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What About Me, Too?

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Extract

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Dear Diary,

Wednesday the 4th of September 

I start year 6 tomorrow! I have decided to mark this most important year by starting a diary. When my big sister Frankie wrote a diary and Mum read it Frankie got so cross she ran away from home. They think I don't know what happened but she's been smoking cigarettes, bunking off school and drinking vodka till she's sick, which is really stupid because she has to take GCSEs this year and they are very, very important. My diary says DIARY in big letters all over the front. I really like the way I've made the Y loop down underneath all the other letters. It's been lying around the house ALL DAY and nobody's even noticed. I left it on the kitchen table while everybody was having breakfast. I've moved it round the house, I even put it on Mum's bed while she was changing Tom's nappy and she didn't even say, 'Are you keeping a diary, Lola?' like mums are supposed to. Maybe it's not interesting enough. Maybe my life just isn't as interesting as Frankie's or Mum and Dad's. That's the trouble with being a child. No one thinks you have anything to say worth hearing.

Dear Diary,

Still Wednesday the 4th of September 

Have just been next door to see what Clare is going to wear on the first day back at school but she won't tell me. She says I'll copy her, when how is that like even possible when she buys really expensive cool designer clothes and we don't?? But the really weird thing was that I was only there for about ten minutes when her mum sent me home. She said that Clare had to do some maths and that Clare was going to be really, really busy from now on so I was going to be seeing a lot less of her except at school. But Clare's like my BEST FRIEND! We do EVERYTHING together!! I was so upset that I ran home before she could see me cry. When I told Mum I cried though. I don't understand what I've done to offend her. Mum went mad. She says it's nothing to do with me and everything to do with 'that ghastly woman'. She hates Clare's mum. She calls her HND (it stands for Her Next Door). She was like so offended on my behalf and kept saying, 'How dare she? What a terrible thing to say to your own child's best friend,' and then she wanted to go round and see her, which is like really not what I need before we've even gone back to school. I had to stand behind the front door and push her back really hard and shout at her to make the point that I really, REALLY didn't want her to go. Mum says that HND wants Clare to go to a private school and you have to sit exams for those and she's probably got her a tutor. Mum says that's wrong, that she's just trying to buy her a better future. I don't see

why that's so bad if she can afford it. Mum's obsessed with HND. Whenever I ask her to do something for me like buy me new ~~knickers~~ nickers or trainers she says things like, 'If the surgery's not too busy, darling,' or, 'Maybe at the weekend,' which means never. But then she doesn't just leave it at that. She has to put herself down for not having the time to be 'The Perfect Mum', unlike HND who doesn't work. When to me she is the perfect mum because she's mine. But if it's true, that Clare's mum's not going to let us hang out together much, then this is going to be a really, REALLY bad, sad year at school because she's been like my best friend forever, since reception.



From: Sue James
Sent: Wednesday 4 September 21:52
To: Angela James
Subject: Checking in after a fab two weeks in Greece . . .

Dearest, one and only sister . . .

I may be middle-aged with saggy knees, three kids and a marriage which can at best be described as stagnant but hey! let's live a little . . . That's my new mantra for life anyway because how else do you endure a moody teenager on her GCSE year, a tween who feels inadequate because she can't wear Prada, a surprise late baby and an adulterous menopausal husband? Go on holiday all together, that's what you do. Flying anywhere with babies is always fun. The more kids you have the easier it is to forget one. Left Tom behind in the departure lounge because it's so long since I've had a baby that I just got up and walked to the gate when they called our flight. Then concussed him in the plane, banging his head against those panels just above the seats as I stood up to take him to the back to change his nappy . . . forgivable usually in a mother, but NOT when that mother is also a doctor . . . so that was two points down on the holiday scorecard of marriage before we'd even got there. Managed to raise it sky-high again through waterskiing because I can still do it and Matthew can't. He tried several times and strained his groin.

