wiping domestic robot I've become), but having kids automatically makes me the same as all the other mums in 'The Coven' up the park. And being 'the same' makes me want to do something terribly rash - like rediscover the impulsive person I used to be. Don't get me wrong, I love Jack and our son, but everyone else seems to be having so much more fun than me - and so much more sex ...

The pressure's on.

Can they resist *The Seven Year Itch*?

Can you?

And if one of them cracks? Will it be Amy or Jack?

It's time to find out ...

## About the Authors

Josie Lloyd and Emlyn Rees each had novels of their own published before teaming up to write bestsellers together. Their work has been translated into twenty-six languages. They are married and live in London with their three daughters.

*Also by Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees*

The Boy Next Door  
Come Again  
Come Together  
Love Lives  
The Three Day Rule  
We Are Family

# The Seven Year Itch

Josie Lloyd & Emlyn Rees



arrow books

For everyone who read *Come Together*

# **Acknowledgements**

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The important thing about the social phenomenon known as the Seven Year Itch is not whether this urge towards marital infidelity is universal, or whether it really is most likely to strike seven years into a marriage, or even whether you actually believe in it at all. No, the only truly important thing about it is this: if you *do* feel the Itch, will you choose to ignore it, or will you start to scratch?

## Amy

### The Vipers

When I was eight, my grandfather wrote in my autograph book: *When three or four women come together to chat, God help the first woman to leave.*

I never truly understood what he meant until I joined the Vipers.

It's our bi-monthly meeting and I'm late. Personally, I don't think of them as vipers, more as a close group of fellow first-time mothers, but Jack's always referred to them as that, or the Coven, which is just as bad. It's fair enough, I suppose. My poor long-suffering husband bears the brunt of the processing I have to do, to get over the veiled comments and insinuations made each time the Vipers meet.

Jack, of course, doesn't understand why I still see them at all, but it's like the Mafia: once you're in, you're in for keeps. I know these women and they know me. We're bound together by pain and ugly scenes of uncommon emotions. If I did leave, I'd be a traitor forever. They'd spurn me in the park and not invite me to birthday parties, and before long, I'd wake up with a severed horse head – well, a My Little Pony head at the very least – in my bed.

I hurry through the gates of Queen's Park and take the short cut past the tennis courts. It's a cloudless May day and the horse chestnuts are loaded with cones of blossom, but I

hardly have time to notice. I'm sweating as the buggy rattles over the grass.

There's a young guy playing tennis with his coach on the court. His legs are tanned and supple and there's an athletic spring in his step. As a peal of his laughter reaches me on the breeze, I'm reminded of how Jack once was, before too much work, parenting and our ongoing financial crisis made him so serious.

Back then, Jack and I always used to talk about how we'd meet up at lunch time to play tennis once a week together. Being able to do just that was part of the reason we chose to buy a flat as near to the park as we could afford. But in the three years that we've lived here, we haven't once met up for lunch, let alone played tennis, and now we've stopped talking about it altogether.

Before I get within sight of the playground area, I stop and pull out *Buster's Bedtime*, my son Ben's favourite book. I open it at the bit where Buster cleans his teeth. The illustration has a tinfoil mirror in it. I search my own distorted reflection for any signs of the illicit croissant I had earlier, or yesterday's smudged eyeliner. I'm clear, but even so, I wish that I'd washed my hair. And wish that I'd had my roots done. And wish I didn't look like one big frown. And, as I chuck the book back into the netting at the bottom of the buggy, along with the rancid assortment of banana skins and sandy nappy wipes, I wish most of all that my appearance didn't matter. But it's the Vipers and it does.

Believe me, with them everything gets exaggerated. You put on new heels, you might as well be wearing stilts. You put on lipstick and you're having an affair. And if you put on a pound, you might as well have put on a stone.

It's like playing spot the difference for a living, and every difference spotted involves a judgement or a criticism of some sort. Which is why I take out the book again and carefully touch up my lip gloss so that it looks like I haven't got any on. Because I hate coming away from these

meetings feeling crumby. It leaves me feeling downtrodden, and I just don't think I can face it today.

