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This Diary Belongs to:
Cathy Collins

Age:	~~Late Forties~~ ~~Mid Forties~~ 48 years old
Relationship Status:	Tense with a good deal of resentment occasionally dispersed by the odd moment of joy, i.e. married to Mike for nineteen years.
Location:	Bridleton, west Midlands. Famous for its equal ratio of charity shops to pubs.
Family	Son – Freddie, 17 years (unfortunately with the maturity of an 8 year old)
	Daughter – Kirsty, 15 years (unfortunately with the maturity of a 25 year old)
	Mother – Judy, 74 years (great wife, rubbish mother; still incapable of paying me any kind of compliment)
	Father – John, 78 years (great dad, rubbish husband; still incapable of any kind of domestic chore)
	Older sister – Lizzy, 51 years (lives in LA and drives me mad trying to tell me how to live my life)
	Younger sister – Nicola, 42 years (lives down the road and drives me mad because she won't let me tell her how to live her life)
	Dog – Barbra Streisand 9 years (named by above-mentioned immature son)

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Place of work:	Kitchen table – book-keeper for Ascot Drive Chippy, Fast Eddie's Taxi's and Ralph Flemming, the world's least renowned crime author
Interests:	Are for old people

Motivational Goals

New Year – New You

Set your goals *right now*!

If you can achieve just one goal a month you can transform your life by this time next year.

Keep it simple, keep it smart,
keep it close to your heart.

January	Goals only ever lead to disappointment and misery. I'm not doing it!
February	
March	
April	
May	
June	
July	
August	
September	
October	
November	
December	

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January

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1 January

I wouldn't say I was unhappy. I was just normal.

Neither happy nor unhappy. Somewhere in the middle, just trying to get from day to day without much thinking about how cheerful I was. To be honest, I actually hadn't given it much thought at all until my sister gave me this 'Motivational Diary' for Christmas. A diary! I mean, I hadn't written a diary since I was a teenager and needed to pour out my angst about Paul Backleton and his inability to see beyond my acne, braces and fluorescent Eighties wardrobe.

I was insulted to start with. Why on earth did she think I needed a Motivational Dairy? She lives in California and passes her time mostly up to her neck in yoga poses and kale smoothies and somehow she thought this qualified her to tell me how to run my life. I'd specifically asked her for the sing-along version of *The Greatest Showman* for Christmas, thinking that pretending I was singing and dancing with Hugh Jackman might provide the necessary escape required from another largely dissatisfying family Christmas, but clearly she hadn't listened. On opening the disappointing diary, I immediately sent her a text to express my disgust as I topped up my festive calorific intake with Ferrero Rocher.

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A Motivational Diary – WTF?!

Within moments she was FaceTiming me.

You knew it was serious when you sent someone a text and they replied by video-calling you. It meant that serious, maybe even complicated words needed to be said that could not be covered by text-speak or emojis. She was, of course, glowing with health and sunshine whereas I was muted by grey skies, skin puffed out by too many carbohydrates, my up-do frazzled by too much time over a hot stove and an unsightly rash around my neck caused by my 100 per cent acrylic Christmas jumper.

'Before you even start,' she said, 'I know what you're thinking. This diary is some hippy crap that my sister's got into because she lives in LA.'

Funnily enough, that was exactly what I was thinking.

'Well, it's not. My girlfriend Janelle, you know the one who's married to the cousin of the Foo Fighters' drummer; well, she gave me a Motivational Diary for my fiftieth birthday and it's changed my life, honestly Cathy. It's made me put myself first. Made me think about what makes me happy, and that's really hard for people like us.'

'What do you mean, "people like us"?'

'You know: female, a mother, a wife.'

I gave that one a moment's thought.

'If you say so,' I replied eventually, grabbing my eighth Ferrero Rocher of the evening.

She peered at me through the phone and I hoped she couldn't see the gravy that had dripped down the fluffy snowman on my chest.

'All we do is fit around other people's lives,' she continued. 'While we let ourselves go.'

Harsh, I thought.

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'We let other people live the way *they* want while we adjust our way round them. Well, it's time to put yourself first, Cathy. Work out what you want to achieve to make yourself happy before it's too late.'

'What makes you think I'm not happy?'

'How was Christmas?' she asked.

'Oh, you know, the usual over-panicking and under-delivering. I've spent weeks in the endless cycle of buying food, then buying even more food in case there's not enough food. Then buying presents followed by buying even more presents in case there are not enough presents. Then hours alone in the spare bedroom wrapping way too many presents before spending hours alone in the kitchen cooking way too much food. Two activities that – as you well know – I hate and am terrible at. It's been great, really it has. An absolute joy, as usual.'

'Might I say you sound a little depressed, Cathy?'

She was making me mad now.

'No, I'm not! I've had a perfectly normal Christmas, Lizzy. That doesn't make me depressed.'

'If that's your Christmas then you *should* be depressed,' she replied. 'Of course it could also be the menopause kicking in. That might be why you are feeling a bit down.'

'Jesus, Lizzy! I was feeling perfectly fine about my typically disappointing Christmas until you put me on the counselling couch and overanalysed it.'

'I'm just saying that at your age you need to be monitoring for symptoms of the menopause. Anxiety and depression can be a part of that.'

'*You* are making me anxious, Lizzy, not my reproductive system!'

'Are you having night sweats yet? Or difficulty sleeping, vaginal dryness, reduced sex drive?'

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'Are you reading this from a leaflet or something?'

'No. I have a web page open.'

'Look, I haven't seen any sign of the menopause yet. My periods are all still perfectly normal.'

'You're still having periods!' gasped my sister. She looked truly horrified. As if I'd told her I was an axe murderer.

'Yes! They still keep coming, monthly, like they're supposed to.'

'But why aren't you on the pill, Cathy? I went on the pill straight after I had Alicia. I can't have had a period in eighteen years.'

I paused, flummoxed for an answer to what I realized was a perfectly reasonable question.

'Well, I guess, well, I thought about it but . . . but I never got round to it. I was just kind of distracted by, you know, life.'