Matthew couldn't understand why none of us wanted to accompany him on visits to ruins in temperatures close to forty

degrees. (You're used to this sort of heat down under but for us Poms just moving from the pool into the shade required Herculean effort.) The one time I did go with him we got lost up a dirt track. He refused to stop to ask a man on a moped the way because he can't speak Greek and being a man couldn't even begin to communicate. So I got out of the car and established where we ought to be, which of course made Matthew even crosser because he now felt humiliated. When we finally reached the 'sight' it was the most unprepossessing pile of stones I have ever come across and I was just grateful that we had left Frank and Lola behind.

Another significant highlight was discussing feminism with Frankie over a bottle of retsina. Matthew, Lola and Tom did 'Row Row Row Your Boat Gently Down the Stream' so many times I wanted to capsize them. And then, as they were doing it one night for the 900th time, Frankie said, 'What IS feminism, Mum?' I nearly jumped out of my skin with excitement. Frank's conversation for most of the holiday up until that point had consisted of one of three phrases – 'I miss Chattie SOOOOOO much,' 'Am I brown enough?' and 'I think I'm gonna DIE of BOREDOM spending TWO WHOLE WEEKS WITH YOU TWO' – when she wasn't listening to her Walkman, so feminism burst on to this scorched desert like an oasis. It's a relief to know she can still think.

Matthew tried to pour water on decades of female achievement with 'a load of old bollocks'. Frankie claims it's redundant now, so there was plenty of scope for conversation from then on. I know sexual politics still burns as bright as ever amongst the young. It's just that they talk of it in terms of boys being 'only interested in one thing'.

Lola spent the best part of each day jumping in and out of the pool with a girl she became best friends with. So weird seeing her displaying the beginnings of womanhood – she's budding pert little breast sacs beneath protruding nipples and even a few wisps of pubic hair and my beautiful child is disappearing in front of my eyes – and yet she still behaves like a child. There she was playing with this other (far less developed) ten-year-old, diving through rubber rings, rescuing orphaned fish and pretending to be a mermaid. She's not even eleven, yet she seems more of a teenager than Frankie. She's leggy, moody and stroppy – lippy Lola – and answers back all the time. 'So-o-r-ry' is now her favourite word, making it quite clear that she isn't at all.

So it's the start of a brand-new 'school' year and getting Lola into a decent secondary school is going to be about as easy as springing a mass murderer from Broadmoor. You either need to lie about where you live or become terribly devout to even stand a chance. There isn't a sibling policy at Frankie's school, and we live 1.6 miles away. It's such a popular school that they now say that you have to live less than half a mile away to get in. HND is of course going private – chippy bitch. And she's so competitive about it – upset Lola today by telling her that she couldn't see Clare outside school because of course the child is so bloody dim she's going to need round-the-clock tutoring just to be able to understand what's written on the exam paper. Even if I believed in that as an option, Lola would never pass the exams – her spelling's atrocious and I'm not prepared to sacrifice Lola's health on the altar of ambition. So it's going to be a tricky time. Frankie is unbelievably moody, determined that

nobody has ever had it so bad and is already jostling for position at the start line. She told me last night that GCSEs were much the most important thing a child ever did, much harder than moving to secondary school and that she deserved – yes DESERVED – a massive prize at the end of it!

Not looking forward to going back to work tomorrow. It's been so wonderful not having to touch the squidgy bits of complete strangers. And it means having to deal with Ian Bryson again. Ian is good-looking, charming, charismatic. His queues at the surgery are always the longest because he has this knack of making every patient feel special, plus the women love to linger for a last look and he fancies himself as a Dr Finlay. But he takes a fiercely moral stand on everything. He's against abortion and laughs at any form of 'alternative' medicine. Such practitioners are all just quacks as far as he is concerned and he doesn't even believe that there is much of a link between mind and body. We crossed swords on my last day because I saw one of his patients and he had written 'Deranged Alternative Hypo' across her notes because she'd asked for allergy testing. I foolishly challenged him about it at lunch and we had a massive row in front of the receptionists. Then in the afternoon had a lovely old dear lying on the table for a 'down below' – suspected incontinence. I always say, 'Give me a cough' to see if there is any leakage but instead I said, 'Give me a kiss.' She was so deaf and batty that she didn't hear but I got the giggles so badly that I had to leave the room. I stood bent double, weeping with laughter in the corridor, where Ian saw me so word soon spread round the office. For the rest of the day everyone just said, 'Give me a kiss,' when they saw me . . .

