

The Stepmother's Diary

Fay Weldon

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Extract

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Emily's Account

I read my daughter's diaries the other day. Let me share with you. You may think you know pretty much what's going on in your own family. Believe me, you do not. You think truly dreadful things only happen in other countries, other cultures, far away: but they also happen in your own back yard, to the nicest people, and at the hands of others who believe that they too are perfectly sane and nice, the kind who sort the household waste and try to save Africa.

Gwen, grandmother of my daughter Sappho's stepchild, turns out to be nothing but a two-faced, greedy bitch. And she had recently been awarded an OBE for services to charity. Mind you, the money had been as good as stolen, and from Sappho.

And to Isobel, my pretty granddaughter, currently doing her A-levels, who spends her Saturdays clearing old people's gardens, and in whose sweet mouth butter would not melt, I was on the verge of saying, 'I think you are evil. Not just ordinary evil, but actually satanic.' I did not say it because I did not want to be cursed. Isobel does not projectile-vomit nor does her head turn right around on its neck, as with the child in *The Exorcist*, but she might as well. You can see that I am pretty angry with her at the moment.

Isobel is not actually my granddaughter; she is my daughter Sappho's stepdaughter. There is a difference. There is no blood connection. I would not want you to think evil ran in the genes. These modern, all-inclusive families of ours, created by the passing sexual interest of a couple in each other, be they hetero or homo, can give birth to chaos. Splits happen: children pack their bags and have no choice but to follow the possessor of half their genes, leaving the other half behind. A week with this parent, a weekend with the other – if they love us so much, think the young, why don't they get the fuck back together? Save us all this?

And as a result of modern times here is my daughter Sappho, Isobel's stepmother, on my doorstep at ten in the morning, pregnant, *distracte*, and suffering.

Usually once I open the door to Sappho she goes on in ahead of me bringing with her a gust of good cheer, energy, and red-cheeked dark prettiness, which has been hers since she burst from the womb. On that occasion she didn't even leave me time to get to the delivery room. It is not in her nature to hang about. But today she just stood hesitantly on the step and thrust a heavy Waitrose bag towards me. She was five months pregnant, and she should not have been lugging heavy stuff about.

'I'm not going to stay,' she said. 'These are my diaries. I want you to hide them. Please don't read them.'

'Good heavens,' I said. 'Surely there are enough places at home to hide things?'

Home for Sappho and her husband Gavin, and his children Isobel and Arthur, was our beloved Apple Lee, a rambling, six bedroomed farmhouse of considerable age and uncertain value, located as it was just off the carbon-soaked Archway round-

about where 'no one' wanted to buy. Only its Grade II listing had kept developers at bay. All around was squalor and random urban development, waiting for decades for a chop which never came. Although the house had been recently and rashly renovated to the glossiest of standards (Sappho had become unexpectedly and wonderfully rich) it was already cluttered, since none of the family put anything away if they could help it. Only Laura the perfect secretary did, and these days she was kept to her quarters.

I had lived in Apple Lee for thirty years and here Sappho had been born, and her father before her, and here I had been widowed young, and assiduously pursued lovers and career. I am a psychoanalyst and work from home. I still thought of Apple Lee as mine, and myself as temporarily absent, and half regretted and half not, that I had put the property in her name so that she, not I would have to cope with garden, stairs, draughts, rumoured ghosts, Heritage building regs, the ancient apple tree which needed treatment for blight and canker, the protected soprano pipistrelle bats in the garage which was once the stable block, the neighbours with their man-eating dogs and feral children, the street litter of fast food cartons and used syringes.

I prefer to live in a comfortable, centrally-heated, ground-floor retirement flat in Hampstead, and my few clients (Freud has fallen out of favour in recent years) certainly prefer to see me here rather than at Apple Lee.

I had not reckoned on Gavin and the children moving in with Sappho. Of course, it was on the cards that she would marry: though she always said she had no intention of doing so. That she would abandon the world and sanity for love had simply not occurred to me.

‘Not Apple Lee; it isn’t safe any more,’ said Sappho. ‘Isobel might find them and use them against me. Fucking little tart.’ That was quite shocking.

In the four years since her marriage Sappho’s loyalty to her new family – though none of them was her flesh and blood – was extreme. But perhaps now she was finally pregnant, and Stubb-Palmer blood (Sappho’s) was to mingle with Garner blood (Gavin’s) in the new child, her reactions would become less civilised and more Darwinian. She might even try to nudge the rival’s children out of the nest. The selfish gene would assert itself: she would begin to act more like a wicked stepmother and less like an angel trying to outdo her predecessor in care and concern for the young she had inherited. We would see. This morning she certainly looked a little wild-eyed and paranoiac. I hoped she was okay – it is nice when one’s theories are vindicated but one does not want one’s flesh and blood to suffer for them. Better to be proved wrong. ‘Fucking little tart’ from Sappho was out of order, and distressing; she swore occasionally but mostly at inanimate objects. ‘Fucking computer’, ‘fucking printer!’ perhaps, but not this.

‘I have to be on my own for a while,’ she said now. ‘I have things to work out.’

‘You and Greta Garbo,’ I began, but stopped. There was indeed something really the matter. She was not wearing her usual too-high heels or the silks and suedes she tended to favour: she was wearing a woolly hat with red and blue stripes and was wrapped in an old nylon navy parka, and her shoes might as well as be Gavin’s as hers. So much pregnancy can do for you when it comes to fashion, I know, but she was not at all her normal self. She had the stunned look you see on faces on TV when people watch their

homes being burned, or stand among the bodies of the dead, unsure whether they're in a dream or it's real. She was wearing a backpack. I recognised it as Arthur's, the one he took to go pot-holing, as was the hat.

'You shouldn't be wearing a backpack,' I said. 'They're bad for the spine. What are you trying to do? Lose the baby?'

'You would say something like that,' she said, forlornly. 'It's projection. You mean you want me to lose the baby.'

I was taken aback.

'Why would you think I wanted you to do that? Of course I don't.'

'Because you hate Gavin,' she said, bleakly. 'And it's Gavin's baby.'

Well, who else's would it be? Infidelity, between them, was just not on the cards.

'You're so full of hormones,' I said, 'you're not going to know who you hate or what you want.'

I wished she hadn't married Gavin but I didn't hate him. Nor, did I imagine for one moment, did she. I had seen and heard too many patients vent their rage about their spouses, how they despised them, loathed them, wished them dead – only to observe them perfectly calm and affectionate again at the next session, good sex having intervened as like as not. Gavin and Sappho had had some almighty row, which they did anyway every month or so. It was always when she was pre-menstrual, a fact she hated me to point out, and so I did try not to. Now that she was pregnant, I felt allowed to mention it. But I clearly shouldn't have.