## **The Great Female Conspiracy**

Of course, it wasn't always like this. At first being with the Vipers was great, because when I fell pregnant with Ben, the initial euphoria of the thin blue line on the pregnancy test quickly wore off, and the terror I felt at the prospect of giving birth equally quickly kicked in.

Of course, I knew I wasn't supposed to feel like that. I was supposed to be all earth mother and smugly proud, but inside I felt like Sigourney Weaver facing the drooling alien, and as I got bigger, I started to feel like the alien had impregnated me and it was only a matter of time before its offspring punched its way out.

So when I joined the local group of expectant mothers and found that I wasn't alone in my fears, I clung on to them like a life raft. They made me feel normal. They talked to me like I still had a brain and wasn't just a walking brood mare, and in no time at all, we were bonding over the horrors we tried to hide from our menfolk: varicose veins that crawled like feeding worms across our groins, and piles that a mole would be proud of; stretch marks that appeared on our bellies like contours on a map, and aching hips that made us hobble like little old ladies. Not to mention tits that leaked like Mr Whippy ice-cream dispensers, warts and beauty spots that went weird and itchy and our unfeasibly bushy bikini lines (less Brazilian, more Cuban – as in Fidel Castro's beard).

We learned to laugh about it all, just the same as we did about how fat our faces felt and how we regularly got stuck in the bath, whilst assuring one other that we were just 'all bump' and hadn't put any weight on at all.

But then came the births in quick succession and, ashen-faced, we clung to each other with renewed neediness, glad that there were others out there who also felt like they'd

narrowly survived a terrifying car crash. ('Vietnam.' That's how film-crazy Jack described Ben's birth. 'Like spending a night on Hamburger Hill.' He was right, in a way. We did feel like war veterans.)

It was the betrayal that was the worst. The discovery of the Great Female Conspiracy. I guess it exists to keep the human race going, but the fact is, that nobody – especially other women – tells the truth about giving birth.

They never tell you about the full gynaecological horror that involves delivering another human being into this world. They never prepare you for the moment when you discover that you're made of meat, not make-up; that you're actually more butcher than Body Shop; and that this epiphany changes you for ever.

So in the weeks that followed these birthing experiences, we comforted each other, us Vipers. We shared in horrified whispers the gory details of what we'd been through. We cried on each other's shoulders as we tried to come to terms with stitched perineums, cracked nipples and sleepless nights, whilst we pretended to the rest of the world that we were glowing with maternal serenity.

But the problem with any group of women (as any woman knows) is that over time it becomes a hornets' nest of covert competitiveness. And once our babies stopped being newborn? We were on bitchy quicksand.

It shifted from being about how we were *feeling*, to how we were *doing*. We started sizing each other up, scrutinising and comparing our new mothering skills – and found each other lacking.

## **A Test Of Faith**

I take a deep breath and smile brightly as I approach our usual tables by the toddler sandpit. They're the wooden type you get in pub gardens with the benches attached. I remember that Jack had one in the garden of the house he shared once with his best mate, Matt. Only this one is a lot

less enticing, of course, on account of a deficit of peanuts and ice-cold lagers, and a surfeit of tasteless breadsticks and sticky juice cups.

In the sandpit, I can see several of the kids I've known since they were born tearing around. One of the biggest surprises about becoming a parent is that, despite all the gumph they tell you on the TV, it really is nature not nurture. These kids were all born with their own personalities. The cute ones are cute, right from the start, and the mean ones are mean. Not that you can ever say this out loud, of course, any more than you can say that it's possible to really loathe other people's kids.

Don't get me wrong; some of these offspring I love. I really mean it when we joke about dancing embarrassingly at their twenty-first birthdays. But between us all there are eight kids. Statistically, one of them is going to turn out to be a nasty crim of some sort.

The Vipers are all present and correct, surrounded by a protective shield of buggies. Camilla is holding court. I swear she's had a fake tan. She's wearing a pretty summer skirt and Converse trainers and she's sitting astride the bench, one hand rocking her Bugaboo Buggy (the most expensive in the range) where demon Tyler is mercifully asleep. Her other hand (complete with diamond-studded eternity ring, presented at her bedside in the private maternity hospital, by BBC exec hubby, Geoff) is resting ostentatiously on her swollen belly. She's sixteen weeks already. She laughs up at Sophie.

