

# confessions of a mad mother

Kelly Pang



She was a picture of polished perfection, with a recognisable face that graced national TV every night. I was the dorky, non-descript worker – the face behind the computer. So imagine my surprise when one day, this colleague planted her high heels near my desk and pronounced to me in a gleeful tone: “This is going to be the end of *sleep* as you know it!”

I was then an innocent first-time mum-to-be, happy to have enjoyed a pretty smooth pregnancy. Other than several episodes of nosebleeds, two rounds of constipation and many bouts of nausea that I overpowered with packets and packets of Marks & Spencer Fizzy Fish sour candy, there was nothing very remarkable. I went for prenatal massages, regular swims and yoga lessons in preparation for a good, strong birth. Two days before I popped, I even got down on all fours to scrub the toilet till it gleamed. In the books, I was already “nesting”. I was ready, or so I thought.

Of course, it was innocence – and many hours of sleep – lost when baby was born. Thanks to the yummy mummy, I couldn’t say I hadn’t been warned. But what no one told me was this: Motherhood was also the end of *sanity* as I knew it.

In my first day as a mother, and a mad woman, I was dressed in the pink hospital tent, hair uncombed, a perpetual grin plastered on my face. Most new mummies I had seen were propped up on the hospital bed – as they should – smiling wanly at visitors. But euphoria got the better of

me, so while my visitors popped in and out, so did I. I circled the room, walked up and down the corridor, and even went out some way to the lift lobby and back. If that was not bad enough, I was also not wearing any shoes. Postpartum, Chinese, barefooted: just the perfect conditions for early rheumatism.

More insane acts were to follow, some too embarrassing to put on paper. However, what edged me towards insanity was not so much the immediate loss of grey cells after childbirth. Rather, it was my plan to take a whole year off work to look after my daughter. The best way to do this, I had figured, was to do it all by myself. No mum-in-law or maid or any other form of baby-sharing arrangement. I just could not fathom leaving my baby with anybody else. Besides, one mummy to one baby, how difficult could it get?



I was in for a huge shock from baby's second month onwards. By this time, the "best part" was over: The red packets and baby gifts had been ripped open, the stream of visitors had trickled to almost nothing, and my mother-in-law who had stayed with me during the confinement period had packed up and taken all her culinary skills with her. Goodbye steamed cod with ginger, goodbye sesame-oil chicken. It was also at this time that my little daughter started to become fussy, frightful and sleep-defying. One clueless mum to one cranky baby. It was a startling reality, to put it mildly.

Each morning, the "click cluck clunk" of the gate would tell me that, ready or not, I was officially on my own. The husband had left for somewhere which seemed like paradise and who knew when he would be back? Me, I sniffed at the sour milk smell coming from my nursing pads. I was a stinky, dishevelled mess with nowhere important to go to that day. Of course, there was serious stuff to do in my husband's office, but all I could think of was that one of us had the baby and the other did not (that was quite rational, no?) In any case, I would look forward to his return every night, if only to thrust the baby into his arms.

In the meantime, I would have to try my best to keep going. There would be the endless rounds of feedings to give, the various baby chores to do/undo/redo, the minute-by-minute second-guessing of what baby wanted – plus the need to keep her calm, happy and preferably gurgling. Ah, playtime!



*What no one ever told you about being a parent*

If you smell of milk every day, you will never ask for a milk bath at the spa again.

This looked simple but was not, because there was only so much I could do to pass the time. My limited repertoire involved lots of tongue-clicking, belly kissing and the hiding and revealing of my face...“Peekaboo!”... “Peekaboo!” Sometimes I was met with wide-eyed wonder, other times a splutter of fretful cries.

To add some variety, I shuffled with her from one wall to another, exposing her to shades of cream and peach and framed pictures of an English countryside, after which we would end up by the window facing the busy road. There were cars and buses whizzing by, children hopping onto school buses, the garbage collectors making the rounds. All very exciting stuff. For a more stimulating activity, I would whip out a book from our library of two: the colourful cloth one with animal sounds or the waterproof one with, guess what, more animal sounds. With only five pages to go, the activity was usually over too soon. “Oink Oink! Moo Moo! Quack Quack!” – I was an enthusiastic sound-button pusher. Then there was the rattle, the caterpillar, the butterfly, Barney, Winnie... they were all summoned for repeated appearances throughout the day.