She glared at me, as if she were seven once again, and turned to go, in such apparent dudgeon I tried to grab hold of her, which is not in my nature – I tend to reserve physical contact with

anyone for actual sexual activity. I am too often construed as a rather reserved and remote mother, but I love Sappho very much.

The trouble is that too much awareness of the fragility of the child's erotic development can make one err on the side of caution. So many case histories offer tales of phobias and neuroses – a shoe fetish, say, or a savage Electra complex – triggered in childhood by some random action by the mother, some misinterpretation by the child of what is going on. The knowledge itself can mean one tiptoes through their lives when one should be clumping noisily about. Now, seeing she was unhappy, mother love overcame reserve and took me by surprise, and I reached out for her. And Sappho just pushed me away and said,

'I'm going away for a bit. Just don't try and run me to ground, okay?'

And she was gone and I was dreadfully hurt.

And I went inside and tried to make sense of it. Why did she think I hated Gavin? I was always perfectly polite to him. I daresay I tended to disparage him in the 'Oh, men!' kind of way women of my generation do disparage men, but he was Sappho's choice – inasmuch as women do have a choice when their hormones are running and their expectations are sailing – and I had gritted my teeth and tried not to let her see I was appalled.

And in fact these days I get on rather well with Gavin. He was fascinated by birds and small wildlife, having been brought up on the Yorkshire moors, not far from where Ted Hughes the poet spent his childhood. My deceased husband Rob had been a friend of Hughes, and shared the love of small furry creatures, and some of it had rubbed off on me, so at least I had something to talk to Gavin about, if only rodents, crows and eagles. I am not so hot

on the classical stage, which is his other enthusiasm, tending to go to the theatre only if Sappho has written the play. And that, since she married Gavin, come to think of it, and he moved into Apple Lee with the children, simply hadn't happened. Once she had a writing career, now she does not. She has a family, and a job, and obligations. Is this what marriage does? Yes. Partnership is worse. Always peering over the shoulder to see if another is fancied more? Never!

Barnaby declares he wants to live under the same roof as me. Let him come down for a toasted sandwich and a snuggling session in bed – he has problems – but anything more? Heaven forfend.

And 'fucking little tart'? Isobel was usually as good as gold. Girls can suddenly 'turn' when they reach the menarche, I know, and change from little darlings into Winehouse monsters almost overnight, embracing squalor and rough sex in a fit of enantiadromia, that Jekyll-Hyde, Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus process so loved by Jung, but surely not our Isobel. Mind you, she was a stepchild. Stepchildren tend to have 'issues' in adolescence.

'Any woman who takes on a man with a daughter takes on trouble,' I'd said to Sappho, when she first broke it to me that she was going to marry Gavin. 'I hope you're aware of that.'

'That's not necessarily true,' she said. 'You just want it to be.' She could not bear for me to be proved right, I knew, any more than I could bear it when my mother was proved right when I married Rob. But that had been a long time ago.

'These days fathers have profound and lasting relationships with their daughters,' I warned her. 'Often it stops only just short of actual sexual involvement. The face on the pillow is liable to change, but a daughter is for ever.'

The daughter remains to share memories, places, laughter and keep past and youth alive, I said. 'Wives may come and go, but daughters stay, to love and be loved and try and drive out any new woman in the marital bed.'

'It will be different for me,' was all she said. 'Their mother is dead, poor things. Why should they not love me, if I make myself lovable? I will do everything I can to make up for their loss. It's not in my nature to be a wicked stepmother.'

She simply did not, would not, get it. She resists me: I don't blame her. It is not much fun being the child of a widowed, sexually active psychoanalyst. But the archetype has changed, whether Sappho cares to admit it or not. Wicked stepdaughters are more common now than wicked stepmothers ever were. Poor ousted Hansel and Gretel no longer roam the forest hand in hand: rather it is awash with lonely, weeping, second wives shivering in the cold and rain, tripping over tree roots, grabbed at by thistles and thorns which can pierce the heart. Hansel and Gretel stay home in the warm.

The doorbell rings again. Perhaps it is Sappho back to make her peace? In theory I can open my door by pressing a series of keys but it never happens. I thank God this is a ground-floor flat and there are no stairs and that I no longer live at Apple Lee, where the stair carpet in my time was worn and dangerous. I am in my sixties; I have a mildly arthritic knee. I open the front door to Gavin.

Behind him pass the citizens of Hampstead, to and fro as they do all day outside my window, with their smart clothes and cotton bags from the organic stores, and nowadays not a plastic bag in sight. I am up near the underground station, opposite the coffee shop. The customers have clear civic consciences, and God

knows what they get up to in their hypoallergenic beds at night. Gavin is looking just fine, handsome and only moderately distraught, which is not unusual. He doesn't come in.

'Is Sappho here, Emily?' he asks. I shake my head.

'No,' I say. Well, it is the truth. I don't want to get involved.

'You haven't seen her?'

'No,' I say, crossing my fingers. Freud saw this as an unconscious gesture of seduction, but I do it consciously, to acknowledge and excuse a lie.

Gavin runs his hand through his hair, which I see has suddenly begun to thin. And he had such a fine head of hair once. It was part of his charm, with his intelligent eagle looks and saintly manner: all that brown curly hair, all that vigour! Gavin is nineteen years older than Sappho, and only ten years younger than me. When he is seventy and she is fifty-one, she will feel it. When she gets to my age, he will be eighty-five. I wouldn't want a man of eighty-five. (Barnaby is sixty-seven and that is quite old enough. Barnaby lives upstairs and will be down for a toasted cheese sandwich any minute now.) And now Sappho is pregnant, and not easily able to get out of this relationship. A lot of the young these days have a kind of first disposable marriage before moving on to what they describe as the real one. This has not happened, alas, to Sappho. I want a grandchild, true, and a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, but the girl has managed to complicate her life no end, and wilfully, not just by shacking up with but actually marrying the man.

'Any idea where she might be?' he asks, as if casually, but it isn't. Something's up.

'No,' I say. 'Didn't she tell anyone where she was going? She usually does, in case she's needed.'

‘You know what she’s like,’ he says. ‘She writes an email and then presses delete instead of send.’

‘Doesn’t Laura know?’ Laura is their secretary and in the interests of efficiency tracks everyone’s movements, even plays back their phone calls in order to make sure dates and times are put into the Garner Times Diary, and everyone is where they are supposed to be in the right clothes and on time. It is not embossed – one of Gavin’s few economies. Once it was the Sappho Stubb-Palmer Economist Diary, her name embossed in gold.