Sophie does combat yummy mummy. She's pretty in a freckly, turned-up nose kind of way - all khaki pants and headscarves and glimpses of her flat midriff and the top of her tattoo. 'Womb Raider' Jack's always calling her with a worrying twinkle in his eye, the same as when he watches the real Angelina Jolie on the screen. I'm not losing any sleep over it, though. Jack may wonder, but he's not the type to wander. Not these days, anyway.

And patting the space beside her, when she sees me, is overenthusiastic Faith. Fashion-wise, Faith seems to have stuck in the nineties, with an original Rachel-from-*Friends* barnet, but today I notice that she too is wearing new Converse trainers. It crosses my mind that she might have actually followed Camilla and bought the same trainers in secret. Put it this way: Camilla isn't copying *her*.

'Ah, there you are, Amy,' Camilla says, smiling. We do kisses all around and I climb into the space next to Faith.

I've been kind of looking forward to today. Let's face it, there's not much in my day-to-day diary to get excited about. So little, in fact, that I don't actually use a diary any more. There's the ongoing activities that fill up my time: the rota of dishwasher emptying, food shopping, nappy changing, cooking and washing-machine filling. Then there's my routine with Ben: Aquababies at the pool on Monday, Boogaloo Bunnies on Tuesday, Monkey Music on a Wednesday and Park Pranceabout on Thursdays. (Fridays, obviously, we go wild and crazy.)

And then there's these occasional get togethers with the Vipers.

But the second I'm subsumed into the group, I remember what I loathe about it. Motherhood, I've discovered, is the great leveller. I could be a brilliant lawyer, or an architect, or yes, even a celebrated fashion designer (as I once thought I would be by this age), but it counts for nothing here.

Apparently, because I have a child the same age as Faith's, that makes me *the same* as Faith - and call me a snob, but Faith is really quite thick. Being 'the same' as Faith makes me want to break free and do something terribly rash. Like telling her that I find her constant bonhomie false beyond belief and her annoying assumptions about my life ignorant and inaccurate. Or that beneath the virtuous veneer, I suspect her of being the most venomous viper of all.

‘Aw. He’s still got that nasty skin rash then,’ is Faith’s opening gambit, pointing down at Ben, who’s asleep, wrung out from the eye-rolling, toy-tossing, tonsil-tearing tantrum he had earlier about being strapped into his buggy. (Anyone would have thought he was an innocent death-row prisoner being dragged to the chair.)

I reach out and protectively cup my darling boy’s angelic face. A few hysteria-induced blotches are hardly a nasty skin rash. I feel my heart flip with guilty love for my little boy. In the WWF-style wrestling match I had with him, I wish now that I hadn’t lost my temper and called him a ‘little fucker’ for making me late.

‘He’s fine,’ I state, in the kind of tone I hope will kill this line of conversation dead.

But Faith is to empathy what Stalin was to public relations.

‘Could be the start of chickenpox,’ she speculates.

She really hopes it is, clearly. I’d never dream of criticising her daughter Amalie, or keeping tabs on *her* illnesses, as if they were weaknesses. I wouldn’t dare offer an opinion on the fact that Amalie looks – in Sarah’s words – ‘slightly touched’.

‘It’s understandable really though, isn’t it,’ Faith continues. ‘Poor Little Ben’s probably got low resistance after that horrible cough he had last time . . . it’s going around.’

I smile as blandly as I can. ‘Or maybe it’s bird flu,’ I suggest. ‘You never know . . .’

For a moment, I hope Faith might see this statement for what it is: a joke. No such luck. She leans in close.

‘I’ve got some Tamiflu,’ she confides. ‘I’ve been stockpiling for months. I’ve got enough to give you a box or two. Or I could give you the website, if you like?’

I’m at a loss as to how to respond, because my first instinct is that if Faith is the kind of person who’s going to survive a pandemic, I’d rather perish with the masses.



