

the mother hood

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First published in New Zealand in 2026 by De Opalho Publishing.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of New Zealand.

ISBN: 978-0-473-77631-2

Cover design by: Jessie Marsh

Cover photos by: Ben Devery

Author photo by: Kseniia Spodyneiko

New Zealand books printed and bound by: Copy Press

New Zealand books distributed by: Real NZ Books

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The
**MOTHER
HOOD**

BECAUSE MOTHERHOOD REALLY
DOES TAKE A VILLAGE

VANESSA DE CARVALHO



To all mothers and mother figures.

if they're old enough

. . .

"If they're old enough to ask for it—"

"Oh, fuck off," Saffi muttered to the TV, annoyed at the breakfast show host for declaring that toddlers should no longer be breast-feeding.

"Oh, uck off," her toddler repeated behind her.

"Benji! Hey, love ... that's not a very nice word to say."

"But you say it. Me want to be like Mummy."

"I know Mummy said it, but it's not a nice word, and I shouldn't have said it. You remember when we talked about how when you're big, you're an adult?" Benji nodded. "Well, there are loads of words you can say when you're an adult. But right now, that's not a nice word for a little boy."

"But me not little, Mummy. Me a big boy. Me don't do wees in my undies!"

Saffi sighed. How was she going to explain this? She got down on her knees.

"Yes, my love. You're totally right. You are a big boy. But you're not big like Daddy. You're not an adult."

"So when me dult, me can say 'uck off'?"

"Umm, sure. I guess you could."

"I love you, Mummy."

Without waiting for her reply, Benji ran away, no doubt looking for his sister. Saffi smiled, resisting the urge to run after him to tickle his little belly and bite those irresistible toddler thighs. There was still the dishwasher to empty and load with the morning's dishes, the washing to hang, and maybe today she would get around to cleaning the bathrooms. It had only been on her list for the last three days. She took a

deep breath, trying to ignore the droning of the lawnmower outside, and reached for her coffee. It was now lukewarm.

"This sucks," Saffi muttered, defeated by all there was to do in such little time. The summer holidays would be over in a few days, and she felt she didn't have much to show for it. She reached for her phone and opened the group chat, silent so far that day.

COFFEE? IN AN HOUR? PLEEEAAAAASSSSSEEEE?



Violet was on the couch with a steaming cup of decaf coffee in her hands, the morning show on TV in the background. She was due in six weeks. She was going to savour this slow start to the morning. Her bump hid the view of her ankles, which were swollen due to the February heat and her long walk yesterday. She felt a kick, which jolted her, making the coffee slosh over the edge of her favourite mug and land with a splat on the tiled floor.

"Bubba! Hi, Bubba," she said, her eyes welling up. She stroked her stomach, hoping to feel her baby again, but it had gone quiet. She was about to pick up her phone and text Joel when the doorbell rang. Violet heaved herself off the couch, wondering how much bigger she would get in the next month and a half. The extra weight on her small frame made her feel huge. She pictured a beached whale needing help to get back into the water.

"Kia ora." Cheryl, her mother-in-law, burst into the room, leaving a trace of flowery perfume behind her. "I was just in the area and thought I would drop off some fruit and veg from the garden. I'll just pop them on the bench, shall I?"

"Sure," Violet whispered, shutting the door. "I guess you'll be staying, then?"

"What's that, dear?"

"Oh, nothing. Would you like a cup of coffee or something?"

Cheryl looked at her watch and scrunched up her face. "Let me see. I'm supposed to meet Doris in a bit, but sure, why not? I guess it'll be nice to catch up." She put an arm on Violet's shoulder and walked her

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back to the couch. "Here, sit down. I'll make it. Do you want anything?"

"No, I'm okay." Violet waddled back to the couch, slipping on the spilt coffee. She managed to catch herself, but Cheryl had noticed the near miss.

"Oh dear, what's that? You know, you have to be more careful, dear. You're so close to the end. It would be a shame for something to happen now, wouldn't it?" She helped Violet onto the couch and then ran to get a rag.

"I know, but I'm just pregnant. I can do that. Here, give it to me."

"I'm here. It's fine. Sit and rest."

Violet sighed, focussing her attention on the TV. There was a segment on breastfeeding.

"This will be good for you!" Cheryl said, tapping Violet on the leg.

Just then, one of the TV presenters said, "If they're old enough to ask for it—"

"He's so right!" exclaimed Cheryl. "My gosh, I hope you're not going to be one of those mums who breastfeeds their child for that long."

"Well, I don't know, Cheryl. I mean, the WHO says two years or more, so I'd like to try for at least that long."

"Hmmm. You know, back in my day..."

Violet looked around, trying to tune out her well-meaning but overbearing mother-in-law, who was now droning on about how she had only breastfed Joel for four months before stopping cold turkey and handing him a bottle of formula. "It's what everyone did back then, and look, you're all fine."