‘Laura is temporarily out of the office,’ says Gavin. I wait, but he declines to elaborate.

‘Have you tried Sappho’s mobile?’ I ask. Gavin all but shudders. He manages email, but despises mobiles and all things digital. He is a dinosaur, and I am afraid one day he will simply topple over into hot primeval sand and crush my poor Sappho, who is a rosy, delicate flamingo.

‘It’s switched off, naturally.’ He is hostile towards her. What has she done?

‘There’s an open day at Isobel’s school tomorrow,’ he continues. ‘I just need to remind her.’ But it doesn’t ring true to me.

Now Sappho is pregnant things will have hotted up. Competition for the father will become overt. From ‘fucking little tart’ I imagine the row is most likely over Isobel.

I tell Gavin I’ll get in touch as soon as I know anything. I suggest he checks out the college where she teaches once a week, but he says there’s no reply from her office. And then he asks if by any chance she left a carrier bag with some papers, and I think: oh, that’s it. For some reason he’s after Sappho’s diaries.

‘No,’ I say. ‘Why?’

The Stepmother's Diary

‘There are just some papers there I need.’ He is on his way to a weekend conference in the Faroe Islands.

‘Ah,’ I say, ‘the red-necked phalarope!’ He is pleased at my ornithological knowledge, and darts me one of his charming smiles, and I hope that whatever has happened between Gavin and Sappho is not too bad, and all will yet be well.

Gavin goes. I offer him a drink but I’m glad he doesn’t take up the offer. I do not want to keep up the deceit, and besides, he might catch a glimpse of the Waitrose bag.

These diaries, which Sappho doesn’t want the ‘fucking little tart’ to get hold of, and which now Gavin is searching for, are safely with me. Of course I meant to read them. I am a mother, and have my daughter’s best interests at heart. In a Waitrose bag, too, and therefore homely yet aspirational. A Tesco’s bag would somehow have diminished the contents.

Was it my duty as a mother to read them, or not to read them? I had read her diaries when she was a child until she found out I was doing it. She said nothing but began to write them as letters to me, and then we both got bored and stopped. Or perhaps she just had too much homework, being at an academic all-girls school. Did she mean me to read them while saying she didn’t? Yes, I decided. Of course. Otherwise she would have handed them to one of her friends. I made myself a cup of coffee.

I take my mildly painful joints back to my desk, where I somehow fit. The Waitrose bag sits there and defies me to open it. I am putting it off. Do I really want to open it? Isn’t it bad enough remembering what you choose to remember, let alone facing your daughter’s memories of a mutual life?

I go back to considering the plight of the modern child in the current climate of multiple serial partnerships. The one-life,

one-spouse model is outmoded. The child of the much-married or serial-partnered must live with a mere half of the provider of their genes, and as like as not the wrong half. The bed where they were conceived vibrates to the *cris de jouissance* of new partners, and it a rare house built to modern building specifications where the walls are thick enough to muffle animal cries of human congress. The primal scene, which Freud felt to be so important to the unconscious sexual development of the child – the first awareness of the parents’ sexual entwining – is not necessarily between the joint creators of the personality, the self, as nature intended, but is tainted by the intrusion of a stranger. In Isobel’s case, by my daughter, Sappho. The more the father loves the newcomer, the more the child hates.

Isobel’s real mother is Isolde Garner, ten years deceased, invalid and martyr of perfect memory but still very much alive, I fear, in the Garner household. Sappho and Gavin sleep with a painting of Isolde above their bed. It’s a rather gloomy composition by a fashionable but not very good artist, in patterns of greys, as if all the life had been drained out of the subject, as indeed when it was painted it was soon to be. The only light allowed is around the head, in the form of what amounts to a halo. A depressing piece.

I said once, when Sappho was having trouble conceiving the grandchild I so wanted, that perhaps the painting of an ex-wife above the bed was not a particularly good fertility omen.

‘I tried to get rid of it,’ she said shortly. ‘But Isobel had hysterics. Gavin would be more than happy to see it go, but Isobel sees it as a disloyalty.’

‘Why can’t she have it in her room?’ I asked.

‘It would upset her colour scheme,’ said Sappho. ‘The greys are too blue. She’s very artistic.’

‘Or Arthur’s room?’

‘Even I wouldn’t wish that on Isolde,’ said Sappho. ‘Arthur’s room is all dirty socks and plates of old baked beans.’ For all her money she is hopeless at running a house.

The doorbell goes again. I open it to Barnaby, my lover. I like to describe him like this, of course, and he technically is, but Viagra would help. He is more of a cuddler than a lover. Barnaby has the flat above mine: he is a Jungian who specialises in dream analysis and dream therapy. We are in and out of each other’s homes all the time, and quarrel all the time. I think, bluntly, that Jungian therapy sucks: he thinks the same of Freud. Sometimes I suggest we get married, knowing that this is the best way to keep him at a distance. Sometimes marriage seems tempting: most of the time, no. I mean, *why*? Company is good but I might meet someone else, not in so much need of Viagra. The problem remains decade after decade. Settle for one and you have to go without the other, unless you’re prepared to put up with an almighty fuss. But then he might meet some nice, kind, soppy Jungian, younger and sweeter than me, who would be only too happy to snap him up – and I wouldn’t want that at all. So it goes. Whatever changes?

I tell him Gavin has been round, looking for Sappho. I tell him Sappho came earlier and left her diaries.

‘I hope you’re not reading them,’ he says.

‘Of course I’m reading them,’ I say. ‘That’s why she left them.’

‘Bloody Freudian,’ he says. ‘Sometimes people mean what they say.’

‘Very seldom,’ I say.

He asks me how worried I am about Sappho, and I think and say six out of ten. Not too much at all. My normal level is about

five. A contrite Gavin is coming after her: she's pregnant and extra-hormonal at the moment: they have rows as a normal part of life and quickly recover: she has enough money to do as she pleases; she is one of fate's favourites.

'It's the children I'm sorry for,' I say, 'and since they're no blood relations of mine even that's fairly theoretical.'

He accuses me of a Freudian impartiality which adds up to coldness. I accuse him of a Jungian moral-high-ground nicey-nicey sopppiness. We split a bottle of wine, and I make cheese on toast, using cheese slices, which offends him. He would prefer some kind of double-distilled Cheddar but I can't be bothered. Processed slices are perfectly good. I ask him for his views on the primal scene as it must affect stepchildren in our modern society. He chatters on about the archetypal mother Gaia and how she conspires against the consort to free the son from the father's control. I say I am talking about the too-early eroticisation of the growing child.