If playing with baby was mind-numbing, then getting her to sleep was the exact opposite – it was mentally challenging. Before I became a mother, I didn’t understand why other parents needed to rock their babies to sleep. I would be that firm mother whose baby did not need such



*What got you hopping mad*

“So, what do you do all day?”

mollycoddling, I had thought smugly. But when she cried, my resolve crumbled immediately. So I started to rock: I rocked her standing up, sometimes with gentle sways, other times with frantic motions. I whacked my palm on her backside to mimic the maternal heartbeat. I let out primitive sounds like “orh la, orh la”. I rocked her in her baby rocker; I took her out of it. I put her in her Baby Bjorn; I took her out of it. I paced back and forth, and wondered if I should also kick my legs up in the air, as I had seen one grandmother doing. As I said, my baby defied sleep. Because all these only led up to one thing: a defeated plop on the sofa and the offer of a very deflated boob that eventually got her to dreamland – maybe.

When I realised that it took one hour to put her to sleep, and half an hour before she woke up, I was horrified. I started reading up on how I could make a baby sleep. Both hope and dread swelled up in my chest as I studied the technical details of the “cry-it-out” method. But I just didn’t have the heart to do it. When I chanced upon a parenthood portal for Asian parents, I was so relieved. These people were discussing things I had never heard of – Glenn Doman’s flashcards, the Suzuki music method – they sounded like pros. I put up a post asking for tips on how I could get baby to sleep without relying on the breast. But someone must have sneered at my question, because suddenly, they started regaling each other with tales of how useful their breasts were. One mum related how her three-year-old son had suffered a fall and was inconsolable



*What got you through the first year*

*My sister, for letting baby and me linger at her house when I visited her. She must have known that, secretly, I was afraid to go home.*

until he came to her for a “suck-suck”. She gushed, “Even his grandfather says I’m a human pacifier. LOL!” I got out of that group soon after.

Left to my own devices, I experimented with techniques to make baby sleep faster, better and longer. I was then living in a two-storey flat. On some days, behind closed doors, you could catch me cradling my baby and furiously climbing up and down the stairs. Like the traditional sarong cradle, the rhythmic pull of gravity sometimes had a drowsy effect on her. “This too shall pass, this too shall pass,” I chanted inwardly as I heaved her up and down the stairs. Sometimes, I put her in her stroller and then pushed the pram around the living room, making all necessary U-turns, three-point turns and carefully avoiding crashing into furniture, while all the time taking peeks to see if her eyes were finally shut. Again, this was done with my front door closed. I couldn’t bear for my neighbours to be peering in, looking at a mad woman.

Just an aside, another confession to make: Pre-baby, I had no idea how to cook. Besides instant noodles and hardboiled eggs, my best “dish” was tuna sandwich, made from canned tuna, of course. In secondary school, I was a Technical student (we worked with wood and metal), and I had not been taught any Home Economics skills like baking and sewing. When I went to a friend’s house and saw that she had a big pot of chicken stew standing on the stove, ready to be served, I couldn’t help but blurt out: “You used raw meat to cook this?”

So it was obvious that food became a problem after my confinement month, especially as breastfeeding made me hungry all the time. I remember scouring the newspaper classifieds for tingkat services that actually delivered lunch. I found one and only one, and that started my tiffin-carrier diet. I couldn’t finish all that was provided so when my husband came home, we would reheat the 三菜一汤 (three dishes and one soup) and that was dinner.

When baby started solids, I took the easy way out and bought cereal packets and jars of Heinz baby food while other mothers were making real juice from real apples and concocting carrot and sweet potato puree from scratch. Later, when I could no longer put off the inevitable, I dug out an unused grinder from my kitchen cupboard and went to the wet market to buy chunks of meat. Every day, I would grind the meat into a little paste and stir it into a pot of steaming porridge. I was terribly proud of myself. Things were going okay until I started smelling something bad from the grinder. When I took it in to the service centre, I got a shock. They told me that the grinder was meant for dried stuff only, simple things like spices, beans or coffee. With my misuse, I had left decaying meat to stew in the machine. Duh!

