

The 7 Sins of Being a Mother

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 juggernaut

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*To my love for women of all shapes/sizes/moods/
structures/feelings, pre-/post-/none menopausal,
with oestrogen/progesterone/testosterone/none, with
gravity-defying breasts/silicones/one/none, with
children/without. I dedicate this book to women
and those who identify as one.*

I am a sinner

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Introduction: The Sinning
Starts at Forty Weeks

Pregnancy

I was proving to be the worst mother
out of her patients. I didn't seem to be
into my kid, childbirth hadn't turned
me into a being of soft, maternal
generosity.

We were in the middle of it, my boy and me. It was a starry night, we were in a plush hotel room, our clothes had left trails on the floor. I was slightly tipsy with the wine I had had at dinner. The protein shake had worked its magic on him. Those were the carefree, guilt-free days of early marriage.

Suddenly I heard my boy say, ‘Shabash, shabash,’ and then letting out a sigh of satisfaction. I had expected a more horny ‘yea baby’. This was like getting encouragement from a PT coach.

I put aside his confidence-boosting words but what I couldn’t ignore were the consequences of it – our first unplanned pregnancy. Why do I say first? Because the second, about which I have written in my earlier book, was unplanned too.

How did we manage such a feat twice? Well, we weren’t just riding high on hormones, we were also

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following PT instructions. As soon as we got married, my in-laws began telling us that it took years and years to produce a baby; only if we started now would we manage to have one in three to four years.

My competitive spirit got the better of me, and I produced two in three years. After the 'shabash' night we got cold feet and were very careful and disciplined about contraception. Then we had another blip, but since this was just a blind shot and it usually takes months and years of blind shots to make a baby, we got lazy about taking any precautions. I forgot that my boy had won a teddy bear in archery at a school fest. Always the bullseye!

But let's not digress. This book is about what happens after the pregnancies, about the long, winding road of motherhood. About the comedies, the tragedies, the learnings, the failings and, always, the guilt. When it comes to motherhood, I feel I have been the eternal sinner. Many of these dramas began even before the baby came out.

My first pregnancy came with a huge list of instructions from Mummy, my mother-in-law. One was that I was not to sleep with my boy. She meant sex. This being my first, I tried to follow all the instructions, but

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my libido was at an all-time high. I don't think I let my boy have a minute of rest, and he wasn't complaining. But the guilt of indulging in carnal pleasures while pregnant was getting to me.

I was expected to have pure, pious thoughts and was even forwarded a few satsangs and discourses along with meditation methods. But inside I felt like Bindu and Helen, the yesteryear vamps who oozed sex appeal. My sin was that not only was I horny but also felt very sexy, despite a baby growing inside me.

I blamed Chandigarh's weather and the good home food for being so aphrodisiacal. But when one post-sex morning my boy reminded me that this was peak summer and I had eaten khichdi the night before, I realized it was all me.

This disconnect of reality versus expectation began to get to me. So we decided to meet a gynaecologist. The doctor asked us, 'Do you have relations?' 'Of course we do! I mean, we are married,' I responded, baffled. She looked at me, rolling her eyes, and repeated herself. 'I know you both are married, but do you have relations with him?'

What the hell was wrong with her? I was about to get up and leave, when my boy squeezed my hand and

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whispered, 'Sex.' I looked at him even more confused. 'Now, baby?' He frowned and said, 'Idiot, she is talking about us having sex.'

As I look back on the incident, I remember a more recent one where my son came to me saying that his friend had hit the MP. I was very impressed by this eight-year-old's bravery. He had actually done what so many of us dream of. He had struck a member of Parliament!

'Why are you smiling? He hit the main point,' my son said to me, tugging at my kurta. I still couldn't fathom what he was talking about. Switchboard, socket? Then my son gestured to his pelvis. What? Whatever happened to the words 'penis' and 'vagina'!

I should have corrected the gynae back when she used the word 'relations'. Perhaps these cryptic abbreviations wouldn't have trickled down to the next generation. As much as I disliked my doctor and her way of explaining sex to us, she did finally give me the answer I needed.

Yes, it was safe to have 'relations'. 'Biologically and physiologically, you are allowed.' As we were about to leave, she added a postscript, 'But religiously speaking, beta, pure thoughts always help.'

As soon as I left her office, my phone beeped. It

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was a message from the doctor recommending a book: *Spiritual Thoughts During Pregnancy*. Urgh. I chose to ignore her sermons. Nor did I stop for most of the pregnancy! When it became impossible to do missionary because of my ever-expanding tabletop, we moved to cutlery and spooned instead!