'Picture it,' I say. 'Gavin, discontented with his empty bed after seven years, joins Sappho in hers, and drags his children with him to witness this new connubial bliss, and obliges them to overhear their cries of joy. Apple Lee may be old, but only its outer walls are made of solid stone and inside the partition walls are thin.'

'Perhaps it's her idea,' says Barnaby. 'Perhaps she's the one who's done the dragging. Perhaps she is in a conspiracy with the son against the father. How many times has she been married?'

'Only once,' I say. 'It's his second.'

'And they all live under her roof. That goes against the natural grain, in which the man provides the home and introduces the wife and eventually their children into it, and all breathe the

same air, smell the same body smells, from the beginning.' Barnaby can be quite astute. So intense is the experience, so strong is that initial birthing, that siblings, if separated when small and reared apart, will meet as strangers and fall in love. We can agree on that.

'So which of them did the dragging?' he persists.

'It was only sensible for them to live in Apple Lee,' I say. 'It's a big house with a garden, near the children's schools, and it's been Sappho's family home for generations. I moved into it when I married her father. He died, I took it over, and so far as I was concerned the house was cursed. It practically killed me with its dry-rot. So I put it in Sappho's name. She doesn't seem to mind, and anyway she's rich so curses don't affect her. She just employs builders.'

'I would have thought,' he says, enigmatically, 'that the primal scene is the least of anyone's problems. Why does it obsess you? Is there something you are hiding from yourself?'

I get fed up with Barnaby, and shoo him out when he has finished his toasted cheese and chutney. Now I am ready to face the diaries.

They are stuffed into the heavy plastic bag – six rather shabby cardboard folders with rubber bands holding them together, miscellaneous typescripts, a number of lined, handwritten A4 pads, and many extra loose sheets of paper. Sappho has clearly packed them in a hurry and not under the eyes of Laura, who would have had them properly labelled, in date order, and copies made and on disc. These are my daughter's diaries; they are her self, her life, her being. They are my own creation, up to a point, since I brought her to life. How sensible are children who, in search of their own selves, normally hide all such material from

their mothers. Sappho must indeed be desperate. As it happens the first page I take out is an account of her wedding to Gavin Garner, four years back. Disaster day, if I'm to face facts.

Sappho's Diary: *June 26th 2004*

Dear Diary,

Last week I married Gavin. It was a good wedding. It was on the longest day of the year, and the sun shone, and the guests were on the whole happy, except for my mother, my secretary, my agent, some of my closest friends, several colleagues, and the mother of my new husband's deceased wife.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin, to be my lawful, wedded husband.'

But they will all come round to it, I am sure. Love conquers all. Those most against it are those who have most to lose by it.

My mother's complaint is that Gavin is so much older than me, and comes with two children, and his income is uncertain; why do I bother with marriage, which is an outmoded institution; why doesn't he just move in with me? What she really means is she worries that if I am legally married to Gavin his children may end up inheriting Apple Lee. She says she only wants me to be happy. All mothers say this, but I think she means it. Just trust me, Mother. I will watch all legal contracts, make wills, this kind of thing.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin, to be my lawful, wedded husband.' Love him, comfort him...

The Stepmother's Diary

My agent says married women don't meet deadlines. What he really means is that a husband may feel competitive, start checking the statements, reading the contracts, try to bring down his percentage and generally interfering. He might even get fired.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin, to be my lawful, wedded husband.' Honour and keep him...

Laura my secretary says a husband will distract me from my work, but what she means is that until now she has full control over my life, and she is frightened that things will change if I marry. She is not against sex, nor, so far as I can see, passing lovers, but she is against men in general and certainly against marriage. She may be a lesbian. I don't know. She comes to my house to work every day and knows every detail of my life, but I know remarkably little about hers.

All my life I have been observed. My mother sees me as a case history and I'm sure takes notes. When I was at drama school my every step and vowel was scrutinised. Now I am famous (moderately), journalists consult Google before coming to talk to me and know every stupid thing I have said or written, and I know nothing about them. They see me as a media object, not a human being. Gavin will save me from all this. There will just be him and me, and every now and then his children, too.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin, to be my lawful, wedded husband.' Not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God...

My friends don't want their own social lives disrupted: they're afraid our all-girl evenings will stop. Weddings within the group unsettle everyone. Many have stepmothers of their own and prophesy disaster so far as Isobel is concerned. But I know all that

will be all right. Her real mother died: there was no divorce. There is no animosity in the background, on the contrary. I was there on the day of her birth and her mother trusted me with her care. That is to say I was the au pair. And though Isobel was too small to remember, I don't forget. She was the sweetest, prettiest thing. My friend Belinda says my stepson Arthur will try and seduce me, because all stepsons vie with their fathers to possess the new wife, but that is nuts.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin, to be my lawful, wedded husband.' As long as we both shall live...

Gwen, Gavin's ex-mother-in-law, stands to lose her grandchildren. She doesn't want them coming under my influence. Well, they will and too bad. I don't want them coming under hers. She doesn't like me, and never did. I am too real for her, all over the place, and she is so perfect and clear from the beautiful arch of her eyebrows to her cute Prada shoes, and she suspected me from the beginning, even when there was nothing to suspect, when poor Isolde was on her deathbed, and I was holding everything together. The children love me; they put up with Gwen, with whom they have been living for the past seven years, poor things, since Isolde's death, other than holidays and weekends with Gavin.

Snap, snap went the paparazzi outside the registry office: flash, flash. I don't know who told them. 'This way, Gavin! This way, Sappho.' But most of the flashes were for me. I hope Gavin doesn't mind. I hope he manages to finish his novel and his star outshines mine. I hope he doesn't get bitter and twisted because he is a serious person and I am a trivial one and the world is too stubborn and dumbed-down to notice. 'Give us a smile, Sappho, give us a smile.'

The Stepmother's Diary

I could feel my mother raising her eyebrows when Isobel went up to the front during the marriage ceremony and held Gavin's hand and just stood there, and didn't let go even when he kissed the bride, that is to say me, but I thought it was brave of Isobel. She was only eleven and didn't want to be left out. She had no mother of her own, only now, me. I want her to understand she is gaining a mother, not losing a father. So I included her in the embrace and we stood in a close, contented little ring and I could hear the breath of the sentimental, approving sigh from the audience, and I thought: I will make all this come right for everyone, I will.