'Distracted by other people's needs and not your own, you mean,' said Lizzy. 'You see this is exactly why I have sent you the Motivational Diary. So this kind of self-neglect doesn't happen.'

'I'm not self-neglecting,' I told her. 'I'm perfectly fine.' I reached for my ninth Ferrero Rocher.

'Look, you don't have to put anything difficult in there,' she said. 'Just some simple stuff that will make all the difference.'

'So what have you put in yours then?' I asked her. 'What's your January goal?'

'Well er . . . well, actually I've decided to train for a marathon, but that doesn't mean . . .'

I laughed. Of course I did.

'I'm not doing it,' I said firmly. 'I'll only disappoint myself and then I'll be really unhappy.'

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She sighed and leaned back, folding her slim bare arms and revealing the clear blue skies behind her.

'If you say so,' she said. 'But don't come crying to me next year when you're miserable. Just give it a go, sis. Please.'

'I'm not miserable,' I told her. 'Well, I wasn't until I spoke to you.'

My reaction to this phone call was obviously to reach for several more Ferrero Rochers and go into a deep sulk. What did my sister know about my life? I *was* perfectly fine. Plus I knew where that 'Motivational Goals' mumbo-jumbo got you. Self-loathing and disappointment, that's where. Having goals meant increasing your expectations, and that would always lead to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. My approach, I felt, was much more useful, and it didn't require me to sit and scratch my head over a list of things that I was never going to get around to.

It was so much easier to just lower my expectations instead.

I realized some time ago that – so far in my life – creating expectations had only led to disappointment. I could count on the fingers of one hand when my expectations have actually been exceeded.

1. When I was twelve years old and ate my first pizza in a proper Italian restaurant rather than the frozen four-pack kind from the supermarket. I thought my head would explode.
2. How painful childbirth was. I genuinely thought a JCB had entered my uterus.

That was it.

Now if there was a centipede that happened to have

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fingers and toes, they would not have enough fingers and toes to count how many times things have not met my expectations and therefore how many times I have experienced the low dull gloom of disappointment.

So that was why I would *not* be writing a list of 'Motivational Goals'. I knew where they led. So no thank you, Lizzy. I was perfectly fine. Life was fine. I didn't need any stupid goals to make me miserable.

5 January

I suppose normal life had to commence sometime post-Christmas, along with the shouting, the swearing, the crying and the utter desperation.

Yes, the first day of term had arrived.

> *Chill, Mum. My geog teacher has a dentist appointment. No need to be in till later – your loving son xxx*

This was the text my son sent me from his pit after twenty minutes of me shouting upstairs for him to get up. My son could not remember what a teacher told him five minutes ago, never mind over two weeks ago, so I was suspicious this was a lie but had no proof. Pretty much my constant state of play with my two children.

I suspect you have been drinking but I cannot be sure.

I suspect you should be doing *a lot* more homework but I cannot be sure.

I suspect you are not constantly watching YouTube or browsing Instagram purely to research future career opportunities, but I cannot be sure.

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I suspect you *do* eat meat, you just don't like my casseroles, but I cannot be sure.

Deciding which side to fall on was a constant lottery. Get it right and you would hit the jackpot. Highly perceptive mother who demanded respect. Get it wrong and you lost valuable ground on the trust stakes. A weapon of mass destruction in any argument.

'*You don't trust me!*' had been shouted at me so many times I was starting to feel I should pursue a career in politics.

Of course, I had no such issues getting Kirsty out of bed. Her alarm went off at six this morning and so began the ninety-minute beauty regime until a selfie-ready model appeared out of her bedroom. I cannot believe she sprang from my shabby loins. She had contour brushes for Christmas that cost more than everything in my make-up bag, bathroom cabinet and jewellery box put together. I didn't get it. Why couldn't I do make-up like my 15-year-old? Actually, I knew exactly why. She'd learnt from the experts on YouTube whereas I'd learnt using Crayolas on a Girls' World.

I was about to tell her that I admired her well-defined cheekbones and perfectly applied cat-lick eyeliner when I remembered that I was her mother and, in the interests of the Teenage Resilience Training Programme I'd been desperately trying to deploy, I should bite my tongue and think of something more appropriate to say. Before Christmas I read that the increase in mental health issues in teenagers is partly due to their lack of resilience, having been wrapped in cotton wool by overprotective parents all their lives. Obviously I saw this as the green light to give my kids a tough time, and so I had traded my usual sycophantic confidence-building platitudes for insults.

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'Your face looks like you're auditioning for a part as a zebra in *The Lion King*,' I told her.

She stopped in her tracks, turned and studied me, and then drop-kicked an insult back. 'And you look as if you go to the same tanning salon as Donald Trump.'

I gasped. I was hoping no one had spotted my 'subtle' and 'secret' spray tan I'd had in a desperate attempt to do something about my pasty British winter complexion. Still, she had acted in accordance with the Teenage Resilience Training Programme and so I sent her on her way. Not before I told her she was beautiful and that I loved her, of course.

Kirsty left the house in a cloud of designer perfume, in a way I knew I would never achieve, while Freddie was still upstairs. I decided to err on the side of 'LIAR' this morning, as after the enforced family time at Christmas, I had never been keener to get the house to myself. I went upstairs and stood outside his room and turned the specially hidden radio on very loud to Smooth FM and waited. Sure enough he emerged moments later and shouted '*Alexa, switch off*,' at the top of his voice. When this had no effect, I agreed only to switch off the hidden radio if he got up and went to school.

'You are evil,' he breathed at me through his nostrils before he staggered into the bathroom.

'And what are you today?' I shouted at him through the closed door.

'A poor tortured son whose mother doesn't understand him,' he shouted back. 'Who will end up putting the sausage in sausage rolls in a factory in Dumfries.'

'Excellent news,' I replied. 'Finally, a career path.'