After two weeks in any other working environment the episode would have been long forgotten. But at this practice ANYTHING is possible with Ian around.

Tons of love, Sxxxxxx

Dear Diary,

Thursday the 5th of September 

My new teacher is called Miss Jennings, although she's not coming in until next week so we had a supply teacher called Mr Burt. Kieran and Tom are already messing about, winding him up by pretending they don't understand really simple stuff. I'm sitting next to Camilla, not Clare, which is so unfair if I'm not going to see her much outside school. Maybe her mum feels that our house isn't good enough for Clare to come to (which it isn't).

Clare, of course, has brand-new trainers and D&G jeans for the first day of year 6 and a mobile phone which rang three times in lessons – her mum checking she was all right. Mr Burt said that if she didn't turn it off he would konfiscate it and then she spent the rest of the day complaining about how unreasonable he was. I think she just wanted it to ring because it made her feel more important. She also had this amazing new pencil case with compartments and a really cool eraser pen which she said she'd let me borrow, only that's hard because I'm not sitting next to her and when I asked her at break time if I could have a go she just ran off with Tanya laughing – TANYA, THE MOST HORRIBLE GIRL IN THE WHOLE SCHOOL!!! They were whispering today and giving me these evil stares like they were talking about me behind their backs. I don't know what to do at break time without Clare, we always sit together beneath the apple tree and talk and I felt kind of stupid sitting there all on my own.

We ought to be able to sit next to who we like at school and nobody really likes Camilla because a) she's fat, b) she was born without a foot and has to wear a false one which means she can't run or do PE properly which is why she's fat, c) she tells lies to make people like her, d) she farts, a lot, and she never brushes her hair so she's definitely got nits. Mum says I have to be nice to Camilla and that the teacher will move us all around again at half-term, but that's ages away and she doesn't have to sit next to her all day long, scratching away.



From: Sue James
Sent: Saturday 7 September 22:12
To: Angela James
Subject: Re: How is marriage stagnant exactly?

He's angry, sullen, argumentative, moody and accusing – permanently. I'm insulted daily either as a 'fool' or a 'nag' or, worse still when he's in a really bad mood, as a 'stupid bitch'. If he comes home irritable, which is most days, he picks on the kids, but mainly Frankie, for the simplest things. If they do something which falls below his standards of behaviour it's all my fault; yet when they're good or succeed at something it's because he's been such a positive influence on their lives. I am, of course, irrelevant. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells and never know when I'm going to say something that'll trigger a fight. Lola is always his darling girl. She can do no wrong. But Frankie gets it in the neck for everything although I do have to admit she has attitude with a capital A. He's now started on the 'you'd-better-really-knuckle-down-to-those-exams-this-year-and-get-good-grades-unless-you-want-to-end-up-on-the-dustbin-of-life' line, which isn't even true. He had to resit A levels before they would let him into law school, and what a mistake that was.

Dr Ian 'Finlay' Bryson has gone on the offensive. He's started filling my in tray with research papers that cast doubt over alternative medicine. He wants a competition, but I haven't got time for this so I just scrawled, *'The art of medicine consists*

of amusing the patient while nature cures the disease' (Voltaire). Who cares how they feel better so long as they DO' in red felt-tip across the top of today's offering. Thirty-fifteen.

Sx