

[WOMB WITH A VIEW]

Every week, a woman reflects on motherhood – whether she has children or not

'I FELT AS ALONE AS I DID THE MORNING AFTER MUM HAD DIED'

Flora Watkins on the pain – and envy – she felt on becoming a parent after her own mother had gone

WATCHING MY mother-in-law cuddling my newborn son and planting a kiss on his forehead, I was suddenly overwhelmed with such intense grief that I stumbled out of the room, clutching a hand over my mouth to stop me from crying out.

My own mum had died from breast cancer when I was at university. By the time I was pregnant with my first child, 14 years later, the pain of losing her had subsided to a dull ache that I only felt at certain milestones – when I turned 30, and again, on my wedding day.

But aged 36, holding my little boy Jago in my arms renewed that raw anguish of the days and weeks immediately after her death – and nothing could have prepared me. It's not an exaggeration to say that it felt as if she'd died again.

Like all new mothers, there were moments when I was feeding Jago, or just looking at him, when I'd be so consumed with happiness that I'd find myself weeping. But with that tsunami of emotions and pregnancy hormones came other feelings that were confusing, and impossible to process.

I couldn't deal with the fact that Mum would never hold my baby, that he'd ▶



Flora with her
mum Linda



Flora with
her sons Jago
and Gussie

never know his other granny. I'd feel raging anger and jealousy when I saw other women with their mums, at baby groups or in the street. Why did they have their mums around to help them adjust their clunky buggies or fetch them a coffee while they grappled with nursing bras and hungry babies? Why hadn't I got a mum to come and stay and give me a break? If I needed even an hour away to get my hair cut, I had to pay for childcare, which gobbled up my maternity pay.

I was completely on my own – and I felt as lost and alone as I did when I woke up the morning after Mum had died. Psychologists talk about the five stages of grief and loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance. I'd been through all five in my early twenties, and suddenly – though I didn't realise it at the time – I was stumbling through the stages all over again.

'I want my mum,' I'd sob over and over to my husband, as I hauled myself out of bed for yet another night feed. 'Why isn't she here?' I'd cry. 'I'd do anything to have her around.'

Suddenly, I needed to ask Mum all sorts of questions that I'd never considered when she was alive. Had she struggled to breastfeed, as I did? Had she been so anxious about cot death that she'd pace backwards and forwards to the crib like a caged animal as the baby slept? And when she finally managed to fall asleep, was she so attuned to the baby that its every snuffle and gurgle jolted her awake again?

WHEN WE BECOME MOTHERS, WE NEED MOTHERING OURSELVES

Caught in the never-ending cycle of feeding and changing and settling that accompanies a newborn, I didn't realise that the fourth stage of grief – depression – had crept up on me. When Jago was just over five months old, I was diagnosed with post-natal depression. While it was a relief to get a diagnosis and start taking medication, now I needed Mum more than ever.

But through the cruel illness that is PND, I came to understand my feelings and why Jago's birth had reopened the wound of losing Mum. A doctor mentioned a PND support group run by a charity called Cedar House. Sitting in a circle with several other new mothers who were all struggling to cope, I sobbed as I talked about Mum, about how I would find myself doing crazy things, like dialling her old mobile because I missed her so much and was desperate to hear her voice.

Her phone had been disconnected, of course, but I nurtured a crazy half-hope that I might hear her old, familiar message.

Liz, the counsellor who ran the group, nodded sympathetically. 'When we become mothers,' she said, 'we need mothering ourselves.' It was a light-bulb moment for me. New mums *do* need mothering. We need our mothers there to hold us and reassure us, like they did when we were little girls. We need our mums to tell us that everything will be OK, to tell us that we're doing just fine – and to guide us gently when we're not.

Slowly, as the antidepressants and the talking therapy did their work, I began to recover. I still missed Mum dreadfully, but gradually I reached the 'acceptance' stage once again. I realised that Mum was still with me – and with my boys (a year later, I had another son, Gussie).

Mum is here in all sorts of ways. She's here in the boys' broad cheekbones, and in their sweet natures that are counterbalanced by quick tempers. She's there in my parenting style, in the old, familiar books I find myself reading to my sons, such as *Brambly Hedge* and *Peter Rabbit*. She's there in the elaborate cakes I try to bake for their birthdays, even if they're not nearly as successful as the ones she made. Mum is there every night as they're falling asleep, as I sing them the lullabies that she used to sing to me. 'Summertime, and the livin' is easy...'

With young children, Christmas – which was miserable for years after Mum died – is joyful again. And instead of loathing Mother's Day, I now look forward to it, and the boys presenting me proudly with bunches of bent daffodils and potato-print cards.

In the last letter Mum wrote to me, when she knew she had only a few weeks to live, she urged me to keep talking about her, in order to keep her spirit alive. I show my boys photos of my mummy, their other granny that they won't ever get to meet, because she's in heaven now.

Jago is four now and he's just started school. He's into Disney films at the moment. 'I'll bring her back to life for you, Mummy!' he says, waving a magic wand.

'You already have, my darling,' I say. 'You already have.' Cedar House runs support groups for women with PND in London and Surrey. For more information, visit cedarhousesupportgroup.com