*

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The minute he was out the door I dashed to my phone and began my daily ritual of comparing myself unfavourably against the rest of the human race. Sure enough, my social media was bombarded with Couch to 5k beginnings, back-to-work pledges, charitable-giving requests and dry-bloody-January promises. Once I had confirmed that I was the least driven, laziest, least charitable human being who ever existed, I remembered the 'Motivational Goals' that Lizzy had tried to trick me into writing. I was tempted to update my status to: Cathy Collins has no interest in setting any stupid goals this year as she knows it will only lead to misery and disappointment but commends everyone who thinks they can and looks forward to an update on your failing to achieve any of them by mid-February.

I was just selecting a coloured background and wondering whether balloons or party streamers would be more appropriate when I realized I would not be able to deal with the inevitable social-media backlash that would encourage and cajole me into thinking that I was the type of person who could achieve great things, so hastily I deleted it. I could of course write the truth. That I was beginning my forty-ninth year on this planet with the usual plethora of menial tasks that needed to be done, none of which I was the slightest bit interested in. I weighed up my options for the morning's activities, such as put the Christmas decs in the loft, find a plumber to fix the tap that has been leaking for approximately five years, do a food shop, call my mother, or look at the computer for work purposes rather than just staring at Rightmove.

I actually really needed to do some work. I say 'work', but somehow it felt rather like homework used to when

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I was at school. I did it at home, in my own time, but it existed as a nagging feeling in the back of my mind. I knew it was there but it was something to be endured rather than enjoyed.

I couldn't complain. I mean, it was every parent's dream to work from home, part-time, so they could be around for their kids, right? Especially given that Mike was away a lot with his job. There was no way I could have scaled the corporate ladder as well as him. One of us had to step back. So I'd given up my career in Finance and started taking on freelance accountancy work. And while I didn't miss the relentless pressure of working for a large profit engine, I did miss going to a place of work with people in it, particularly people whose conversations didn't totally revolve around their kids, i.e., young people. People who talked about late-night telly and new bar openings and who fancied who. Water-cooler chat, I guess? I just had a kettle and me. No chat.

I opened my laptop and sighed as I logged onto my email. Frank, the chip-shop owner, had sent a message to say he had a load of receipts in a carrier bag he could do with getting rid of, so could I go and collect them? Maybe I could go over at lunchtime and pick up a saveloy to cheer myself up before I faced delving into a mountain of fat-based expenditure.

Then I opened one from Ralph, my other client, an aspiring author in his seventies. He had no income but liked to tell people he needed an accountant to manage his royalties. He'd been writing his crime thriller based on his career in civil engineering for the past five years. He asked me if I'd had a nice Christmas then wanted to know if I could find out if he could claim his bus pass as a legitimate travelling expense.

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Before I could delve into the delights of the Inland Revenue website, to my relief the telephone rang. However, it was the landline, so I knew it could only be someone trying to con me into doing something I didn't really want to do.

I was right.

'It's me, your mother,' said my mother.

'Hi, Mum,' I replied. 'How are you?'

'I can't chat as I've got to try and call Geraldine and let her know when Edward's funeral is so she can get her train booked. She's going to come and stop with us for a few days.'

'That'll be nice, Mum.'

'Could you pick up some toilet cleaner when you're out? I'd ask your sister but she does work full time and her children are much younger than yours so she's far too busy.'

'It's fine, Mum. I'll pick some up.'

'And would you come and help me do a bit of a spring clean? You know what Geraldine's like. She spots mildew a mile off and I can see some behind the toilet, only I can't get to it because of my knee. Would you mind just having a go at it next time you come? If Geraldine sees it she'll have a heart attack and we don't need any more funerals this winter.'

'Fine, Mum,' I replied.

'Good, good. I'll ring her back right now and tell her she can stay. See you later on this afternoon then. Bye.'

I sat and wrote a list of jobs for the afternoon. Pick up saveloy for lunch along with chippy receipts. Come home, eat saveloy. Go to shop and buy toilet cleaner and then go to Mum's to clean the toilet.

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8 January

Mike rang tonight to see if I was all right. As if I'm not used to him not being around. I am *totally* used to it given he spends most week nights out of the home, breaking up some poor company somewhere, in a job that seems to require very little 'consultancy' and much more just telling people they are sacked. Mike's freedom to go off to far-flung places at a moment's notice and have his bed made and eat food off a menu causes no resentment in our marriage. Not one bit. Apparently he is in Liverpool for the next few weeks. A mail-order company needed destroying and children needed putting on the streets.

'Missing you,' he said. 'I got used to being at home over Christmas.'

To be honest, the rest of us had struggled. The three of us had a system whereby we co-existed by shouting at each other, not talking, and then begrudgingly doing what we should have done in the first place. Mike could not cope with the shouting followed by the silence. Mike expected to come home and play happy families and suggest things like, 'After dinner, shall we all sit at the table together and play cards?' At which point Freddie barricaded himself in his room while Kirsty filmed Mike turning the kitchen upside down trying to find the playing cards, saying she was going to put him on her Instagram page, which he foolishly thought was a compliment. Dad Disasters could go viral at any minute.

'I'm getting fed up with working away from home all the time,' he said. 'I feel like I'm really missing out on being with the kids and helping you out. I know they're both going through a tricky stage.'

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Helping me out? I'd asked him to have the 'sex talk' with Freddie a while ago and I'd told him to be particularly clear about consent. Apparently Freddie had asked Mike to clarify when you knew you had consent and Mike had told him that basically when you were married it was somewhere between the third and fourth glass of wine but he wasn't sure for other couples.

'I'm thinking of throwing in the towel,' he murmured over the phone.

For a minute I thought he was talking about whether to reuse his super-fluffy hotel bathroom towel in an eco-friendly fashion, or throw it in the bath after one use so it could be unnecessarily washed. He had some tough decisions on a day-to-day basis, did Mike.

'I want to be at home more. In fact, I've been thinking about it over Christmas. I might even go for a career change. It's starting to get to me, all this organizational change bollocks. I think I need something new. I might retrain . . . I think I might like to teach, Cathy. You know, do something good. Contribute positively to society.'

My mouth was on the floor. There were so many issues with this I did not know where to start.

Teach! What could he teach? As a white, middle-class, middle-aged man, how to make sure you always had the most important opinion in the room?