As Cheryl continued stating all the ways parenting was much better when she did it, Violet admired how clean her place looked. Everything in its place. The pristine white walls, the brand-new white couch, the white rug under the coffee table. Cheryl had not hesitated to say that white was a terrible idea, especially with a baby on the way. As a teacher, Violet knew Cheryl might have a point. Kids were messy. But that's why her kids would only ever play in their rooms. The living room was just for her and Joel.

At that moment her phone pinged, and she lunged for it, grateful for the distraction.

COFFEE? IN AN HOUR? PLEEEAAAAASSSSSEEEE?

YES! THE MONSTER-IN-LAW STOPPED IN UNANNOUNCED. I NEED AN OUT, she texted back, a smile on her face.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. Just my friends. What time did you say you were meeting Doris?”



Every morning when Pippa woke up she snuggled into her mother lying next to her. If it were up to Lena, Pippa would still be feeding in her sleep, but things had changed. This morning, the toddler tugged at Lena’s shirt, trying to pull it down to get to the milk.

“Mōrena, Pips.” Lena kissed the top of her daughter’s curly hair. “Remember, we’re not feeding in the morning anymore. Breakfast first, then milkies, okay?”

“Milkies now?” her daughter mumbled, her eyes still closed.

Lena found it hard to say no to Pippa sometimes. This was one of those times. But the Plunket nurse had been concerned about Pippa’s lack of weight gain during their last visit. When Lena reluctantly admitted that Pippa rarely ate in the morning, the nurse suggested moving the feeding session to after breakfast. She had been so relieved that the nurse hadn’t judged her for “still” breastfeeding her almost two-year-old in the same way her GP had.

“Come on. Why don’t you help me get it ready?”

She carried Pippa to the kitchen where Tane was drinking coffee, scrolling the news on his phone, the TV on in the background.

“Pāpā!” Pippa squealed, wiggling to be put down so she could run towards him.

Lena smiled, admiring her shirtless husband at the kitchen table, the curtains behind him blowing in the wind. It was a perfect scene. *Almost perfect*, she corrected herself, absently stroking her stomach. She walked towards him and kissed his head.

“Morning, T. Sleep well?”

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“As good as I could with this wiggly monster next to me!” He tickled his daughter, who erupted into fits of giggles.

“Imagine if I hadn’t convinced you into buying a king bed!” Lena said.

They laughed.

“There’s still some coffee for you,” he said, pointing to the plunger on the bench.

“Amazing! Ta.”

Lena poured herself a mug and added a bit of milk. She closed her eyes, enjoying that first sip, letting the bitterness of the drink sit on her tongue and feeling the warmth in her hands and her mouth. Easily the best part of her mornings. She didn’t know a single mum who didn’t reach for the coffee as soon as they rolled out of bed.

She put her mug down and quickly got to preparing breakfast. Oats with frozen berries and sliced banana. Every morning. Without fail.

She put Pippa’s silicone bowl on her highchair tray.

“Kai time. Go wash your hands.”

“OK, Māmā.”

She watched her daughter, thumb in her mouth, toddle over to the sink, where the kitchen helper tower stood waiting for her, making handwashing an easy independent activity.

Tane had already left for work by the time Pippa finished breakfast. She brought her bowl to the bench before walking to the love seat in front of the TV. “Milkies, Māmā.”

Pippa pulled down Lena’s top. Lena stroked her daughter’s hair. She was so proud of herself for still breastfeeding, almost two years on. She had dealt with low supply, thrush, and a tongue tie, but eventually she had got the hang of it. She went from being a newbie in the breastfeeding group to an “oldie”, listening to the newer mums and pointing them in the right direction with encouragement.

Something on the TV caught Lena’s eye. It was a segment on breastfeeding. She reached for the remote and put the volume up. She had missed most of it. But what she didn’t miss was one of the TV presenters saying, “If they’re old enough to ask for it—”

She immediately turned off the TV.

Oh, wait until they hear from me. Don’t they know that the natural age of

weaning is about five? Don't they know the WHO's breastfeeding recommendations? And how about having a lactation consultant on the show to educate the public about this? Ridiculous!

"Māmā, you mad?" Pippa laid a hand on Lena's cheek. Lena noticed she had been holding her breath as this internal dialogue raged in her head.

"No, baby. I'm just thinking."

"Uhva side?"

Lena found the way that Pippa mispronounced words adorable. "Yes, my love. For as long as you need it."

She looked down, locking eyes with her beloved daughter as she latched on to the other side. This was as much a source of comfort for Lena as it was for her daughter. She would not stop anytime soon.

She was glad when her phone vibrated next to her. She needed something to get her out of her head.

COFFEE? IN AN HOUR? PLEEEEEAAAAASSSSSEEEE?

YES! THE MONSTER-IN-LAW STOPPED IN UNANNOUNCED. I NEED AN OUT. ABSOLUTELY.

That would help her get the frustration out. Saffi and Violet were always ready for one of her breastfeeding rants. It was one of the many benefits of having the best mum friends. They didn't always agree, but they always listened.

And there was always coffee.