

A much-needed perspective for women who are re-examining their roles and responsibilities as mothers

MARIA HOUSDEN AUTHOR OF HANNAH'S GIFT AND UNRAVELLED

# A Mother apart

*How to  
let go of guilt  
& find happiness  
living apart from  
your child*

GUILT

HAPPINESS



SARAH HART

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*How to  
let go of guilt  
& find happiness  
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Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
6 Trowbridge Drive, Suite 5, Bethel, CT 06801, USA  
www.chpus.com

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British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

13-digit ISBN 978-184590094-6

10-digit ISBN 184590094-4

LCCN 2007938978

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*The names of women who shared their experiences in this book  
have been changed to protect their privacy.*

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## *Introduction*

# Take heart, mother apart: the journey from despair to peace of mind and happiness

*'Why did you leave them?'*  
*'How could you have allowed it to happen?'*  
*'How do you live with it?'*

If you are a mother living apart from your child, I'm certain you will have been asked these questions and other variations. The enquirer is at best surprised and at worst incredulous and shocked when we talk about our circumstances. Sometimes they fall silent, and dealing with their embarrassed confusion and hasty attempts to change the subject can be as difficult as those people who are eager to know more. Questions are thrown quick and fast, and as we try to find the words to explain, we feel judgement soaking into us like dye—the tarnishing proof that we are unnatural mothers. A mother who abandons. The woman who has committed the ultimate taboo.

As a mother apart, I know how you feel. As a counsellor, I understand that the experiences of women in your position can be complicated, and your feelings bewildering and sometimes extreme.

*'If anyone had told me that by the time he was six we'd be separated I'd never have believed them—we were incredibly close.'*

*Danielle*

*'Seeing other mothers enjoying their children is still so upsetting. How did this happen to me? Will we ever have good times together again?'*




*Jayne*

Regret, guilt, high anxiety and depression—many mothers apart feel like they have received a life sentence of pain. Take heart: this book will support you. It will help you make positive changes and find acceptance for what you cannot change.



## Who this book is for

*A Mother Apart* is written for women who have chosen to live apart from their child as well as those who are suffering separation that had nothing to do with a direct, personal decision to leave a child, including:


Mothers with **regular** contact with their children:

-  Non-resident mothers. In other words, women who are divorced or separated and are not regarded as the primary carer of her child by the courts.
-  Mothers who have shared residency. Part-time Mums who consider themselves to be co-parents with the child's father.
-  Mothers whose children live with a carer other than their father.

Mothers with **irregular** contact:

-  Mothers whose circumstances might be any of the above but for whatever reason, their relationship with their child or the child's primary carer has become strained and contact has become irregular.
-  Long distance mothers. Living far away from a child, perhaps in another country, makes regular contact difficult.

Mothers who have **no contact** with their children:

-  Circumstances can vary greatly, with some mothers having been granted shared residency and contact by the courts but who still suffer from parental alienation.

Various chapters of *A Mother Apart* can also support women who have had their children abducted by partners living in another country, mothers whose children are in foster care, women whose children have been adopted, mothers in prison and the like.

While all chapters might not be immediately relevant to all mothers apart, the book will provide guidance and help as personal circumstances change.








## Partners, family and friends

The strong feelings and often complex circumstances of mothers living apart from their children is, at times, baffling and difficult for loved ones. The aim of the book is also to help de-mystify the status of being a mother apart and provide insights and




solutions to partners, relatives and friends—or anyone wanting to support a woman living apart from a child.

Perhaps you'll recognise your circumstances in some examples of how a woman becomes or experiences being a mother apart below:

-  A shared residency order that doesn't work well in practice. A mother may find the reality of being a part-time parent very difficult or painful: The child's father could be obstructive and not encourage a good, ongoing relationship between a mother and child. Or a child might blame a mother for the separation and a once loving relationship changes. Or a teenage child becomes less interested in seeing their mother as they gain independence.
-  A mother was the main breadwinner in the family and, by choice or default, the father was regarded as the primary carer by the courts.
-  A mother who leaves her children in the family home with their father as she doesn't want to disrupt their everyday lives.
-  A mother who leaves the family home for a short period of time because she needs space to make a decision about her marriage and finds that relationships have deteriorated and decisions have been made about residency in her absence.
-  A mother goes into hospital suffering from depression to find that home life doesn't return to how it was before she became unwell. Her child might be living with another carer or her relationship with her partner has broken down.
-  A mother who loses residency because of drug or alcohol addiction.
-  Some mothers even have a shared residency order but have no contact due to parental alienation.