He is fifty-one. You can't be a student at fifty-one. He'd look ridiculous in casual clothes, sneakers and a rucksack.

And how on earth could we pay the mortgage off while he was retraining? How would we pay for the kitchen extension, which *he* had insisted on? Apparently no house could function without an open-plan kitchen/diner these days. He saw one at his colleague's house in Edgbaston

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and would not rest until we got a room that we could cook and eat in as a family.

We practically never cooked and ate as a family.

'Well, of course you can do anything you want to, honey,' I told him. 'If you think you can stand being in front of an unruly class of smelly fourteen-year-olds, then you go for it.'

'Mmmm,' he said. 'I think I could offer a lot to the teaching world. Only yesterday someone told me that my PowerPoints on organizational culture in the post-mobile workstation era were inspiring.'

This was Mike all over. Absolute confidence that he could turn his hand to anything. No quibbling, no faltering, just utter belief in himself. I thought about how I would feel if Mike became a teacher and I came to a frightening conclusion.

Jealous!

How could that be? I had no interest whatsoever in standing in front of a load of kids and trying to make them learn stuff they'd never really use. None. It sounded like the absolute job from hell to me and yet . . . and yet I was jealous. What of? That he could even think about it? Even think it was a possibility without first thinking of the hundred reasons why he shouldn't do it? Without thinking about the effect it could have on the rest of the family, on the rest of our lives? Was I just jealous of the fact that he was putting himself and his needs before the rest of the family?

'Can we talk about it properly when we get a minute at home?' he asked.

'Sure,' I muttered.

'Great. That would be really good. I really am fed up with hotel life, you know.'

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'I know,' I replied. I glanced at the pile of ironing that I'd planned to do while I watched some crap telly. 'What are you going to do tonight?'

'Well, I thought I'd do a few laps in the pool because it was a buffet lunch today and I need to work off a crayfish baguette, and then I'll just grab a steak in the bar later. They've got the match on so I'll perhaps watch that, then get an early night.'

'Never mind eh,' I said. 'Sleep well.'

15 January

Tania came round today. I was in desperate need of some quality Tania time, as I hadn't seen her since before Christmas. Tania lives next door. She is smart, funny, and one of my best friends. She's a bit, older than me at fifty-five, so I guess I look up to her a bit, especially as she does the very awe-inspiring and worthy role of a social worker. And she's in two book groups! The one I'm in, as well as one where they actually read books, including non-fiction!

Within five minutes of me texting her to say, 'Yesterday's dessert?', she was knocking at the door and holding a half-eaten lemon meringue pie. I already had two spoons and two coffees ready at the kitchen table, and so we both dived in before a word was uttered. This was often our Monday ritual. Eating Tania's leftovers from her family Sunday lunch. She was a feeder and I was very happy to be an eater.

'Good Christmas?' I mumbled, trying not to spit pastry at her.

'Oh, the usual Jamaican-British hybrid Christmas,' she

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replied. 'You know, jerk turkey, with reggae *and* carols on Spotify.'

I wished I could have spent Christmas at her house instead of mine. Tania would often tell me tales of her Christmases whilst being brought up in the Caribbean. It sounded amazing.

'You?' she asked.

'Oh, the usual English style. No one up until midday, no one really hungry because no one really likes turkey, and I can't keep up with Freddie's "allergies" or Kirsty's diet regime so loads of food went to waste. That's besides the fact that – as you know – I can't cook. Presents were mediocre at best. Mike was his usual thoughtful last-minute self and bought me a dress online that didn't fit. But it was a lovely dress. And funnily enough it fits Freddie, who wore it to a party on New Year's Eve.'

'Fancy dress?' she asked.

'Probably not.'

'How's he doing?'

'Oh, he's Freddie. Still grappling with the astonishing amount of choices he has at his age. University, apprenticeship, work, gap year, which letter he wants to be on the LGBTQ rainbow. I told him he should identify as U.'

'I've not heard of U – what does that stand for?' asked Tania.

'Useless.'

'He's not that bad,' she said with a grin.

'He used my brand-new Ladyshave to give the cat a Mohican on Boxing Day,' I told her. Even now, the thought of it makes tears spring to my eyes.

She put her hand on my shoulder in an attempt to console me.

'Go on then,' I mumbled. 'Tell me what Mabel and

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Keresi were doing on Boxing Day,' I asked, bracing myself for the worst.

'They both did a stint at the homeless shelter,' she replied, rubbing my shoulder in sympathy as the tears inexplicably started to flow. I shouldn't be a bit surprised that Tania's daughters are so lovely. After all, they have two mums, and that's an unfair advantage if ever I heard one.

For some reason the tears wouldn't stop. What was wrong with me? I even tried to picture the cat getting her revenge on Freddie by pissing all over his treasured vinyl collection, but even that seemed to have no impact.

'What's wrong, honey?' Tania asked me, attempting to spoon more lemon meringue into my mouth. Like I said, she's a feeder.

'I don't know,' I muttered through tear-stained hands.

'Come on, spit it out,' she said.

I knew she didn't mean the pie and so I was forced to tell her something.

'Mike thinks he wants to quit his job and retrain to become a teacher,' I told her.

'Your Mike?' she asked.

'The very same.'

'But what would he teach?'

'My point exactly.'

'I thought he loved his job?'

I shrugged. 'So did I.'

'And what do you think about it?'

'I think it's a rubbish idea.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'Is it because he's making career plans and decisions and you're feeling left behind. Even jealous maybe?'

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'No!' Bloody hell, could she read my mind?

She raised her eyebrows.

'Yes,' I said with my head bowed, feeling slightly ashamed.

'So make your own plans. You know you're not that far away from Freddie and Kirsty leaving home. You really need to think about where you want to be when you stop playing mother twenty-four seven.'

'Oh, shut up,' I replied. 'You're as bad as my sister. She's trying to get me to set myself some goals. Telling me I need to put myself first. Telling me I'm depressed. She even had the audacity to mention the M word.'

'Right.' Tania nodded gravely. She didn't need to be told what the M word was – she's a woman. 'Have you had any symptoms?'