Poor Isobel! That morning she had woken us up. It was five-thirty in the morning. I hate early-morning telephone calls. They are usually bad news. Someone in prison, in hospital, something awful. But it was Isobel. She was at her grandmother Gwen's. She had been woken up by a nightmare. She was sobbing and gasping in terror. 'Daddy, I'm so frightened. In my dream you were getting married, and it looked like Sappho, but she was really a shape-shifter like in the film and started to eat you alive. And I tried to scream but my voice came out all tinny and squeaky, and I woke up.' He calmed her down and reassured her, and reminded her that since she was going to live with us she was quite safe, it was only a dream. She shouldn't watch films after the watershed. What was Gwen thinking of?

But it was ages before the sobbing stopped and long after the erection I had felt pressing against my side dwindled, that the phone went down. Gavin went back to sleep at once, but I couldn't settle because it was midsummer and the birds knew it, and soon it was time to get up and prepare ourselves for the ceremony. And I wasn't going to look my best. I was all puffy-eyed from lack of sleep.

'I, Sappho, take you, Gavin to be my lawful, wedded husband.'
Life gets so boring if nothing happens, nothing changes. Hold
your nose and jump!

Emily's View Of The Matter

I closed the diary, but only temporarily. Of course I meant to carry on reading. I just needed a little rest. I could see it was going to be disturbing: Sappho was evidently preparing for publication as much as self-expression. It was in my daughter's nature to be published and be damned – it was after all how she made her living. 'Hold your nose and jump', forsooth, into a diary as into marriage and the devil takes the hindmost, which in this case would be me, the one who sees her as a case history. Other mothers measure their children's height on the door post: I tended to write down landmarks in her psychosexual development in a notebook – though goodness knows where I had put it. But I was confident enough in my affection for her, and hers for me, that I trusted her not to write anything too terrible. What I got I would deserve; I would read on.

I wondered if I should call up and ask Barnaby about Isobel's dream but desisted. He would probably say the child had invented it for the benefit of her stepmother, in order to disturb and upset. I did not think Isobel at eleven was capable of quite such sophistication, though you never knew. Four years of marriage since, and Sappho had made few complaints about Isobel, and none at all about Arthur, but then she wouldn't,

would she? She wasn't going to give any of us grounds for being right about the wrong-headedness of the marriage. Until now, when she had arrived quivering and quavering upon my doorstep, she had turned its good face resolutely to the world.

But she was quite right. It was a good wedding, as I remember it. Everyone said so, and most meant it. When we'd all given vent to our doubts in the weeks leading up to the ceremony and Sappho still insisted on going ahead, there was nothing for it but to wish the couple well. We all knew how well Gavin had behaved when Isolde was dying – and she took two years about it. For eighteen months of those Gavin had written a newspaper column on the subject, tenderly and tastefully enough, and how could one not hope for his happiness? Thirty guests came to the ceremony in the Camden register office and another fifty turned up at the Groucho's upstairs bar, closed for the occasion. It was an all-generational affair: Gavin's father was eighty-eight and like some old and dignified eagle, an older version of his son and still vigorous, smart and *compos mentis*, which was reassuring to those of us on the bride's side and was a matter of congratulation to those on the groom's.

'Like Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones,' someone said, 'and that's lasted, hasn't it?'

Sappho did show some resemblance to the film star, bright-eyed, long-legged and looked good in anything. Gavin had wise eyes and a firm chin and enough hair left to look good at the altar, or the desk or whatever, it being a register office. One would like one's daughter to be married in a church but since I had not had her christened I could scarcely expect it.

Luke, Sappho's agent, came up to me at the party and said he'd been counting wedding rings.

‘Only fourteen, darling, amongst eighty guests. One wonders what the world is coming to! And four of those embedded into now mottling heterosexual flesh, as was the custom of yesteryear.’

Luke’s partner Hugo said he’s counted ten rings between five gay couples after civil contracts. Hugo’s ex-partner Lionel claimed stable relationships were more a feature of the gay community than the heterosexual.

I had done something very unusual for me and written to Hilary Alexander on the *Telegraph* and asked her what the mother of the bride should wear. I was very conscious that Gwen Lance, mother of Gavin’s first wife Isolde, and none of our favourite person, was going to be present. With the aid of nannies and helps she had looked after her grandchildren Arthur and Isobel since Isolde’s death from lung cancer. She had modelled in her day for David Bailey and although now well into her sixties was ineffably well-dressed and still occasionally appeared in *Vogue*. I did not exactly want to outdo her, but I did want to be her equal.

Hilary Alexander suggested I simply contact Gwen, and I did, on the phone, introducing myself. Gwen was cool, and distant.

‘It isn’t exactly a wedding, my dear, is it, being in an office. And a second marriage at that. Has Sappho been married before? No? Extraordinary! But not too much of a fuss, I would think. I found a nice vintage Chanel knee-length suit in yellow and white on my rail the other day; probably something like that. No hats or anything. But I have to go now; I have a taxi at the door.’

I bought a very restrained Dior dress at great expense, which when on looked as if it could have come from Marks & Spencer, and Gwen turned up in an Yves St Laurent cream dress with a kind of safari jacket over it and a jaunty hat, and looked about

thirty-five and totally outshone me. Barnaby wasn't properly in my life at the time so I had to go on my own. Thank God Laura was there to do the organising so it went like clockwork. Isobel was wearing white, more like a wedding dress than the one Sappho wore, which was grey chiffon and did nothing for her but which had probably been chosen by Laura at Fenwick's. Sappho was usually too busy working to bother much with clothes, even for her own wedding.

The groom's father engaged Gwen in so lively a conversation some wondered whether, if the bride's mother was free to marry the groom's father, how the younger couple would take it. The age gap would be about the same. The youngest guest was five, daughter of Sappho's friend Polly, and widely rumoured to be the child of a sperm bank. Arthur stayed away – ostensibly because he was in the middle of his biology exams. It was understandable, all agreed, that if a lad didn't want to come to his widowed father's wedding, he should not be pressured to do so.

But that's enough of all that wedding stuff. That was then and this is now. Back to the diaries.

I am rather pleased there are no entries dating back to her childhood. The ones she has seen fit to leave with me date from when she left home, so I will be spared much. The first pages were written when she had just started drama school.

I'd hoped she'd go to university but no. She was wilful. She was such a pretty girl, graceful, obstinate, straightforward, guileless, with a great generosity of spirit, a lively mind, a certain naivety and an ambition to write for the theatre, which I discouraged, interpreting the desire as an evasion of the central role of the self. I was so proud of her, and so worried for her. She was forever trying out other selves for size. I dreaded her settling on one that

wasn't quite *her*. She'd found boys her own age spotty and dull, preferring to sit in her room and do her homework. She'd gone straight from *My Little Pony* to *Lord of the Rings* via Georgette Heyer and bodice-rippers, to posters of Arthur Miller, with his big boots and double-tied shoelaces all over her wall. I suppose she thought what was good enough for Marilyn Monroe was good enough for her.

