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Opening Extract from...

Dear Lumpy

Letters to a Disobedient Daughter

Written by Louise Mortimer

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Preface

Even after the surprise success of my brother's tribute to our father, *Dear Lupin* . . ., I made it clear, to anyone who was remotely interested, that I had absolutely no intention of producing a similar book myself. This was despite being endlessly asked: 'Have you kept the letters from your father?' or 'Are the letters he sent you as funny and touching as the letters he wrote to your brother?' However, rather surprisingly, it was my brother who persuaded me to actually dig out all the letters I had and read them.

I thought I had close to fifty cards and letters. As it turned out there were nearer two hundred. I read several of these to close friends who laughed until they had tears running down their cheeks. Then, with much encouragement and assistance from my brother, I started putting together this second tribute book to my father. We have not forgotten, of course, the inimitable character that was our dear mother who always had our best interests at heart and never failed to give us unusual advice and make rather extraordinary observations – such as on the way home from my father's sister's funeral when she remarked: 'Do

you know what? I think that's the most fun we've ever had with Aunt Joan.'

The whole process of reading and sorting my father's letters has been a challenge as I had not read any of them since his death in 1991, and not one letter had a date on it which included the year and I had not kept the envelopes. It was all extremely emotional and I found myself laughing, crying, and sometimes even laughing and crying at the same time. Above all, though, this magical inheritance, which had been kept in a drawer for over twenty years, brought my father and indeed my entire family back to life in a way that I would never have thought possible.

To say that I am proud of my father is an understatement. Growing up I was a 'daddy's girl' and in my eyes he could do no wrong. Being the youngest and a daughter, my father was much more lenient and I was impossibly spoilt as I could twist him around my little finger. Having said that, he was like a rock and in times of need he was always there for me – wise, kind and always calm. I don't remember him ever losing his temper. If he was annoyed, angry or upset about a situation he would just take to his typewriter and we would receive a dressing down that also managed to be loving – a real skill. I am eternally grateful to both my parents for not giving up on me despite their disappointment when I was excluded from one of the country's premier girls' schools for misconduct and for marrying my much disapproved of boyfriend, Henry, in secret.

Dear Lumpy . . . is a companion volume to *Dear Lupin . . .* and the letters in the book are a further snapshot of all the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations of life with the Mortimers and their friends.

1969

The Flappings
Much Nattering
Berkshire

My Dearest Lumpy,

I hope you are settling down well and have not been moistening your pillow with hot tears. Settle down to some steady work and kindly refrain from doing anything really foolish. I miss you very much here and so does Cringer. Have you had a letter from the man with the Rolls Royce yet?

You have now got to the age when most girls have clashes of policy and opinion with their mothers. I shall be surprised if you prove an exception. My advice to you is to play it dead cool and decline to be drawn into long and acrimonious arguments. Your mother is devoted to your interests but like other mothers she is not always reasonable; nor, of course, are you.

I greatly enjoy having you at home but think there are grounds for improvement in your manners with people (not

your parents) older than yourself. Your attitude sometimes borders on the oafish and if visitors make the effort to be agreeable to you, you must reciprocate. At times you seem to make no effort at all; possibly from shyness, more probably from sheer laziness and a disinclination to exert your mind at all. I shall anticipate marked improvement next holidays!

How is Snouter? I trust you will look after him during the winter. One of our big trees has got elm disease and has got to be cut down. Your sister Jane has been attacked by fleas and mosquitoes in Greece. The new people came into the cottage on Saturday. Pongo has sore feet and is very smelly.

Best love,

D

Snouter was a gingham toy pig bought from a local fete. My father gives some practical advice regarding my mother; being a typical teenager, it goes straight in one ear and out the other.

The Sunday Times

Dearest Lumpy,

If you ever leave bits of stick and bamboo all over the lawn again, thereby mucking up the mowing machine, I will string you up to the laundry line and flog you for 2½ hours with long boughs of freshly cut holly. So watch it and don't push your luck too far! I enclose some sweepstake tickets. You may win a pink plastic po or a bottle of home-made wine derived from parsnips and old cabbage stalks. Jane is in a great dither

and talks at interminable length on the telephone. It is so tiring for those who have to listen. Pongo has caught a small rat and Cringer, I fear, has worms. I hope to see you again soon. Don't eat too many sweets or you will burst out of all your new clothes.

Best love,

D

I have annoyed my father again. He deals with it this time by using idle threats. I am persona non grata.

Budds Farm
23 November

Dear Miss Plumpling,

Thank you so much for remembering my birthday and sending me both a most acceptable present and an exceptionally pert card. It is v. cold here and I simply cannot afford to turn the heating on yet. I go to bed in long woollen socks and a balaclava helmet which lets the cold air in owning [*sic*] to the depredations by hostile moths. Your mother is in bed with a sore throat caused, in my view, by talking too much without appropriate pauses for thought. She has announced her intention to go to Kenya after Christmas. Will you come here as cook? Or perhaps I will just get on a boat and go off somewhere. Possibly China. More likely the Isle of Wight. Cringer is in good form and has just eaten four petit beurre biscuits. No wonder he is getting thick round the neck. Your

mother kindly gave me a shirt for my birthday. Alas, it would have fitted William Bomer.

Best love,

D

My father always pleaded poverty, especially when it came to heating the house or paying the phone bill. In very cold weather he would wear his balaclava and a very fetching jersey he had knitted out of old blanket wool when he was a prisoner-of-war.