In the meantime, my bump grew and grew. Every few weeks I would look in the mirror and say to myself, 'This is it. I really can't get any bigger than this.' Then I would surprise myself and break my record. My masi would keep asking me if I had become so big that I was getting stuck in doorways. If I wasn't then I had more capacity.

In the final weeks, she flew down to Chandigarh to be a part of my new beginnings. As soon as she arrived, she gave me a big hug and said approvingly, 'Ae honda ae size (this is what they should look like).'

No, she wasn't talking about my bump, but my boobs. Some things never change! I have to admit I was loving it too, though by this point, at nearly nine months, I wasn't feeling sexy any more. From Helen and Bindu I had graduated into becoming a whale, rude noises erupting from deep within my depths every now and then.

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I just wanted the baby out. And so my masi, who was always looking for a rescue mission (she could give all the Batmans and James Bonds a real run for their money), decided to launch Operation Labour. You should start having a lot of sex, she told me loudly over lunch. As much as I appreciated her forthrightness, I really didn't think she had to be this explicit while I was with my parents at the dining table.

My father choked on his food, my mother tried to shut Masi up by passing all the food to her, even as my nani nodded her head in agreement. As much as I would have loved to take this advice, I needed to have my partner around. He was in Delhi shooting his first film, feeling young and fresh, while I was struggling with a helium-balloon version of myself and the Masi-and-Nani team.

I whispered to her, 'Masi, he isn't here,' to which she said, 'Taan ki hoye (so what)?' My father could take it no more. He stopped eating and got up to leave. My nani started scolding my mother for not putting enough salt in the food and forcing my poor father to abandon his meal. 'This is what happens if you serve pickle bought from the market,' she said to herself sadly.

Masi realized that sex wasn't a viable option for me,

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and so came the next nuskha – moving the nipples. How the f*ck does one move one's nipples? As kids we had practised eyebrow raising, winking, rolling the tongue while sticking it out, heck, even moving the ears, but moving the nipples? How do you train those muscles, ligaments, tissues – whatever makes those nipples?

Masi corrected me saying, 'I mean rub them.' I didn't want to rub any creams over my swollen breasts. Earnestly she said she could do it for me. What? No way was that happening! Later I learnt that nipple stimulation increases oxytocin production, which causes the uterus to contract. I am sure she didn't know any of this, and I wasn't telling her in case she decided to pounce on my nipples.

Her next tip was to have castor oil, taking it either through the nose or mouth. No, I said firmly. After much coaxing I agreed, but on the condition that she would do the sample test first. I didn't let her argument of 'I don't have anything to push out except kidney stones' convince me. I got the better of Masi on that occasion, but she didn't concede defeat. After all, no one leaves a pregnant woman alone, and certainly not Chotu Masi.

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She didn't trouble me for the next few days, but couldn't stop herself thereafter. She came to me carrying a whole bunch of needles. She was going to do some acupuncture on me. I asked her, worried, if she had ever done this before. She told me she had researched on Google for the past few days and might just be able to pull it off. You can imagine what my response was. NO.

Her next idea was to make my meals extra hot, that is, loaded with chilli. She believed the spice would help in inducing contractions. Those meals left not just my tongue but also my heart and stomach burning.

December winter in Chandigarh can be painful. You hold in your pee and go only when it is urgent. And here I was, sitting on the ice-cold pot for hours, running chilled water from the jet spray up my frozen butt.

The next day, exhausted, I left for my daily walk (more of a waddle now since I had gained twenty-two kilos!). It didn't take long for Masi to catch up. She apologized for frightening me and gave me another tip. I was to imagine my labour. It's called visualization, she said, beaming.

Okay, this didn't sound so bad. I started visualizing that I was being taken to the hospital with beautiful, blow-dried hair. The doctor asked me to push twice

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and on the third push the baby came out gently, all smiling and dimpled. The doctor handed it over to me. I caressed the baby's soft skin and it gurgled at me.

Masi was not pleased to see my tranquil, happy face (this was surely not a good sign!) and was about to hit me with another hare-brained idea. I had had enough and sped up so I could be on my own. Her presence was giving me palpitations.

My palpitations didn't stop even after I reached home. My stomach too had started cramping. Maybe the fast walk had been a bit too strenuous. I sat down, closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths. When I opened my eyes I saw Chotu Masi staring at me.

She was smiling triumphantly. 'You are in labour!' What? Seriously? Yay! Excited, we took out the hospital bag we had prepared earlier and waited for the contractions to quicken. On a side note, no amount of nuskhas and tricks helped; all that was required was Chotu Masi's presence!

It was night by the time my contractions became more frequent, coming now every three minutes. My parents who had dozed off in exhaustion were shaken awake by superhero Masi who shouted, 'The girl is going to deliver here only. Get up. Let's go!'