

Butterflies

Butterflies in my belly tell me I am feeling something other than dread. 'At least I'm feeling something,' I think.

The entrance to the office building echoes with familiarity. Someone recognises me and they call out.

'Kate! I haven't seen you for a while. Have you been away?'

I manage a smile. 'I had a baby,' I call back.

It has been ten months since I was last here and I instantly recognise the smell of the place. Everything is familiar: the hesitant lifts, the beep-bip of the secure swipe cards, the drift of freshly brewed coffee in the passageway. All is the same. But not me. I am vastly different.

Postnatal depression has stolen away the last eight months of my life. When I left this organisation amongst the warm wishes of my workmates I was a gregarious, in control woman, sharp as a tack and on the ball. Well connected and supremely organised. I was a walking cliché of workplace happiness.

As I ascend the stairs I wonder what it will be like coming back to work again and I am grateful for the nullifying effects of my 'happy pills'. I know I am no longer sharp or organised or on the ball. Depression and anxiety have atrophied my senses and judgement. I feel frumpy and lacklustre. My baby belly sags over the rim of my pants, none of my clothes fit me anymore and the grey under my eyes is impossible to cover with make-up. I haven't had a haircut in months and I know that people will notice I have let myself go to seed.

I enter the office, heart thumping in my chest. I use the deep breathing exercises my psychologist taught me to alleviate the impending panic that now threatens me in every unpredictable situation. The welcome is warm. My colleagues gather around me with enthusiasm, some of them using it to mask their discomfort. I have let them all know that I have been very unwell. They are doing their best to normalise the situation for me. While it is hard work emotionally, I am grateful for their diplomacy and consideration.

My supervisor has put aside time to speak with me this morning. She turns off her phone so we will not be interrupted. She has some things planned for me, tasks and projects she knows I will be interested in, mixed with some pedestrian administrative work that will require little effort.

'I don't want to put too much pressure on you to begin with,' she says, 'but I don't want you to be bored either. We can make adjustments as we go along. Are you okay with all of this?'

There is just enough work there for my two days a week and I believe she has the mix right. I am not sure what my capabilities are anymore and I tell her so. I have to explain that my memory is shot to pieces, that I have difficulty making decisions, that I often avoid starting something I feel anxious about. She nods as I speak. She understands there are limitations, but she also believes that they will change over time, as my confidence improves. I feel like she is not trying to do me a favour, she genuinely wants to see me do this for myself. For the moment, my anxiety drops.

Sitting down to my new desk I go through the still memorable motions of starting up for the day. Computer on. Cup of tea. Check the phone. Emails. I am acutely aware that I have forgotten how to be in this place. Until recently my world has been filled with hours of

sleeplessness, worry, and a flat, tuneless fog that has enclosed my senses in grey nothingness.

I remember only how to do mindless tasks in a dark rhythm, ever watching the clock as the minutes drip by. I have been used to living my life in two hourly blocks from the time my partner leaves the house.

Eight to ten: feed, play, sleep for baby. Wash and sterilise bottles with effort. The sun makes my wet hands glisten while I weep helplessly into a soapy sink.

Ten to Twelve: feed, play, change nappy for baby. Cook some vegetables to mash and freeze. They boil dry while I stare out the window. It feels like the end of the world and I am hopeless.

Twelve to two: Doctor Phil on TV. Get up to go out three times without success. Settle baby to sleep. Waste an hour worrying whether I should wake her to feed.

Two to Four: Feed, change, play with baby. Mindless staring. See a beautiful child rolling on my floor but unable to find any joy in it. More tears of regret as I watch this precious moment be lost to the thick fog over my eyes.

Four to six: Thank God. The day is almost over and I made it through. Four walls driving me crazy. Sleep for baby. Cook dinner and prepare to be cheerful for partner.

Day after day it has been the same. Ashamed of my inability to pull myself out of it I hid behind a mask of a pallid smile, until even that became too difficult to keep up. The final break down came in a rush of overwhelming emotion, like being dumped by a monster wave. It left me gasping, disoriented and wired with adrenal rocket fuel.

That was six months ago. Furious that the depression had got the better of me I threw everything I had at it. Postnatal support group, psychologist, acupuncture, massage, exercise, mum's group. In spite of the weird out-of-body feeling I made myself visit my work friends. I could see by their expressions and behaviour that I wasn't right. I wasn't who they remembered.

I told them bluntly, 'I have postnatal depression.' Silence ensues, because no one knows what to say.

'That really sucks,' says one. I could hug her. 'Yeah,' I say, 'it does.'

Now I am back among them. Most are polite and hopeful, I guess, that I will not bring it up. Others, like my supervisor, are genuine in wanting to see me restored and confident again. They know I can do it with time and TLC.

I realise how practised I am at masking it, what an excellent actress I have become. I smile and listen to their confident conversations about their lives. I used to participate in this. But now I feel like I have nothing to say that does not sound ominous and out of kilter. So I say nothing at all. I simply smile and nod.

My hours and conditions have been made flexible to accommodate me. Sometimes I work from home if I can't face the office, but as time goes on this happens less and less. I am instructed to venture forth gently, to ask for help if I need it, and to take time off for appointments if necessary.

I am supported in a totally unexpected way. I do not have to plead, or argue or justify what I need. I am listened to. My supervisor's perspective is that it is her responsibility to help me get well through work, to bring me back to my full potential. She does not baby me, or try to

protect me too much. She advocates for me and does her best to make work just challenging enough. She talks to me optimistically about the future. She does not treat me as if I am fundamentally impaired for life. There is no question in her mind that I will one day feel enabled again. I am not a frightening disease to be shied away from or molly-coddled or politely distanced.

Work has become a sanctuary of sorts, a place where I can find a few pieces of my unique self, independent of my domestic home life, and put them back together again. With the help of my supervisor I am rediscovering the 'self' that disappeared into the brooding hole of depression.

My supervisor treats me as she always did – with professional respect for my abilities and personal kindness. She knows that she will get the best out of me as an employee if I can work toward reaching the best in myself. She gives me her personal mobile number and encourages me to call her anytime. I appreciate the gesture, but never take it up. I have other people whom I can call when the black dogs bite. Besides, we are not great friends, but we are great colleagues. And I recognise that she has already given me a most unexpected gift. By believing in me she has encouraged me to once again believe in myself.