Fortunately, our attention is drawn to Camilla, who leans in conspiratorially and rattles a pink bottle of pills, and glances at Sophie, eliciting giggles and coos from the group. Of course, that's what Camilla and Sophie are looking so smug about: Sophie's pregnant.

Then it turns out, in a sudden splurge of confessions, that Faith, Linda and Abby are all actively trying for 'number two' as well. Lan simply holds up two hands with her fingers crossed and stares down at her belly (although it's so tiny, it's a wonder that anything as big as an olive, let alone a foetus, could fit in it). Camilla squeals with delight and starts handing out folic acid vitamin pills like a teenager dealing Ecstasy.

And they're off.

## **The Second Coming**

Over the last two and a half years, many topics have been aired and debated at these very tables. Some of them, looking back, have been ridiculous. Like the endless pre-birth pain-relief-versus-natural-birth debate. Laughable now. The moment we went into labour, we were all screaming for drugs. Abby's water-birth pool stayed in the boot of the car, Linda drop-kicked the hired back-massage machine against the wall, Lan stabbed Phil in the balls with her acupuncture needles when he suggested they might help, and Sophie screamed hysterically over her Yogic-Breathing-Through-It tape.

Post-birth, of course, the Vipers' conversational topics became much more specific. There was will-he/she-take-a-bottle? month, followed by how-do-I-know-if-he/she-is-ready-for-solids? Then we were on to is-it-too-early-for-potty-training? And the ongoing nanny-or-nursery-or-me? debate.

These conversations are so inane, they make me want to shoot myself.

And this one is no different. Soon, we're past dates of last periods and on to the justification for having another child.

The big question is, why do it all over again?

‘What about you, Amy?’ Camilla asks, eventually. ‘You’re very quiet. Any thoughts on number two?’

‘You’ve *got* to get pregnant too,’ adds Faith, ‘otherwise you’ll be left out.’

I’m in the spotlight.

The truth is, I do want another child. The only problem is, the reasons I have for wanting another one I could never, ever admit to the Vipers. Because if I’m very honest, this is what I think about having another baby:

1. If I get up the duff now, then I don’t have to worry about sorting out the next stage of my career for a few more years and can spare myself the inevitable humiliation of failing job interviews. It’s been five years since Friers, the fashion company where I worked, was taken over and I got made redundant, and three years since I quit a dull and stressful job as an office manager in a bookings agency.
2. If I have another baby, I can get thin after that one.
3. If I get pregnant now, I can put off starting the sit-up regime I’ve promised myself I’ll start any day now and then I’ll have a good excuse for my flabby tummy next time I’m in a bikini.

‘Oh . . . Jack and I haven’t really discussed it, yet,’ I lie.  
(We have. He’s said no way.)

I’m aware that I’ve fallen once again for the Vipers’ old trick. They’ve managed to turn reproduction into a group activity, and now I feel that I’m on the wrong side of a divide.

‘I loved discussing it with Ed,’ Sophie gushes. ‘It’s so different deciding to go for it the second time around, isn’t it?’

Camilla, Lan and Sarah heartily agree.

Sophie adds a cheeky guffaw. 'I had no idea it would happen so fast. I was rather enjoying all the trying!'

I cringe at the cliché, but can still feel my heart racing with childish jealousy. I've always considered myself to have a better, healthier relationship with Jack than any of these women have with their fellas. I hate the fact that they've all made the decision to reproduce again – on the assumption that it'll happen just like that – and are all apparently enjoying wonderful, intimate sex sessions trying to conceive.

I look down at Ben. I can feel Camilla staring at me.

'I'm not saying Jack and I won't go for a second,' I say, trying to keep the defensive edge out of my voice, 'but I'm just *so* enjoying being a mother at the moment. It's just so great. I really don't want to spoil things for Ben. And besides, the thought of being pregnant again –'

'Oh God, yes,' Faith interrupts. 'Poor Amy. Do you remember how sick you were last time?'

That's rich. *She* was the one who bellyached all throughout her pregnancy. Not me. This girl projects so much, she should get a job at the cinema. It's typical of her to rewrite history.

'And I suppose you would need to be out of the flat before you had another baby,' Camilla adds in her best sympathetic voice. 'I mean, it's lovely and everything, but there's not exactly enough room.'