I gulped. Maybe I should share with Tania a few things that were niggling at me and I feared could be symptoms of impending menopause. Nothing major, but enough to unsettle me.

I got up and walked out of the kitchen into the hall, and came back with a navy fleece I'd bought before Christmas.

'Look at it,' I said. 'It's a fleece! It's navy blue! And I love it! It's so warm and toasty and . . . and . . . comfortable! That's not normal, right? Something is happening to my brain.'

'It's a lovely fleece,' she said calmly, a small smile at the edge of her lips.

'And . . . and . . .' I said. 'I've started to be sensible with alcohol.'

That stopped her in her tracks.

'And yesterday I had a hideous experience watching *Mamma Mia*,' I continued.

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Tania stared at me. 'You didn't, did you?' she asked in horror.

'I kept rewinding that bit—'

'When Meryl sings "Slipping Through My Fingers" while painting her daughter's toenails?' she asked. I watched tears spring to her eyes. 'I have to fast-forward. I can't bear it,' she added.

We both swallowed.

'I cried so much I had to switch it off,' I said tearfully.

We both embraced over half-eaten lemon meringue pie. Already grieving for the future pain of losing our daughters to the big wide world.

Tania pulled away and stared back at what must have looked close to a blubbering meltdown.

'Things are changing,' she said calmly. 'The kids are growing up, Mike sounds like he needs a change. You're nervous about being left behind, stuck in a rut and you don't know what to do about it. Perhaps your sister is right, perhaps you do need some motivational goals?'

'No!' I said firmly, shaking my head. 'I'm rubbish at them. Hopeless. I'll fail and then I *will* be depressed. Look, I'm fine. It's all fine really. I don't know why I'm getting upset.' I reached for some kitchen roll and blew my nose.

'You keep saying you're fine and yet you're crying all over my lemon meringue,' pointed out Tania.

'Just having a moment,' I said, trying to give her a watery grin.

'Maybe it's a moment you shouldn't ignore. Maybe it's time to be proactive, Cathy. Listen to your sister. Put yourself first. Decide what you want.'

She looked worried. I couldn't bear the worried look from anyone. Someone else worrying about me was all wrong. I didn't deserve anyone else's worrying space. I

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was healthy (if a little overweight), I had a good husband who provided for the family and I had two healthy, happy (as happy as teenagers ever are) kids. Worrying took time and effort and I couldn't bear the thought of anyone wasting their time and effort worrying about someone as undeserving as me.

'It's just a moment, that's all it is,' I said, shaking my head.

She kept looking at me with that awful worried look on her face, and then her phone pinged and she glanced at the screen.

'Sorry,' she said, getting up and brushing crumbs off her skirt. 'I'm going to have to go. Work summons. Will you be okay?'

'Of course,' I replied. Tania was always being called on to make really difficult decisions on delicate social-work cases. I walked her to the door and we embraced before she left. Harsh, I thought, as I wandered back towards the empty kitchen. Harsh to be reminded of Tania's world of real-life problems while I'm indulging myself in my less tangible ones.

20 January

Mike was due back tonight and had said he wanted to have that talk. I'd decided that I really couldn't deal with him throwing our lives up in the air, and so I had come up with a cunning plan to put him off this whole 'giving up a well-paid job' malarkey and spending more time in the home.

I was going to make sure the home was as unwelcoming as it possibly could be.

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So, rather than positioning myself in the kitchen when Freddie and Kirsty were due back from school, which was normally essential to referee fights, protect the contents of the fridge and prevent food carnage on the worktops and the floor, I stood well clear, hiding in my bedroom until I got the signal.

It didn't take long. Within ten minutes the fire alarm was going off and I could hear shouting. I dashed in and, sure enough, there was food scattered everywhere and smoke billowing out of the toaster. There ensued five minutes' pandemonium while I tried to find the sweeping brush to hit the alarm with and Kirsty and Freddie continued their blazing row.

'I only asked her where the tartare sauce was,' Freddie told me once the alarm was a wreck on the floor.

'What do you need tartare sauce for?' I asked.

'Fish-finger sandwich.'

'We don't have any fish fingers.'

'I bought some.'

'How did you cook them?' The smoke alarm was starting to make sense.

'Toasted them.'

'Toasted them?'

'Yep. Toasty toasty.'

'Why didn't you stop him?' I asked Kirsty, turning on her. I thought she would have had more sense.

'I don't know how to cook fish fingers,' she said. 'Don't assume I know how to cook fish fingers. That's just typical, that is. Gender stereotyping or what? Why should I know how to cook fish fingers any more than Freddie?'

'Because you are more intelligent,' I said.

'Being able to cook fish fingers properly proves nothing,' interrupted Freddie.

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'You only have to read the bloody instructions,' I yelled. 'Rather than burn the place down! It's not difficult! How are you going to cope when you go to university?'

'I'm not going to university,' he said. 'I'm going to South America.'

My heart skipped a beat. I tried to stay calm. 'Since when?'

'Since I started following an improv group on Instagram. They're touring South America. I'm going to go and join them. They've already acknowledged one of my comments.'

'South America?'

'Yes.'

'Where they shoot people?'

'Very high death rate by gun crime, thankfully,' chipped in Kirsty, staring at her phone. 'According to Wikipedia.'

'Shut up,' both myself and Freddie shouted at her.

I tried to calm my breathing. I wasn't at all prepared for the possibility of Freddie leaving home (if he *ever* got his arse in gear) in eighteen months' time. My only way of coping was to imagine him going to a nice safe little leafy British university, not to possibly the most dangerous continent on the planet. This was some new kind of hell.

I watched as he carefully laid his – burnt on the outside but probably frozen on the inside – fish fingers on the badly cut bread and then slathered them in mayonnaise.

'Decent,' he said, taking a bite. 'By the way, I'm planning on going vegan for Lent. Will you start getting some vegan stuff in from Aldi?'

'You can't, I'm vegan,' shouted Kirsty.

'Since when?' we both said, my head swivelling round.

'Last week,' she mumbled.