1970

The Sunday Times
16 May

Dear Miss Mingy,

I am relieved to hear you have passed (by a very narrow margin) into Tudor Hall School for pert young ladies but doubt if I shall be able to pay the bills so you may not be there long. I hope you behaved well during your visit to the Blackers and did not pinch the spoons and were not sick on the drawing-room carpet. I always think Miss C. Blacker is very pretty and attractive. We had a nice visit to Colonel and Mrs Nickalls apart from getting lost on the way. Moppet has killed a large mole and Cringer has made a series of large pools – almost lakes – in the kitchen. I have heard nothing of Lupin but your sister jabbers away incessantly and does not seem to know whether it is Christmas or Easter. The Head Mistress at Tudor Hall is exceptionally strict and has the reputation of being the most relentless flogger in the business

today. So just watch it and mind your manners! I enclose a small present. Don't just buy milk chocolate or you will soon have the same waistline as the oldest and greediest elephant at Billy Smart's Circus.

Best love,

D

At thirteen my whole class at Daneshill moved on to other schools. My parents chose Tudor Hall for me on the advice of my brother Lupin! Not exactly the world expert on premier girls' schools.

Budds Farm

Dear Louise,

You really are the limit. I opened my box of saccharine tablets this morning and there was a dead cockroach there. I think that was a joke on your part in quite exceptionally bad taste. This time, in fact, you have pushed your luck just a bit too far. I intend to stop your pocket money till 1975 and to engage a holiday governess, Miss Beatrice Birchenough, who has been working in a reform school for difficult girls and knows just how to deal with really hard cases. I may try a few reprisals myself, so don't be surprised if you find a very old cod's head neatly sewn up in your pillow one night. I have in the meantime written a stiff note to Miss Vallence suggesting that you and the members of your dormitory are completely out of hand and a dangerous threat to their ever-loving

parents. The workmen have just finished doing the drive. They came in for a cup of tea and have left tar all over the kitchen floor. I fear your dear mother may explode when she discovers. I believe you are coming home for a long weekend. I challenge you to a croquet match for 5/. You are allowed a start of two up but just for once you must forbear from cheating. By the way, thanks awfully for your outstanding generosity in offering me one of those chocolates I bought for you. I found a huge toad in the woodshed today and intend to adopt him as he is very friendly and from a certain angle reminds me slightly of your plump sister Jane. I shall feed him on a diet of bread and milk and dead flies. Tomorrow I have to go to your Great-aunt Margery's funeral. She was 84 and had been like a hard-boiled egg for years.

Best of love and do try and keep out of trouble if you can otherwise I can see you ending up in Borstal rather than at Tudor Hall.

D xx

I get an enormous amount of pleasure from playing practical jokes on my family. I have been known to put fish heads in my sister's makeup bag and paint skulls in luminous paint on the walls of the spare room when my brother-in-law is staying.

Budds Farm
Sunday

My Dearest Louise,

I trust you are now well prepared for your confirmation

and have adjusted your plump face to a very holy expression. Please keep it like that till after the service, during which you are forbidden to suck sweets or chew gum. Will you be dressed in white, a colour signifying, rather absurdly in certain cases which I will not mention, innocence and purity? Do you have to wear a white hat, and will it be composed of hen feathers or half an old tablecloth? As I shall be the most pure and innocent person there, I propose to come in a white suit. However, enough of that. We must all be very solemn and listen with the closest attention to what the Bishop says; I am sure it will be very good for us. It is a very long time since I was confirmed at Eton. I put on a clean collar and a lot of Anzora Hair Cream (IT MASTERS THE HAIR, so it said on the bottle) which made my hair stiff like cardboard. It was most unfortunate that the Bishop quite forgot to turn up and we were in Chapel for nearly two hours before a substitute could be obtained. Luckily none of my god-parents were there, but my mother was. She was not a great church-goer and got very restive during the long wait. Fortunately I had brought a book in with me as over 100 boys were being confirmed and I knew it would be a very long service indeed even if everything went well.

However, to be more serious for a moment, I am sure it is all 'a good thing' and if you think hard about it just occasionally you may see the point of it all and derive some benefit. I'm sure your mother still does, and perhaps most of us do during times of stress and difficulty. However, one's religion is a very personal matter and it is all really up to you. I rather envy those who have a settled religious faith; it gives them a feeling of security.

I hope you realise it is a strict rule that no sweets are eaten for 17 days after confirmation and it is the custom to hand over all pocket money to the poor of the parish. To save you the trouble, I have already done that on your behalf. At least I would have done had there been any poor in the parish, but there are not. After the expenses of Jane's wedding, I reckon I am poorer than most so I am retaining the money for myself. I'm sure you will agree that this was the right and proper course.

That revolting Moppet left a rabbit's head under the dining room table; it was found by Pongo who made short work of it, to the great disgust of your mother. We are going to have quite a lot of strawberries and raspberries; what a pity they upset your stomach so and you are unable to eat them. I really feel sorry for you. However, I will see your mother makes you some nice junket or tapioca pudding instead.

Thank goodness we have a quiet day here today. I feel very exhausted. On Tuesday I leave at 5 a.m. and motor up to Newmarket. I come back early on Wednesday as I may have to go to a funeral at Rotherwick in the afternoon before I move on to you.

Your affectionate father,

RM

From an early age the relationship I have with my father is very affectionate. Although confirmation is a serious occasion I revel in being mobbed up by him and I am more likely to heed serious advice when accompanied by witty stories and leg pulling.