Jack's right: they're Viperous Witches.

## **Shooting Myself In The Foot**

'Now then, before I forget, Yitka is after some evening work,' Camilla announces. 'If anyone can use her? Amy? Weren't you saying last time you needed a babysitter?'

'Well, it's our wedding anniversary next week –'

As soon as I say it, I feel as if I've thrown a fresh haunch of venison to a starving pack of wolves. There's a round of anniversary celebration one-upmanship, during which we

learn that on their last anniversary, Camilla's Geoff planned a romantic 'seasonally based' meal at home cooked by a minor celebrity chef, and Faith's husband, Craig, has a tradition of buying her a red rose for every year they've been married.

Sophie shares that Ed is planning on taking her to Paris for the weekend, without Ripley, next month. It was supposed to be a surprise, but the George Cinq hotel in Paris sent the booking confirmation to her home address by mistake, with the details of the *menu gastronomique*. Shame.

I try and play down our own plans on account of the fact that Jack and I haven't any yet. I can't even be sure that Jack will remember.

Last year, during Jack's political phase (he tore up his supermarket reward card and finally started using the recycling bin), he announced that he had also decided to adopt an anti-Hallmark stance. This applied to Mothering Sunday (American hogwash) and Father's Day (pointless) and wedding anniversaries ('Why should other people dictate when I'm romantic?') and last, but not least, Valentine's Day (which no longer applies to us, apparently, as we're no longer single). It was only when I threatened not to let him have a Playstation 3 for his birthday, that he agreed that birthdays should be the exception to his bah-humbug rule. So, even if he does remember our anniversary, we certainly won't be doing anything lavish.

'We'd just like to spend the evening together,' I mumble. 'You know, maybe go to the cinema -'

'I'm sure you can do something *much* more exciting than the cinema, but whatever,' Camilla interrupts, 'you simply *must* borrow Yitka.'

*Thanks. I can borrow her, can I? Like she's a cardigan, not a girl with an honours degree in psychology, who lives here, pays tax and speaks perfect English and is brilliant with kids. I don't have the nerve to say it.*

‘Well, you know, Yitka might have plans,’ I suggest, instead.

Camilla looks at me, confused. ‘Plans? You mean social plans?’ She laughs, as if I’m crazy. ‘Yitka doesn’t have plans. As I said, she’s great. She’s really hard working. I don’t think she even *has* friends.’

And why would she need any, with a boss like Camilla?

‘But you’ve got to watch out for her,’ Camilla says. ‘She was angling for a rise to seven fifty an hour.’

So . . . let me get this straight. Camilla’s happy to entrust the care of her precious only son to Yitka, holding Yitka personally responsible for his safety and happiness and early education, only to then try and screw her out of fifty pence per hour?

And this from the woman who justified spending six hundred and fifty quid on a cashmere jumper dress in Matches, by saying it was only £2.50 per wear.

Honestly.

Fortunately, at that moment, Tyler wakes up. His scream is so loud, he wakes up Ben. There’s a flurry of Tupperware and half an hour of organising the fair division of carrot sticks between the kids, plus a ten-minute conflagration about the new management in the park café and whether we’re all ‘doing cake’ today or not. For huntin’ shootin’ fishin’ big girl Sarah, that’s like asking whether we’re ‘doing air’. The lattes are off, caffeine hindering conception, apparently.

Finally we’re all settled, and it’s time for the regular update on each child’s digestive quirks. It’s riveting stuff. Really. Pithy, quick-fire dialogue. Seriously. It’s a wonder Spielberg doesn’t call.

I don’t have the heart to admit that Ben is on day three of a hunger strike (salt and vinegar crisps excepted) and frisbees any bowl of food I give him at the wall.

‘Goodness,’ Camilla says, ‘looking at everyone now, I can’t believe how big Tyler is compared to the others. You know he’s in size five Huggies!’

She makes this declaration in the same way I imagine a nudist on the beach might boast about her husband being hung like a baboon. Everyone can see it, but she's going to rub it in anyway.

In fact, nobody is given a chance to retort before she adds, 'So, what are we doing kids' birthday-wise? Are we going to do a joint one again, this year?'