These scenarios highlight just a few of the many variations of what it means to be a mother apart. Very often, the die is cast rapidly and so I'll add:

-  *Any situation* where decisions are made quickly, in times of high stress and few emotional or financial resources together with a good pinch of guilt, can lead to a life as a mother apart and outcomes that cause pain and regret.

## Why this book was written

As many mothers apart will testify, it can be difficult to find understanding and support for our circumstances as women living apart from our children.

*'I want to learn what I need to do to feel better about being separated from my daughter. I want to know how to manage being in a new relationship and to help my partner understand what I'm going through. He tries but he doesn't really understand.'*

*Olivia*

*'How do I cope with my feelings as I live as resident mother to one child and long distance mother to two others? More than anything, I want to know that I'm not the bad, mad, crazy woman I sometimes feel myself to be.'*

*Natalie*

*'My ex-partner and his new wife make things as difficult as they can for me. It breaks my heart to think that they have so much influence in Sammy's life.'*

*Alex*

*'I need information on what to expect and how to handle mothering apart as my children grow up. Because I don't see them regularly I visualise them being younger than they actually are. I always seem to be about five years behind.'*

*Helen*

The purpose of *A Mother Apart* is to help you. Your well-being is its primary focus. I urge you put on hold anything you've learnt or heard that concerns itself with how much children suffer without a full-time mother. The combination of what others think of our actions and how we judge ourselves can distort our self-knowledge and personal awareness. In our confusion it's easy to blur what we imagine our children feel with our own emotions. The book's contents will help you separate your feelings from those of your child, media views on parenthood and the opinions of child psychologists.

**This book is different because it's not going to tell you that you should have put the needs of your child before your own.**

Perhaps the reason you're separated from your child is because you *did* put your feelings and desires before your child's.

*'I needed to get out. I don't regret leaving, I think it was the right thing to do for all our sakes, but I'm still made to feel guilty.'*

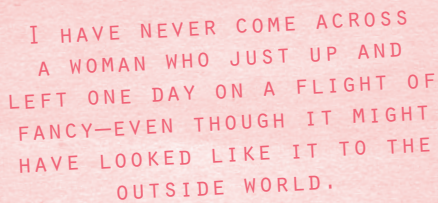
*Vickie*

Maybe the reason you left was because you truly needed to get away for the sake of your emotional health.

*'I only planned to leave for a month to have a rest and sort things out in my mind. I couldn't believe how much had changed in just four weeks—my husband's hostility, the children turned against me, even the locks had been changed.'*

*Jayne*

Whatever your reason for leaving, the emphasis of this book is on you, and the effects of the separation on your well-being, self-esteem, your choices, your future. Why? Because if you focus on *your* needs and feelings, become more aware of *what* happened, *why* it happened and its deeper meaning, and learn how to treat yourself with compassion, the change in you will be the best thing for your child.



I HAVE NEVER COME ACROSS  
A WOMAN WHO JUST UP AND  
LEFT ONE DAY ON A FLIGHT OF  
FANCY—EVEN THOUGH IT MIGHT  
HAVE LOOKED LIKE IT TO THE  
OUTSIDE WORLD.

So saying, my role on these pages is to help you truly accept your life as a mother apart from her child, to come to terms with your feelings, and challenge any negative beliefs and behaviour that cause you pain. My aim is to show you that you can change how you think about yourself as a mother apart in a way that doesn't deny what you feel. Chances are you aren't aware of what a great mother you really are. Your capacity to hold on to your status of being a mother living

apart from your child, your ability to hold the space of mother inside you even though you might not have current contact with your child, is quite remarkable. The fact that you've picked up this book shows both your commitment to yourself and the strength you have to keep trying, to hang in there, to hold on to loving deeply from afar. I applaud you. However you came to be separated from your child, whatever action or inaction you took, it was not something you did lightly; internal pressures, childhood legacies, oppressive marriages, a lack of self-belief, self-awareness, emotional support and economic means lead to desperate situations and limited options.