But ultimately, what threw me off-kilter with each passing day was the very thing I had asked for – the absence of help and adult company. I had never thought of myself as being especially needy of people, but when you face the baby alone the whole day without someone else to let off steam to, it can be very depressing, isolating and lonely.

Looking back, a clone would have helped. I could have asked this other “me” to take over while I sought refuge in the toilet. Or I could have yelled at myself, just to double-confirm, “Eh, is your baby crying again?” But with no one to talk to, I became attuned instead to the sounds of the neighbourhood: the incessant honks and sing-song calls of the rag-and-bone men (“Karung guni! Poh zhua, sah kor, tian see kee!”), the noon-time chime from the nearby school, and the totally unpredictable roar of my neighbour when she barked at her poor son to eat his lunch or do his homework. Perhaps she was like me, a little deranged, but I did not suspect it then.

I was certainly not in good mental shape in the first year. In the early months, I felt waves of panic when dusk descended into darkness and my inner demons came out to play. I was capable of meltdowns if my husband didn’t show up at the door at the expected time. Once, I got hysterical when I uncovered the tingkat containers and found they had sent me a ghastly tangle of chicken feet.

I also lost my sense of proportion – little things started to mean the world to me. Little things like being able to open my wallet with two hands. Like taking a shower without having to park my baby outside the cubicle and watch her with my soap-filled eyes. Like sipping a cup of iced bubble tea full of jiggling pearls in the late afternoon. It’s hard to believe now, but that was the highlight of my day. The planning in my head as I wheeled the pram



across the road to the bubble tea joint was delicious in itself. Green or red tea? Peach, lychee, apple?

The good thing about doing a solo act was that I discovered new uses for the under-utilised parts of my body. I once shoved the little finger of my left hand into my wailing daughter’s mouth to let her suckle, while driving with only the right hand through a Newton area peak-hour jam, panicky tears welling up in my eyes. My toes, I had no idea they were so useful for picking up that stray tissue or towel! Remote controls were harder, but certainly not impossible.

With the benefit of experience, I can now also rattle off a whole list of things I learnt in the first year. Besides breastfeeding, burping and bathing the baby, I discovered many hard truths, like how something can be both mind-numbing and

mentally exhausting. I also suspected that whoever coined the term “sleep like a baby” never had one. And that those who told you to sleep whenever baby slept probably had a very compliant snooze system (like a man’s). Because for me, just learning how to relax was hard: When my daughter slept, my body would freeze in anticipation of her next cry. And that leads me to another paradoxical truth: that it is also possible to love your child and be terrified of her at the same time.

Thankfully, the first year passed. I started feeling the madness subside when my daughter was able to entertain herself, point to what she wanted, use her wobbly legs to get around, help herself to food off my plate, and watch Hi-5! on TV.

Looking back now, I was of course being a first-rate klutz when I embarked on my one-woman show. Still, I never once regretted spending that year with my first daughter. We both got through it together, which must mean something special. And if I had to do it all over again, I would. I just need to clone myself first.

But I do believe that because of that year of going solo, I now suffer from infant phobia. It shows when I see a mum out alone struggling with a bawling infant, because all I can feel is a stab of pain for her. It also explains why, when I congratulate friends on the impending arrival of their first-born, my insides actually seize up with fear. Because I shouldn’t be scaring them, I can only hope they get what I really mean when I tell them, in a gleeful tone: “This is the end of sleep as you know it!”

Since signing off as a newspaper sub-editor, **Kelly Pang** has firmly entrenched her position at home as a highly-distracted multi-tasker. When not parked in front of her laptop pretending to write or edit, she is also Milo maker, peacekeeper and nag queen to her two daughters. Thanks to her husband’s step-by-step tutorial on the use of oyster sauce and a collection of “easy” recipes, she is now able to keep a few things bubbling on the stove – chicken stew included.