I groan. Last year, on the exact day between all the kids' first birthdays, we lined up all the babies on a sofa and took photos of them, whilst Camilla made us all feel grateful for being in her huge mansion.

'Only last year was such a hassle, having *two* parties,' Camilla continues.

This is news to me. And deliberate news, I'm guessing, from the way in which she leaves the comment hanging in the air. I had no idea she had hosted another party as well as the one for the Vipers. We certainly weren't invited. Or I wasn't, at least.

'So this year, I think we should all do a party for our own child. It's easier that way.'

And more competitive.

'I've already booked out Pizza Teca on the 27th for the whole afternoon and Bella Bubbles will be there for entertainment,' she says, confirming my suspicions.

There are general impressed murmurs all around.

'So now, let me see . . .' She waggles her fingers. 'Amy, it's you first, isn't it?'

Too late, I realise that I've totally shot myself in the foot. In public, I've declared that I'm not having another baby because I'm enjoying motherhood so much. So telling the truth - i.e. that up until this moment, it hadn't crossed my mind that I'd need to have a party for Ben, on account of the fact that he's only two and won't remember it - won't wash with the Vipers.

'Yes. Sunday after next,' I say breezily, as if I have it all worked out. I pretend to look in my handbag. 'The

invitations are . . . Oh dear, I left them at home,' I lie.  
'Anyway, I hope you can all come?'

Everyone nods and looks generally pleased.

'Husbands too?' Sarah asks, through a mouthful of muffin.

I nod in a friendly way, a horrible sinking sensation in my stomach.

Jack said last time that he'd rather stab himself in the head with a fork than spend a minute in the same room as Sarah's husband, Tory Rory.

Oh God. What have I done?

## Jack

### **Boomerang Boy Does The Praying Mantis**

When I open the front door to our flat and the smell hits me, the first thing I'm reminded of is the school French exchange I went on when I was thirteen years old.

Long-suppressed memories strobe through my mind: *pain au chocolat*, butterfly knives, *petards*, Gauloise Blonde cigarettes . . . and a cute, spotty dishwater blonde called Marianne, who had tits big enough to ski off, a smile wide enough to break your heart, and who taught me how to kiss with tongues like they did in the movies, and promised she'd write to me in England, but never did.

Exhilarating times, perhaps, but it's the smell of the suburban maisonette I lodged in that sticks with me most.

The Legards were butchers. Mme Legard (face of an ageing Bardot, body of an ageing Sumo) had six kids, and spent her life grilling offal and frying onions, boiling cauliflower, changing nappies, making beds and running baths.

Their house smelt of feeding and breeding, laundry and drains.

It was an overwhelming, suffocating smell. It left me gagging and reeling, claustrophobic and trapped.

Which is why – Marianne's gargantuan charms notwithstanding – I was glad when my brief European sojourn came to an end.



In between sucking up the fresh sea air on the P&O ferry on the way back home, and chucking up illicitly purchased Martini Bianco into *la Manche*, I thanked God that I'd only been a *visiteur*, and that the rest of my life was still to come.

Yet, here I am – with twenty years having whipped by in the blink of an eye – and my own home smells exactly like the Legards' did then . . .

It's like I've come full circle, like everything I once ran away from has suddenly tracked me down. It's like I've become the Boomerang Boy.

I stare along the cramped hallway of my flat like it's the barrel of a gun.

Cloying with the bouillon whiff emanating from our kitchen, there's the nose-wrinkling, dry dairy tang of dribbled, soured milk, which patterns the upholstery of the blue gingham buggy that's currently blocking my path.

Added to these smells is the all-pervasive, meaty guff drifting out of the nappy wrapper in Ben's room. This rank contraption's satanic purpose is to wrap and store used, disposable nappies in lemon-scented cellophane, like a string of pooey sausages.

Quite *why* this invention exists is beyond me. I mean, *why* would anyone conceive of wrapping a shit? Wrapping is what you do to presents, and it's not exactly like you're ever going to tie a gift tag to one of these stinky little numbers, and adorn it with the words: '*As soon as I saw this, I thought of you . . .*'

But what does my opinion matter? The nappy wrapper was brought here by my mother-in-law, and as such, I cannot do with it what I otherwise would – i.e. chuck it out, incinerate it, donate it to medical science, or, indeed, detonate it with a high explosive charge . . .