'Is that because Caaaaaarl is a vegan?' asked Freddie,

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as a blob of mayonnaise fell to the floor and he carefully rubbed it in with his foot.

'No!'

'Who's Carl?' I asked.

'No one,' said Kirsty.

'He's a God-bothering hippy in my year and Kirsty wants to get in his pants,' Freddie informed me.

'No I don't,' she shouted.

'Yes you do. I saw you practically drooling over him in the refectory.'

'Kirsty,' I said, 'I don't think—'

'Don't think anything, Mum. *Please* don't think anything.'

'You really shouldn't . . .' I began.

'It's okay. He doesn't believe in sex before marriage,' said the remarkably informative Freddie.

'Oh my God,' I said, horrified, to Kirsty. 'You're going to join a cult!' I felt very much like screaming.

'Culty Kirsty,' chanted Freddie over and over. 'Culty Kirsty, culty Kirsty, culty Kirsty—'

'Why can't you just keep your mouth shut?' Kirsty screamed at her brother. She picked up a frozen fish finger that had been left strewn on the table and threw it at him. And as if right on cue, in the best piece of luck so far this year, Mike chose that moment to walk in and got frozen fish in the face. My daughter has the most excellent timing and fortunately the most rubbish aim.

To give some credit to everyone involved, the room did go quiet for a few moments. I held my breath to see what would happen next. Given that at no point had I made any contact with the fish finger, I considered that it was not my place to make the first move.

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'What's going on here then?' Mike asked eventually as he brushed his forehead free of frozen breadcrumbs.

'Freddie was calling me names,' screamed Kirsty. 'And interfering and telling tales and being horrible like he always is.

'Kirsty is shit at throwing,' announced Freddie simultaneously. 'Honestly, if she can't hit me from there with a fish finger, then I can totally understand why she never made the netball team.'

'I never wanted to be in the netball team,' Kirsty shouted at him.

'You so did,' smirked Freddie. 'When Miss Chantry was the coach. You girls were all queuing up to be her wing attack.'

'That is not true,' said Kirsty, going bright red and looking as though she was about to cry. Freddie had clearly hit a nerve, yet again.

I looked at Mike to settle this battle. Hadn't he said the other night he wanted to be at home more to help with the kids? Well, be my guest, 'Dad of the Century'.

'You'll never guess where I went last night,' he said, taking his jacket off as though the previous altercation had not taken place and he hadn't just been hit in the eye with frozen goods. 'The Cavern Club. You know, where the Beatles got discovered?' He looked at his children for some kind of response, and when he didn't get one he ploughed on. 'Did you know that it started out as a jazz club, and when John Lennon first played a cover of an Elvis track he got told to "cut out the bloody rock and roll".' He laughed to himself as he stepped over the fish finger lying on the floor and hung his jacket on the back of a chair. 'Can you imagine if he'd have listened? We might never have had the Beatles, or probably half

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the bands you listen to nowadays. You know that Noel Gallagher? He's the lead singer of Oasis, massive Nineties band. Well, he often says how most of their music was inspired by the Beatles . . .'

He looked up and was surprised to see that both his children had somehow evaporated from the room. I was not. Mike's sharing of what he deemed to be 'new news' just because *he'd* only just discovered it was guaranteed to disperse a teenager at lightning speed. I was extremely envious of this ability; however Mike was forever disappointed that Freddie and Kirsty were not inspired by this dissemination of knowledge.

'Where did they go?' he asked me, as though it's my fault he'd bored them out of the room.

'No idea,' I shrugged, resentfully beginning to clear up the mess left by Freddie's foray into creative seafood cookery.

Mike continued to impart other exciting morsels about the rise of the Beatles, gleaned from his trip to the Cavern, but I'd zoned out, angry that Mike had been extremely, if unwittingly, effective at diffusing the argument between his children, and angry that – despite the fact I was nothing to do with the fish-finger missile – I was the one thinking about picking it up from the floor where already all three of them had stepped over it.

21 January

I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet. Not an unusual occurrence. In fact, it was something to be celebrated when I'd 'slept through', as though I was some flipping toddler again. Anyway, I went to the loo

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in the middle of the night and there it was. My period. Hurrah. Must ring and tell Lizzy!

I went back to bed and allowed my mind to circle round the events of the previous evening, which of course was guaranteed to keep me awake until morning because I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that the blinking fish finger was still on the kitchen floor! I could feel its presence in the house, like someone had planted a landmine down there. I'd decided to resist tidying up the offending item in an act of defiance, and for the rest of the evening the entire family continued to walk over it and around it, not giving it a second thought while I gently seethed. The assumption that all domestic duties would be carried out by me sat in my brain like a low-level headache. It constantly niggled and occasionally erupted into a full-blown migraine when I got angry and threw things around and shouted at everyone, at which point they'd make empty promises to try harder and do more. That quelled the migraine down to headache level for a while, until I realized they'd all lied – again – and then the migraine would rear its ugly head again. I figured this cycle had been going on for the entirety of my married life.

It was petty, I knew, to be wound up by a discarded piece of frozen fish, but focusing on that was at least stopping me mulling over the rest of the evening's events.

To be fair, we'd actually had a fairly pleasant meal together. We'd all sat down together in the kitchen/diner, which is something to be celebrated. We all ate the same food – again, something of a miracle. The lumpy white sauce and virtually inedible mashed potato were largely ignored, pushed to the side of the plate immediately in a synchronized manner, given my lack of cooking talent

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was something the family had long been resigned to. Mike and I shared a bottle of wine, deciding to delay our pact not to drink in front of our kids, thereby not reinforcing our reliance on it, until we'd got through dreary January.

The kids bolted the minute their plates were cleared, and so Mike and I were left to tackle the elephant in the room.

'Are you going to pick up that fish finger, or have I got to do it?' I said, trying to be casual.

He looked over at the offending item and said, 'I'll do it,' then didn't move a muscle. I knew then my night was doomed.

'By the way, I'm seeing a life coach,' he said.

'A life coach?'

'Yeah.'

'What's a life coach?'