**This book will show you how to live a full and happy life  
despite living apart from your child.**

Does this sound impossible to you? Maybe you are locked in bitter battles over residency or contact, or are newly separated from your child. My heart goes out to you.



## Chapter 2

### Holding up the mirror

Now that we have a better understanding of the impact of stereotyped motherhood on mothers apart, how the judgement from the world effects us and what our internal judgements are made of, it's time to shift the emphasis from the collective and hold up the mirror to explore your own, personal circumstances.

In this chapter you will be guided through a liberating, three stage exercise called 'Your Story of Healing', to de-junk your outer and inner judgements—the judgements that affect *you* specifically. This process will, with care and sensitivity, help you to revisit the circumstances of your separation from your child and provide a replacement strategy to help you substitute any harsh judgements, out of date beliefs and misguided assumptions with an honest, healthy and nurturing reality check.

### Patterns of parenting: a rerun of your history?

An important part of re-evaluating what happened and de-junking judgements, includes considering our lives before we had children. We also need to reflect upon our lives *as* children, as it is part of the human condition to repeat patterns of how we were parented. Sometimes these inner templates are unconsciously repeated and other times we are aware of our own childhood suffering and are determined that for our children, things will be different—and so the pendulum can swing the other way. The experiences we had as children with our parents is, however, often mirrored in how we are as parents.

Some mothers apart have experienced difficult childhoods and have, in particular, either felt unmothered to some degree by their mothers, or have felt a lack of nurturing, being caring for, nourished, protected, cherished and all the behaviour we associate with mothering during their upbringing.

**To acknowledge that you have recreated a rift or estrangement that occurred in your childhood with your children begins to break the cycle.**

*'My parents weren't happy together. My father was an accountant and worked long hours. I think he stayed away from home mainly to avoid my mother, who had a drink problem. Life at home was chaotic and as my father wasn't around much (and when*

## *A Mother Apart*

*he was, he was angry with my mother) I took on the role of looking after everybody—as the oldest child it was my job. I tried to please my parents by being good and helpful and doing well at school. I tried so hard to control things so that people wouldn't see how crazy our family was. Trying to be in control is an illusion of course, when you live with an alcoholic. They're the one who calls the shots. Looking back, I can see that it was convenient to my father that I just got on with it. I had to grow up so quickly, and have very little sense of being mothered. In fact, I mothered my mother.'*

*Helen*

*'I was adopted and although my adoptive mother cared for us well in a physical way—she is a stoic, practical woman—she wasn't very warm towards us. I knew that she wasn't my birth mother from an early age, but it never felt right to talk to her about it or ask questions. Maybe this was because she couldn't have her own children, I don't really know. I wanted to be a good mother to my daughter and I certainly never imagined that I'd leave her, not after I'd been left.'*

*Elaine*

*'This feeling of darkness, abandonment and silence has kept haunting me all through my life. As I grew up I told myself I will get married, have a house full of laughing kids, summer barbeques on the patio with lots of friends and all my family. I won't ever feel lonely when I am grown up and married. My father never thought this would happen: "You will be a lonely old woman. I can't see you ever getting married. Something's wrong with you, you're mad." Everything I did he belittled—he never showed me love or affection. My husband thought I was mad too, and would periodically use his fist or words to reinforce how mad I was, and I accepted my fate.'*

*Carla*

As a mother apart, exploring the dynamics of your childhood can have an important role in understanding why and how you are separated from your child. Just acknowledging that you felt unnurtured, unprotected or abandoned as a child will help you to see the bigger picture of patterns that repeat themselves. Recognising a past history of separation will help you to get your experience as a mother into perspective.

For some acknowledging is enough, but for others professional help from a therapist who specialises in women's issues and understands the feelings that accompany being separated from a child is necessary for healing the pain of the past. You can find out more about finding a counsellor in the Additional Sources of Help and Advice section at the end of the book.