She was all set to go to Cambridge when she was taken by a fit of anti-elitism and wanted to join the real world. I was against it, and from the evidence of the diaries I was right. It was a mistake. She met the Garners.

Sappho's Diary: *January 1st 1992*

Dear Diary,

Here I am, in my new home, in a new year, life beginning. Allowed to live away from Apple Lee at last, live unobserved, everyone too busy and involved with themselves to care what I do. No one nagging or reading my mind or making notes on my psychosexual development. I shall be a famous actress. I have talent, I know I do, though if I try and do a Geordie accent everyone laughs. At least here they are able to laugh, even though they are a bit thesipy and affected. I spent one term at Cambridge and everyone was so superior it cracked their faces if they so much as smiled. So I came to the Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts. Mother was furious, but I have my trust fund and can do as I like. The boys are a bit of a disappointment, they're so young,

The Stepmother's Diary

and all the girls say they're gay, but I reckon they're just trying to put me off. They can't all be gay. One day I will open this diary and remember what it was like to be me just starting out.

There's a woman who teaches the playwriting course at the Royal Court called Isolde Garner. She is quite famous, and has plays on in the West End. She has just had a baby boy and called it Arthur. Her mother is called Gwendolyn, so it's all very Knights of the Round Table. I wrote a little sketch about it which the group acted, and she said I had a real writing talent but I don't think I have. I can act, but writing? I don't think so.

I saw her husband the other day. He came to collect her and had the baby in this sling thing in front of him. She had a couple of pages to finish, and tried to breastfeed the baby still at her desk, but the baby muttered and moaned and stayed hungry. So the husband whipped out this bottle of formula, ready prepared, and I warmed it under the tap and we tried that. Arthur was quite hungry, you could tell, but seemed well satisfied afterwards. He is a lovely baby but I can see babies are a great nuisance.

'I'll have to give up breastfeeding altogether,' says Isolde. 'Do you mind? It turns my brain to porridge.'

'Lactating is not a nice word,' agrees the husband. 'So it may not be a very good thing.'

I try to follow the reasoning, and fail, other than that they live in a world in which aesthetics rule, and the mere sound of a word can turn you against its meaning. But it makes you think having a baby mightn't be so bad if it had a father who would look after it. His name is Gavin Garner and he is a famous writer. You see him and her sometimes in the arts pages of the Sundays. He is tall and broad and looks like a lordly eagle, and she rather like a robin with her head on one side while she considers what has

been said. A thin robin after a bad winter, mind you. She is very slim and pale and totally beautiful, and he seems to adore her. Anyway, he is too old and powerful and clever for me. I would just be tongue-tied if he asked me for an opinion. I'm just another drama student. He writes reviews, really long ones, on classical theatre, and can be terrible about people.

Emily's Understanding

And Gavin of course was the man she ended up with, a dozen or so years later, Isolde having disappeared from the scene. And Arthur grew up to be not gay, but lacking in what one might call testosteronic qualities of aggression and sexual drive. I blame bottle-feeding. Not because of any necessary superiority of breast milk over formula – breast milk is a minimum requirement for infant survival not a maximum – but because bottles were no longer made of glass but plastic rich in oestrogen-mimicking chemicals which it liberates fifty-fold when you heat it up.

But that is by the by. I have not told Sappho because she washed and wielded the plastic bottle many times for Arthur during his infancy, and I do not want to increase the feelings of guilt she has towards her stepchildren and which makes coping with them more difficult than it ought to be.

Poor Sappho, she misses her own father, as is clear from the above entry. Her father died when she was three. His name was Rob, he was a GP. She was our only child. It had been such a

long hot summer: I remember everything was so parched that year the apple tree could hardly bring itself to bear fruit. I had just been welcomed into the Institute of Psychoanalysts. It is a long training: I had qualified as a GP and then became so interested in the id, the ego and the superego that I moved sideways. I knew so much now about narcissistic and borderline states, character and personality disorders, psychosomatic states, simple and complex trauma, the interaction of neurotic and psychotic forces I scarcely noticed what was going on around me in real life. It had not crossed my mind that Rob would take his own life. He suffered from depression and a degree of paranoia, but so did nearly all the men I knew; angst was part of the male fashion of the day, for feminism was bursting upon the world. Some say depression is repressed anger, but at the time I saw it as repressed guilt. Men were guilty about their patriarchal attitudes, and rightly so. I had just taken my first patient, under supervision. He was, as I remember, a rather good-looking if anorexic business man.

‘On top of everything else,’ Rob said to me, ‘I now have to worry about you having affairs with the patients.’

I promised him I wouldn’t. I thought he was joking but perhaps he was not.

‘But I know what you’re like,’ he complained. ‘And now I’m told there’s this thing called “positive transference”.’

I said it was probably balanced by negative transference. The patients were as likely to hate me as love me. Neither emotion, I assured him, necessarily had an erotic element.

And I thought no more about it. Rob had ceased practising as a doctor, the better to fight off the developers who were as determined to demolish Apple Lee as he was to save it. It was a

full-time job. Compulsory purchase orders bounced through the letterbox. I was all for selling: the house had been in the family for generations but that did not mean it had to stay there. The roof leaked, the wiring was hazardous, the plumbing noisy.

‘It will fall down by itself,’ I remember saying, ‘if you don’t do something. And that will cost thousands we don’t have. Sell, for God’s sake, sell!’

‘Over my dead body,’ he said, and he wasn’t joking. ‘They’ll have to drag me out feet first.’

And so they did. That is exactly what happened.

After Rob died I went through a patch of what the supervisor of my self-analysis described as a pre-oedipal, polymorphous sexuality: that is to say I slept around, with anyone or anything, and I don’t suppose that did little Sappho any good. I justified it, as one does, by believing I was acting on principle rather than out of despair: pursuing a free sexuality, saving the world as well as myself, making love not war as Marcuse instructed us. Sex good, repression bad. I have worked through it, more or less, through my advancing years, and now content myself with Barnaby, while rather hoping to up-grade some day.

But this is meant to be an account of Sappho’s life not mine. It’s just that, as Freud explained to us, the psychosexual development of the growing child is interdependent on that of the parent. And Sappho’s choice of Gavin for a husband is a source of mystery to both Barnaby and me.