'I thought you might ask that, so I brought you a leaflet.' He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and handed me a glossy folded sheet with a serious-looking blonde lady, in maybe her late thirties, staring out at me.

'Hi, I'm Helen,' I said in a faux-Barbie American drawl. 'I'm a government-registered life coach and I help people identify their goals, work out strategies for achieving them, overcome obstacles, and make changes or shifts in their lives.'

'I don't think you are taking this seriously,' he said.

'Hi, I'm Helen,' I repeated, in the same cheesy accent, while waving at him robotically. 'And I'm going to solve all your problems with one swish of my pretty hair.'

'She has a PhD,' said Mike, putting his disapproving face on. The face that always has the effect of making me want to act more stupid. 'She used to work in HR,' he continued, 'and identified that many senior managers

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became dissatisfied with their work life when they hit their fifties. She's incredibly empathetic.'

'You've already met her?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'Last night.'

'You never said.'

'She had a cancellation and said she could fit me in for an introductory session.'

Awkward pause while I worked out how to respond.

'You were at book group last night, weren't you?' he added.

'No,' I said. Such a lame attempt at trying to justify why he'd failed to inform me about his secret meeting with a younger woman.

I glanced down. The fish finger was still there.

'So what did she say?' I asked.

'She said I should work out where I want to be in seven years' time.'

'Why seven years?'

'I guess it's far enough away to make you really think that a big change is achievable, but not far enough away to think that—'

'You might be dead,' I interrupted.

'Useful input,' he sighed.

'Does she give useful input?' I asked.

He looked at me in a way a teacher looks at a student who is just not getting it. Was he already practising for his future career?

'I just thought it would be useful to have an outsider's view. Someone who can give me some perspective,' he said.

Someone who didn't have your wife's perspective, I

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thought. Someone who didn't have the thousand and one other things to consider, as a life coach decided our fate. Someone who didn't have to consider the impact on my life. Someone who could ignore that and say to you, go on, you do whatever makes you happy.

Ping!

Maybe I needed a life coach? Maybe I needed what he was having. Maybe I needed someone to help me cast aside all selfless thoughts of others and work out what I should be doing with my life. Perhaps she could even help me work out some stupid motivational goals. Lizzy and Tania certainly seemed to think that would be a good idea.

'Can I meet her?' I asked.

'There is really no need to be jealous, Cathy.'

I looked at him. I wasn't jealous, but him telling me not to be immediately had the effect of making me feel I should be. I looked down again at the picture of the blonde, intelligent-looking young lady. Too young, I thought, but Mike had that whole distinguished salt-and-pepper-hair thing going on lately, and what with this career-change idea he suddenly had the air of 'midlife crisis' around him. And we all knew what that meant if it struck the male species. Maybe I *should* be jealous?

'I'm not jealous,' I said firmly. 'I just think I could do with a life coach.'

'What for?'

'Well, because. . .' I picked up the leaflet and rebooted my Barbie impression. 'Perhaps I would also like help to identify my goals, work out strategies for achieving them, overcome obstacles and make changes or shifts in my life.'

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His jaw dropped and then he said, 'She only deals with executives.'

Jesus! I mean, WTF?

He saw the rage rise immediately. I didn't have to say a word.

'I'm not saying that's right,' he said quickly. 'I'm not saying that just because you are not an executive you can't have a life coach, or that she shouldn't be more inclusive. I'm just saying that her leaflet says that she specializes in . . . yes, that's it, specializes in, so doesn't exclusively deal with executives, so she might see you. I mean, I could ask her – shall I ask her?'

'No!' I said firmly, crossing my arms. 'If she doesn't want to see me, I don't want to see her.' Wow, wild horses wouldn't drag me to that bitch's lair now to hear some elitist advice aimed at 'executives'.

'Okay,' he said, looking slightly relieved. 'So are you . . . I mean, you never said that you wanted to, you know, work out your goals and achieve something.'

I held my breath. Could I let this faux pas drop? I had him on the ropes and I could see he was panicking, but really? I might not be a big fan of goals, but that didn't mean I hadn't achieved anything – like raising our children for the last seventeen years, for instance?

'I mean, I know raising Freddie and Kirsty is the ultimate achievement,' he blustered.

How did I explain it to him?

'It's starting to dawn on me that Freddie and Kirsty aren't going to be around for that much longer, so life is changing, I'm changing.'

'What do you mean "changing"?'

'Well,' I said, looking down. 'Apparently I am in the catchment age group for the menopause now.'

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'Shit, have you got that?' he said.

'It's not an illness. It just happens. Well, to women. Weirdly men don't seem to have to go through such a process. All you have to worry about is the possibility of erectile dysfunction and, surprise, surprise, they've invented a drug to cure that.'

'I would take it, you know,' he said. 'If it came to that.' He said this as if he had agreed to donate a kidney to me.

'So thoughtful,' I said. 'You just need to be aware that in the not-too-distant future there're going to be three of us in this relationship – you, me, the menopause – and no kids to create a healthy distraction. So well, I guess it's all just making me think, like you, that I need to consider my options, that I need to think about what I want to do with the rest of my life.'

He leant back in his chair, clearly contemplating my input. I'd seen him do this many times before and I was sure it was what had made him so successful at his job. He was very quick and agile at assessing situations, then coming out with a well-crafted solution, as if he'd spent hours deliberating on it.

'Well, I think this is just perfect,' he said, leaning forward and taking my hands. 'Of course you must meet Helen. She'd be brilliant at helping you work out your options and then I'm sure that she'll have plenty of contacts who could also be very useful.'

'Right,' I said, nodding, but feeling a little confused.

'And what perfect timing. I mean it will actually be essential, now that I think about it, that you go back to your career full time. I mean, if I want to retrain to become a teacher, I won't be earning for maybe up to two years, and then of course my salary will be much lower than what I am on as a consultant, so you working full time

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will make all the difference. Truly it will. This is brilliant news.' He paused and looked deep into my eyes. 'And after all, it is your turn. I mean, you've let me pursue my career all this time and now it's only fair that you get the chance to go back to yours.'

What!

No!