So I urge you to consider the effects of your own childhood when writing and telling your story. By exploring the past, you'll be able to come through it and say, 'This is who I am and I am not ashamed.'

**In doing this work you will be taking the first steps to healing the past, healing childhood patterns of separation.**

## De-junking judgements

Your judgement de-junk includes the process of writing (or if you prefer, talking into a voice recorder), rethinking your story and examining your part in it, before sharing it along with what you've lost and gained with someone you trust. But before you start your storytelling process I'd like you to press pause.

How are you feeling?

Chances are you're experiencing some degree of fear. Perhaps you fear having to face the story of your separation again, writing that part when you actually parted. I can absolutely understand that. I know. It can feel very hard. The moment of separation is often the memory that is most pain laden.

I urge not to avoid feeling this fear—to do the exercises below despite it. Although writing or telling your story might seem difficult and painful, it is an important process. When you come to read and share it with someone else, I will help you to do so in a way that is balanced and honest.

It's highly likely that when you've told your story before you've been less than fair with yourself. Perhaps you believe that you were more to blame, more responsible for the situation than you actually were.








I imagine that these feelings are to a greater or lesser degree, capable of making you sound like a selfish, bad, abandoning (or add whatever might hook you) mother. The way to confront, shrink and work through your feelings is to write and speak your story, and then reassess it with an attitude of understanding and compassion for yourself.

Let's face your fear head on, feel it and get it over with, rather than let it control you.

## Out with the fear

The place to start is to write down any fears, criticisms and negative beliefs you have about revisiting how you came to live apart from your child. Include fears of finding the words and seeing them on the page, as well as about reading out your story or telling it again, even to someone you trust. The idea is that you get them all down, every last one.

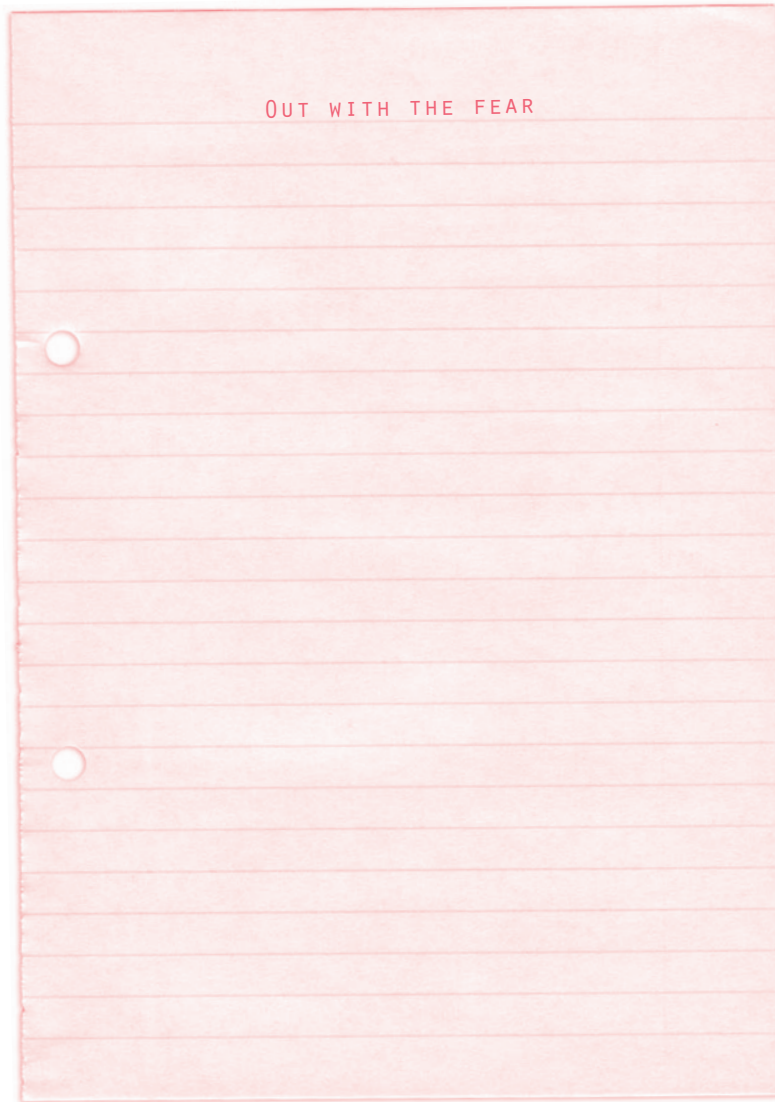
Here are some possible fears:

-  I will be overwhelmed by anger and rage and not be able to cope
-  I will die of shame and guilt
-  I will go mad
-  I will find out that I really am a bad, abandoning mother
-  I will start crying and never be able to stop
-  My mother/father/family would disown me if they read what I'm going to write
-  I'll find out that I hate ... (you fill in the blank)

Fears and negative beliefs are just that—fears and beliefs—they aren't the facts. You can recognise them because they tend to predict disaster and sound exaggerated. What's more, they are likely to disregard your strengths, view negative things as inevitable and ignore the positive in situations.

You are not bad, you will not die of guilt, you will not be damaged by angry feelings or by crying just because you fear or believe that you will. You are fearful, that's all, and the reason why fears and negative beliefs feel so 'true' is that they go in for the kill. They find your weakest spot and head straight for it, so get them all out on the next page.

## *2. Holding up the mirror*



Once you written your list, it's time to confront them. It's important to find the neutraliser to counter each fear. You need to make sure your neutraliser is realistic and believable to you. You won't be able to manage your fears unless you go right to the heart of the internal message that holds you back.

**A tip—if there is a grain of truth in your fear message, acknowledge it before neutralising it.**



*An indispensable guide for mothers living without their children: profound, compassionate, realistic, hopeful and creative. A wonderful source for healing and reparation, it holds the wisdom of one who has come through this unique and rarely understood trauma. I wish it had existed years ago.*

ROSIE JACKSON, AUTHOR OF *MOTHERS WHO LEAVE*

The number of mothers living apart from their children continues to rise. Women leave their children, lose custody, lose touch, choose part-time motherhood or find themselves with no contact at all, for a whole range of reasons. *A Mother Apart* moves beyond the stigma of mothers who leave their children and offers understanding and practical support to help them manage their emotions, as they adjust and come to terms with life apart from their children.

This book provides insight and sympathetic approaches to help you manage the complex situations and strong emotions, including how to:

- Understand and free yourself from excessive guilt and other difficult feelings
- Grieve your loss and move on with an open heart
- Learn the art of big hearted mothering: deep love from afar, over time
- Fully appreciate how the capacity to love deeply from afar makes you one of the most extraordinary mothers in the world
- Find positive ways to integrate your life as a mother apart and as an independent woman

*A thoughtful and sensitive guide to a difficult issue.*

PSYCHOLOGIES

*In this touching, inspiring and deeply wise book, Sarah Hart has distilled the wisdom of her extensive personal and professional experience. It is a book to treasure, to return to again and again as compassion, insight and useful practical suggestions leap off every page. Sarah covers all the struggles and heartaches mothers in this situation are likely to encounter and shows us how to reach a deeper healing and love than we might ever have imagined possible. I am delighted such a beautiful book has been written at last about such a painful and frequently misjudged subject and wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone interested in the challenges of love, especially mothers, and most of all to those who love their children from afar.*

ANNE GERAGHTY AUTHOR OF *IN THE DARK AND STILL MOVING*



As a qualified and experienced counsellor, Sarah has worked for over ten years with women dealing with gender-specific issues connected to finding personal and professional fulfilment, work/life balance and living apart from their children. She has a Masters Degree in Policy Studies, focusing on working women, motherhood and social policy. Drawing on her professional studies and her own personal experience of living apart from her child she offers a unique and pragmatic approach to supporting women who find themselves, for whatever reason, living apart from their children.

Family & Health, Separation & Divorce – UK £12.99



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www.crownhouse.co.uk – www.chpus.com

ISBN 978-184590094-6



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