‘My dear Emily,’ Barnaby says, ‘there is a simple and obvious answer – she is replacing the father who died when she was three.’

‘But why an older man with a daughter? There are plenty of unencumbered men about. Why Gavin? Unless it’s his daughter she’s identifying with.’

‘Or perhaps,’ says Barnaby cunningly, ‘you over-exposed her to the primal scene when she was small. Too many lovers, too many cries in the night? I fear it is yourself you are talking about.’

Enough of all this. Sappho at seventeen. What does she mean? ‘Mother was furious, but I have my trust fund and can do what I like.’

For fuck’s sake, has the girl no idea? What bringing up a child on your own can be like? What I gave up for her? How I didn’t marry again for her sake? Because I don’t think stepfathers are a good idea for a girl: because the tensions growing up with one, especially such a pretty, dreamy one as her, do no one any good. And all right, because whenever I did meet a man I thought I could marry I started worrying at once in case he preferred her to me – being younger and fresher. And as for her feeling guilty when she moved out when she had a perfectly good home with me, I am really glad she did; so she ought. Seventeen years she had spent with me and then she’s just off? I daresay it happens in nature: you bear them and they grow up and are ready to leave the nest, and if you did it properly you’re pretty relieved when they do go. Some of my colleagues indeed argue that the bad behaviour of teenagers is designed by a beneficent nature so the parents are happy when they go. But I had never noticed that ‘nature’ had the slightest concern for anyone’s happiness: all she’s concerned with, the bitch, is the propagation of the species and the minute the mother is past child-bearing age nature has no further interest in her whatsoever and casts her off like an old glove – but there you are.

And as for the trust fund and she could do as she liked, that is nonsense. I had charge of her trust fund, though if she really needed something I would never, never stand in her way.

What am I avoiding that has made me so angry? What are these diversionary tactics? Primal scream stuff? I fear so. Back to the diaries.

Sappho's Diary: *March 10th 1993*

Dear Diary,

Isolde says to get into the habit of writing one's life in scenes. It fosters a certain detachment. So here's the scene for today. I'm not likely to forget it. (Actually, it happened last week, on my birthday, but I've only now had time to write it up.)

Lights up on Sappho, aged nineteen, cleaning out the tea urn backstage at the Royal Court. She is doing this gladly, though some others on the course think they are just being used as cheap labour. Personally, Sappho thinks she is the luckiest person alive. She gets to see Isolde at least two or three sessions once a week, which means she has occasional individual tuition from one of the greatest playwrights living and goes to all the plays at the Royal Court free, and Gavin now speaks to her as if she were a human being. The phone goes.

SAPPHO: Hello, hi, Gavin. Any news of the baby? No? *Death and the Maiden*? Yes, of course, I filed the re-writes last week. I'll bring them right over. But surely she can't want to work today. Isn't the baby due any minute?

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Lights up on Isolde, grabbing her stomach from time to time but still writing at the kitchen table. Gavin puts down the receiver and goes on squeezing oranges for the little boy Arthur, who is three and a poppet. Gavin Garner is the best father and husband in the world.

Enter Sappho with notes.

GAVIN: Thank you for this, Sappho! I don't know what we would do without you.

ISOLDE: Thanks for coming over, Sappho. Oh dear, my waters seem to have broken.

Not a good scene for on-stage. Better if it happens off.

(N.B: always worry about water on stage. It gets into the electrics. Rock stars keep electrocuting themselves, sometimes fatally, by using water as a part of an act. Never mind. I'll see to it later. On.)

ISOLDE: How very messy. Gavin, I think you had better phone the hospital.

SAPPHO: Can I help?

ISOLDE: You could wipe up, I suppose, but it seems so very personal. And I promised myself I'd never use you for domestic labour. It's a temptation because you're so willing.

SAPPHO: Yes, but this is rather different. Kind of an emergency?

Fay Weldon

GAVIN: All I get from these bastards is a recorded message. All our operators are busy. I'll call 999.

ISOLDE: No, honestly, why don't you just drive me in? Sappho, you wouldn't mind looking after Arthur, would you? Give him some tea and put him to bed? I don't want you there at the birth, Gavin, don't worry. These things are not for the squeamish, nothing like that.

Exit Isolde and Gavin, arguing about the merits or otherwise of fathers being present at the birth.

Inset scene of Gwen, Isolde's posh mother, talking to camera if this is to be a film or to the audience if it's stage.

GWEN: What, a man there at the birth? Never let it happen. He'll be put off sex for ever. Women who insist on it are digging their own matrimonial graves. If men go off with younger women it's not because they're younger *per se*, it's because they've never had to witness them in an animal state, grunting and screaming and sweating.

Cut to, or lights up on, Sappho phoning her mother.

SAPPHO: Hi Mum, Isolde's going in to hospital in a hurry to have the baby and they've left me with the little boy. What do little boys of three eat?

Lights up on Emily in Apple Lee, answering the phone. She is distraught.

The Stepmother's Diary

EMILY: But Sappho you are meant to be round here. It's your birthday. I have made a chocolate cake especially for you. Young Piers has flown all the way back from South Africa especially to see you. And oh my God, now the bath is overflowing. Water is pouring down the stairs. Those Garner people take the most fearful advantage.

SAPPHO: Mother, please don't lay a guilt trip on me.

Emily, Or Freud, On Masochism

“Lay a guilt trip on me!” Can she have really said anything so lamentable?’ I complained to Barnaby, whose washing machine had broken down, and so had dropped by with his weekly bag of socks and shirts. I was pleased enough to abandon the diaries. They were going to make a disturbing read. I had read the entry to him, and now we sat in front of the washing machine in the kitchen and watched while a stray red sock turned everything a pale pink. Short of draining the machine by hand there was little we could about it but accept.

‘Why not? How old was she? Nineteen? It's the kind of thing the young do say. Thus they shrug off any fleeting pangs of conscience.’

‘But it's so crude,’ I said. ‘Such an over-simplification. The shopping mall version of the language of the mind. A primal power struggle between mother and daughter and it gets called *laying a guilt trip*?’

‘It’s understandable,’ said Barnaby mildly. ‘The mother reproaches: the child projects its own sense of guilt back onto the mother, and leaves her feeling bad. Look at you – you’re smarting all over. Calm down.’

‘I don’t like her wandering round on her own,’ I said. I felt helpless. When children are little you can pick them up under one arm and run to a place of safety. But then they grow up and how can you save them from themselves? ‘I remember that day well,’ I said. ‘I got very annoyed with her. I’d made her a chocolate cake for her birthday and asked some friends round to celebrate. Then it all had to be cancelled because of the bloody Garners. Everything had to be cancelled. The water wasn’t pouring down the stairs: why is her instinct to exaggerate everything so? It was dripping through the kitchen ceiling.’