Instead I must live with it.

And accept it.

Just as I accept the other odours in my life.

Because it's nobody's fault really, of course . . . these whiffs and pongs. It's just parenthood. We *do* clean, Amy and I. We vac and we ventilate. We mop and we scrub. It's just that sometimes – mealtimes, bathtimes, nappy times – the smell takes over, especially in a two-bedroom flat like ours.

Sometimes it leaves me wanting to turn around and flee, to hunt out wide open spaces, the same as I did when I was a kid, and run with my arms outstretched like a plane, hoping beyond hope that I might actually take off and fly across the sky.

But I don't run. Because I'm not a kid. And because I know now what I didn't know then: that even the fastest of planes has to land somewhere.

And I landed here.

So I kick off my muddy work boots and close the front door behind me, and tell myself this:

*So what if my life occasionally stinks? There's so much more to it than that, right?*

And then I search for proof that this really is true.

And I'm lucky. I don't have far to look.

After contorting my way like Houdini through the obstacle course of the half-collapsed buggy, the upturned car seat, the wooden block trolley, and the soft-toy wicker basket, I find that the first piece of evidence pertaining to the general munificence of my life is standing with her back to me just inside the kitchen doorway . . .

Amy Rossiter: the yin to my yang, the rock to my roll, the Moët to my Chandon, and the fish to my chips.

She's dressed in a tight black cotton top, with her hair tied up in a blue and white chequered scarf that's knotted at the nape of her neck. Her hair's downy there, kissable. Her top's ridden up slightly from the brown leather belt of her blue jeans, revealing a sensuous strip of skin at the base of her spine.

She doesn't turn round. She hasn't heard me come in. She's stirring a pan of cauliflower cheese that's blistering and popping on the gas stove, and looking like the surface of the moon. The extractor fan above the cooker is humming away, and the iPod's turned up loud, pumping out Marvin Gaye's 'Let's Get it On' . . .

It might be the sensuous strip of skin that does it. Or the redneck scarf, which, I admit, does add a certain Daisy Duke fantasy element to the scenario. Or it could be the song. Or even that the song isn't 'Teletubbies Say Eh-Oh', which is more often than not what I return home to these days.

Then again, it might just be that Amy's bum, snuggled tight inside her jeans, now starts swaying gently - hypnotically even - from side to side . . .

It could be any combination of these audiovisual factors that triggers my dormant libido, but the result is the same: I suddenly get an overwhelming desire to jump her.

Overwhelming desire to jump and actual ability to jump rarely coincide in my life these days.

This is largely to do with the fact that Amy and I are rarely alone together. And also largely to do with the fact that when we are, we're usually so exhausted that the attraction of slumping on the sofa often outweighs the attraction of humping on the bed.

Long gone are the bawdy pre-work bunk-ups upon which our relationship was built.

Lost to the mists of time are the occasional rude and rampant, raunchy lunchtime rendezvous which spiced up our working days.

Dear-departed are the cheeky weekend getaways, spent speeding down motorways in search of cheap country B&Bs with creaking bedsprings and snug warm fires.

And all but a fond memory are the lewd and lascivious evening-long sessions of steamy baths and slow massage.

Instead, Amy and I have become the Sultan and Sultana of Speedy Sex, the Prince and Princess of Pragmatic

Porkings, and the King and Queen of Calculated Quickies.

So long as we're not hung-over (which we frequently are), we'll attempt to do it on a Sunday morning, before Ben wakes up.

So long as we're not seeing friends (which we frequently are), we'll attempt to do it at lunchtimes at the weekend, while Ben is taking his afternoon nap.

And so long as we're not hung-over, seeing friends, or dead on our feet (which we frequently are), we'll attempt to do it on weekday evenings, after putting Ben down and reading him *I Want My Potty* (which, I'm guessing, is *not* a text regularly recommended by sex therapists for its aphrodisiac qualities).