This wasn't what I wanted. I recoiled in horror at the thought of returning to the rat race. Okay, so I missed the chat and the banter and being with interesting people living different lives to me, but did I want the weight of responsibility of a full-time job on my shoulders? I didn't think so. Not any more. Did I want to be the main breadwinner of the family? No – I was more than happy that Mike had taken that role. I knew that sounded terribly sexist, but he chose to be the hunter-gatherer when there were nappies to change and sick to cleared up, so he could blooming well stick to it. I most definitely did not choose to be the hunter-gatherer while he got to do whatever he wanted after the kids have bolted.

'Listen,' I said, getting up. 'I don't think you understand. Kirsty wants to join a cult, Freddie wants to get shot in South America, and if somebody does not clean up that bloody fish finger a murder will be committed in this house tonight. Perhaps you can get "Helen" to sort all that lot out for you while you are discussing your dissatisfaction with your well-paid, interesting career that you have had the good fortune to be able to focus on for the majority of your adult life, while I've done whatever was required to make this family function.'

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30 January

Book group tonight at Tania's house, so not far to walk. She'd managed, of course, to knock up a cake in between housing homeless kids and training for the Samaritans. When I hosted book group they were lucky if they got some soggy Pringles that had been left in the tube too long.

Four out of six had read the book, which was a pretty good ratio. Sonja and I admitted we'd used 'having to read the book group book' as a means of escape from moments of Christmas family turmoil, whereas Louise said she'd left the 'Booker-nominated' tome on the coffee table all Christmas, in a vain attempt to impress her snooty father-in-law. She'd not touched it, but had thoroughly enjoyed a romcom she'd got in a Secret Santa from a colleague. We all enthusiastically agreed it should go on our list for the coming year.

Fiona tried to explain to us the significance of the lead character, who was apparently a metaphor for the suppression of the donkey in the Nativity story, but we were much more interested in hearing about the antics at Louise's Christmas works do, where some of her colleagues had shagged in the toilets of a Greek restaurant. Louise was quite a bit younger than the rest of us, and somehow juggled small children and working full time in a solicitor's office. In her job she mingled with people born in the Nineties, which to the rest of us was like mingling with people from another planet. We were keen to hear details of the people involved; characters who clearly lived a life whereby they felt the need – and were able – to have sex in a toilet! Where passion overrode all need for comfort or decorum. Where spontaneity reigned supreme. We were all in awe.

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'I don't think Ray fancies me any more,' moaned Fiona after Louise had filled us in. 'In fact, I'm sure of it. The only time we have sex is if he's watched Fiona Bruce presenting *Antiques Roadshow*.'

Tania had lit a fire, but had thoughtfully also set up a menopause corner next to an open window for Paula and Sonja, who are deep into hot-flush territory.

I watched them, half terrified, from my new perspective, knowing that this was not far away for me either. They looked normal from the outside; however, clearly stuff was raging inside.

'I'm just exhausted all the time,' admitted Paula. 'I so want to cut down my hours but we need the money. And I've just got promoted so have taken on extra responsibility. I'm fifty-five. What do I want extra responsibility for? I'd like a job where I can take an afternoon nap every day, not one where I'm expected to attend client dinners, in the evening, and be lively and entertaining. I want to be in my pyjamas watching *Love Island*!'

Then Sonja admitted to the heaviest periods of her life. 'It's a proper crimson wave,' she said. 'It's honestly like someone is being murdered in my vagina.'

'I'm so pleased I went on the pill after I had Alice,' chipped in Louise. 'I haven't had a period in at least five years.'

Sonja turned to stare at her. I thought she might actually kill her. I knew exactly how she felt. She looked so distraught that I got up and hugged her as she flapped the bottom of her V-necked jumper in an effort to gain extra ventilation.

'And as if things weren't bad enough, Jack only came home for two days at Christmas,' she bleated with tears in her eyes. 'He's got a new girlfriend who he refuses to

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let us meet and would sooner spend a whole week with her and her family rather than with us. When will the torture of having children ever end!'

I tried to give her a sympathetic smile but was distracted by the sight of Paula asleep in the corner, drool dribbling down her chin.

These women appeared to be falling apart. They were on the edge. One thing was for sure, they were most certainly not happy.

So, while listening to Paula's exhausted pre-watershed snoring, and watching Sonja fan her armpits and bleat for her son, I made a decision.

I had to do something.

Menopause wasn't looking as easy as I had first thought it would be; my kids were both threatening dangerous choices and my husband . . . well, he was expecting my life to fit around his own particular midlife crisis. It was all making me feel sad and panicky and anxious, and so I needed to do something about it, or else I was going to end up really depressed. Just like Lizzy said I would. I had to take control of my life before it took control of me. My sister was right. I needed to think about what made me happy, however hard it would be for someone like me.

A woman, a mother, a wife.

But I knew I didn't need a list of 'Motivational Goals'. I knew I would not find happiness there. Only the dreaded disappointment. I needed a different kind of list. A practical one, an achievable one, and one that would put right all the things that were causing me distress. I didn't need to go bungee jumping or run a marathon or anything stupid like that. All I needed was just a list of stuff I should do before I got any older, stuff that would improve

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my life. And I knew exactly the first thing I was going to put on it.

31 January

Motivational Goals

New Year – New You

~~Set your goals right now.~~

~~If you can achieve just one goal a month you can transform your life by this time next year.~~

~~Keep it simple, keep it smart, keep it close to your heart~~

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Stuff I Really Need To Do Before I Get Any Older

January	Write the Above List
February	Ditch Periods
March	Ditch Cooking
April	Get a Life Outside the Family – Preferably with 'Young' People
May	Secure My Son's Future ie. Put a Rocket Up His Arse
June	Secure My Daughter's Future i.e. Teach Her How to Not Get Screwed Over by Relationships
July	Reduce My Carb Footprint (That will be carbohydrate as well as carbon)
August	Agree who will Clean Mum and Dad's Toilet
September	Make the Necessary Announcements about the Menopause
October	Have 'The Chat' (The Really Really Important One)
November	Fall in Love Again
December	Dance with Hugh Jackman

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