‘She did turn out to be a dramatist,’ said Barnaby. ‘I expect that’s part of it.’

It was quite companionable sitting here beside him. He was a very calm and reassuring person. It was probably a good thing that his shirts would have to be abandoned. They were fairly grey to begin with and there was no hope of them coming out a clear bright pink – they would just end up a yet murkier grey with a reddish tinge. He needed a woman; just not me.

‘I should have gone round to help her out. I would have seen what was happening and headed the Garners off. But I was annoyed with her and everything was going wrong. The chocolate cake had sunk horribly into a gooey dark brown mess. I am not into baking at the best of times, but one does like the material world to echo one’s good intentions rather than one’s incompetence.’

‘You have missed a trick,’ said Barnaby. ‘I would have thought

cakes sinking and not rising was distinctly Freudian. I am sorry to have failed you so often.'

'Forget it,' I said. 'I blame the oven. It was rusty old iron and had not been cleaned since it was installed, I imagine around Nineteen Thirty. It was narrower than modern ovens. My hands are still quite scarred around the edges from that oven. Of course the kitchen is all very smart now. The cooker must have cost Sappho over three thousand pounds.'

'I didn't know cookers could be that much,' says Barnaby.

The leasehold of his flat comes to an end in a couple of years. Is this why he is being so nice to me? Because he wants to move in? Well, he can think again. He can share my washing machine but not my life.

'Laura believes in buying the best,' I say. 'She says anything else is a false economy.'

After Sappho started making money and took over Apple Lee, the house was renovated to the taste of the last decade of the last century, not to mention Laura's, and by the time Gavin moved in the kitchen was all stainless steel and granite surfaces, and everything whirred and blinked with little beeps and red lights. It was not at all cosy, and not particularly to Gavin's taste, which Sappho described once as Northern Moor Brutal.

'Who was Piers from South Africa?' asked Barnaby. 'What happened to him?'

I said I couldn't remember, but he was probably a medical student. I tried to introduce Sappho to young men who were her intellectual equal: the boys at RADA seemed such a flimsy, self-obsessed lot. The last thing I wanted was for her to end up with some actor.

'Emily,' said Barnaby, 'take comfort. Considering how you

liked to control her life, you must have done something right or she'd have taken to drink and drugs by now.'

'She was the only child I had,' I said helplessly. 'Poor Sappho! I can see I must have driven her mad.'

'She seems sane enough to me,' he said. 'Just a little neurotic.'

Neurotic? Allowing herself to be used as a skivvy by the Garners? Marrying Gavin? Practically twenty years older than she, lugging two children behind him, giving up her own career to suit him and getting herself with child when she had her whole future before her?

'Neurotic is putting it mildly,' I say. 'My daughter is almost pathologically masochistic. Masochism exists on the moral plane as well as the erotic. It belongs to the super-ego as much as to the id.'

'Bloody Freudian,' says Barnaby. 'Bloody metapsychologist. You and your landscape of the brain. I suppose you think it is all your fault?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Of course I do. I was too repressive a parent. Her father died when she was three. The worst age. She thinks she is responsible. Masochism is how we convert pain – whether it be physical or moral – into pleasure. It exists to assuage some great unconscious guilt. Masochism and repression are intertwined. To suffer, to be helpless, to be free from choice, is to be free of guilt. Why else do people wander round Anne Summers sex shops, looking at velvet handcuffs and day-dreaming of guilty pleasure?'

'You are preoccupied with sex,' he complains. 'Foucault's dirty little secret, the one that powers all human activity, is at least productive. Be positive. Look how rich your little daughter got after she left the Garner household, look how smart her oven! Scribble, scribble, little Sappho! "Scribble, scribble, Mr

Gibbon!" What guilty secret did Edward Gibbon have that drove him on? A productive age is a guilty age. The proletariat sweats and suffers through the Industrial Age for the sadistic pleasures of its masters. What secret did your daughter have? Guilt is why Sappho's kitchen now gleams and glitters and your stove was never more than rusty iron. Guilt equals wealth: wealth equals guilt.'

'Bloody Marxist,' I say.

The spin cycle comes to an end. Barnaby investigates his ruined wash. He looks at me longingly.

'Am I staying the night?' he asks.

'No, you are not,' I say. 'I need to be alone.'

'You and Greta Garbo,' he says.

I say he is not to drape his wet washing over the backs of my chairs. He can take it back upstairs. He does. He is very biddable. Perhaps he wants me to take out a whip and beat him, but doesn't like to say so.

The diaries disturb me greatly. My worry level stands at seven out of ten, and rising. Doing nothing is irresponsible. Sappho is my daughter. She has wandered off into the metaphorical night, into blankness, demanding that she be left alone, while offering me her past to scrutinise. I can't just leave it at that. She requires me to do something but I am not sure what. I will ring and ask Laura what's going on. But I don't want to give her any hint that I am concerned.

I call Apple Lee but the call goes to answerphone. This in itself is strange. Laura the super-efficient is usually there until late evening, manning the phones – or personning them, as she would say, with her little trilling laugh, half serious, half not. But perhaps she's gone off in search of sustenance? Camden Council

has spent millions trying to refurbish the neighbourhood, and a few brave tapas bars have recently opened up. The Garners keep Apple Lee unpainted and dishevelled on the outside, the better to confuse robbers. More to the point, they have surveillance cameras covering the house and security lights that spring into life at every city fox or prowling cat that wanders by.

I will wait a couple of hours and then try Laura again. I could go and meet Isobel out of school and see what she has to say. I remember that it's Friday, and she usually stays with Gwen on Friday nights. Arthur has just started at Warwick University, where he is studying marine biology, otherwise I'd ask him. Arthur and I get on well, and always have. There are various friends and colleagues I could ask of course, but I don't want to start unnecessary hares running. Sappho would be furious if I did.

Back to the diaries. I am sorry now I sent Barnaby away. Company is a good cure for anxiety, a sliver of which, pure and unadulterated, unexpectedly sticks me under the ribs and twists. I look for the reason and find none. Barnaby is right. I too am in denial.

Sappho's Diary: *April 10th 1994*

Dear Diary,

A scene from today I can't let go unrecorded.

Gwen, Isolde's mother, cashmere-clad, supremely elegant with her long model's back, long model's legs (if over-long feet) and her normal, slightly surprised and vaguely condescending air – it