In other words, Amy and I get it where we can. Where sex was once a chef's gourmet tasting menu, it's now become a Subway sandwich. It's something you have on the run, something you squeeze in between other appointments and commitments – and as with all fast food, while the filling is perfectly tasty, it's rarely satisfying for long.

But this moment – here in the kitchen, straight after work – this truly is something of an anomaly. It's a window of opportunity I'd long ago thought bricked up.

So surprised am I, in fact, by the absence of my son at Amy's side, or some other local mum who's brought their kid over for tea, that I'm unable to resist stepping forward and issuing a mock-pervie, 'Phwoar!', complete with an affectionate pelvic thrust to Amy's well-presented behind.

I feel her flinch, surprised, as my arms slide automatically around her waist, and begin snaking up towards her breasts.

There are certain reactions you expect when you make such a covert amorous move on the woman you love.

The spooked: 'God, you made me jump!'

The ever optimistic: 'Grow up!'

Or even the aroused: 'Mmmm . . .'

But what I actually hear is: 'What za fuck are you doing?'

And the reason for this bellowed demand becomes glaringly apparent the moment she twists angrily round to face me.

*She* is not the she I thought she was.

This scarf-wearing woman – against whose buttocks my groin has just been grinding, and around whose breasts my hands have been circling like vultures – is actually someone I've never seen before in my entire life.

And as if any further proof of this horrendous, gut-churning fact were needed, it's provided now by Amy's appearance in the kitchen doorway, with Ben hitched up on her hip and gripped in the crook of her arm.

My mouth dries up like I've just bitten into a sack of salt.

'What the fuck *are* you doing?' Amy demands, glaring first at me, and then at the puce-faced, scarf-wearing younger woman, who's now staring at me in silent outrage, like she's just been plugged into the mains.

Horror fills me, as I follow the woman's stare, first towards my hands, which are still stretched out before me, incriminatingly cupped.

And then towards my hips, which I only now realise, are continuing to gyrate away spasmodically like those of an Elvis doll on a car dashboard, like they've somehow become autonomous from the rest of my body.

It's like a documentary I once watched on the Discovery Channel about the mating habits of the praying mantis, where the male's abdomen continued thrusting and pumping long after the female had devoured his head as a mid-coitus snack.

A strange, high-pitched whimper escapes my lips. Inside my trousers, my nuts perform a most un-nut-like manoeuvre, a kind of testicular jiggle, like they've transformed into two baby voles, who, having found themselves faced with a deadly predator, have started scurrying desperately around, seeking the protection of their mother.

I cross my arms, clear my voice and steady my hips.

'I'm so sorry,' I tell the girl in the scarf.

'I can explain everything,' I tell Amy.

'I thought you were Amy,' I tell the girl.

'I did,' I tell Amy. 'I thought she was you.'

The two of them exchange glances, like they're deciding whether to castrate me or shoot me first.

And the way I feel right now, the second of these two options would be both a kindness and a relief.

'Daddy funny,' says Ben.

I notice him smiling at me, eyes twinkling, like I'm a particularly clever monkey who's just performed a particularly clever trick. He giggles at me, and points.

'Daddy funny, Mummy,' he repeats, starting to giggle.

Something about the sound makes the scarf-wearing woman relax. I see it in her face.

*Hey, she must be thinking, if the kid thinks he's OK, then maybe he's not a serial sex pest, after all . . .*

Ben makes me relax too, the same as he always does the moment I see him, the same as the sight of my mum always used to when I was a kid. Ben makes me feel solid, a part of something bigger than myself. He puts my problems in perspective and makes me feel safe and strong.

I walk right up to him and kiss him on the nose.

I don't take my eyes off his for a second.

My son, my boy, the apple of my eye, the kid I'm looking forward to playing football with when he's seven, and who I'm itching to buy a beer for when he's seventeen . . . the kid who lights up my day, every day.

'Buzz, buzz,' I tell him, pressing his nose like it's a bell.

'Buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz,' he repeats, grinning with delight.

If only adults were this easy to please.

But one glance up at Amy's glowering face tells me that this isn't the case.

## **Michael Douglas's Wrinkly Finger**