The Mother and Daughter Diaries

Clare Shaw

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Extract

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ONE

SOMETIMES I look back and try and work out when I first started to worry about Jo, as if that's when it all started to go wrong. But that's a bit like asking yourself when you first fell in love or when you first grew up. These things tend to creep up on you slowly and one day you just notice them, notice something that has always been hovering there, waiting to be recognised. Perhaps I've always been worried about Jo—after all, I'm a mother and anxiety is on the job description. It all starts before your child is born, worrying in case he—or in my case she—comes out with three heads or twenty fingers. Then you worry about the contents of her nappies, whether she'll make friends at playgroup, whether that marble she shoved up her nose will cause permanent damage and whether the teacher will know that you helped her to colour in her picture. But this is all just gentle preparation for the teenage years when suddenly the world seems to be flooded with alcohol, drugs and piercings in places you never knew could be pierced.

The worry may have always been there, but was there a day when it struck me that there was something I really did need to worry about? Something more than the usual adolescent

anxieties? I can't remember, but I'm always drawn back to the day of my niece's wedding. Perhaps, underneath my camouflage of denial and pretence, I knew then.

At times I blame myself that Jo hit those difficult teenage years just as I was learning to play out my new role as a single mother, still raw and bleeding from the pain and confusion of divorce. Yet if only Jo had accepted the separation as easily as her younger sister had, then maybe we could all have held hands and taken the journey together, as a family, as one. Now I understand that we each had our own journey to take and that sometimes our paths would run parallel, sometimes converge and sometimes divert onto very different courses. And when Jo's path led her off into what I believed was completely the wrong direction, I tried to pull her back onto mine. And yet that direction was wrong too. For her.

So perhaps the story really started with me. With me being plucked out of my comfortable existence, relabelled and thrown back into something unknown, frightening even. And as I struggled to make sense of my new life, I soon realised that my old life had been fraught with difficulty as well: that I had been hiding behind a veneer of perfect wife and mother, hoping that if I pretended long enough it would all come true. But it hadn't really been a life after all.

As a sixteen-year-old teenager teetering from childhood to the brink of womanhood, Jo had every reason to be finding herself, breaking away to discover who she was and where she was going. But what an earth was I doing, in my forties, suddenly questioning what I, Lizzie Trounce, was all about? For somewhere along the way I had left myself behind and had carried on living with no real identity, just a few useful labels

so that people would understand what I did—mother, sandwich maker, wife (now ex-wife), friend, neighbour, occasional beer drinker, part-time film buff.

I remember working at the sandwich bar alongside Trish the day before the wedding. Even then, I was trying to change direction, perhaps even hoping to find myself by looking somewhere different. But you can only change direction when you know exactly where you are in the first place and, unknowingly, I was lost.

'The first rush is over—time for our own sustenance,' Trish said, pouring out a couple of coffees.

'You know, this place would be better if we had room for more tables and chairs. It would make it more of a café than just a takeaway sandwich bar.'

'There's five stools.' Trisha nodded towards the long bar with the stools for any customers who might want to eat or drink on the premises. 'And they're usually empty.'

'That's because they're not comfortable and the room is so narrow you have to drink while being pushed and shoved by the queue. The chances of getting an umbrella in the ear and being slapped around the bottom with a briefcase are extremely high. If only we had bigger premises.'

'Yeah, great. So we have to serve tables as well. Twice the work for the same money,' Trish pointed out. She was only ten years older than me but was content to float easily towards retirement.

'But if we owned the café…'

Suddenly I saw myself as a businesswoman with a chain of restaurants to oversee, bank managers grovelling at my feet, power suit, shoes clicking authoritatively across the restaurant floor.

'If only I'd done that business course Roger suggested,' I sighed.

Trish laughed. 'I really can't see you on a business course. It's not exactly you, is it?'

But what exactly was me? I'd been bright at school with three good A levels to my name, but then I took a gap year, before gap years even existed, and that turned into a gap five years as I happily drifted from job to job, travelling the world in between, until I met Roger. The next thing I knew, I'd given up my flat with the giant sunflowers in the window box and was trimming the privet hedge in a neat, four-bedroomed cube in a convenient location on the edge of town, with favourable commuter services into London. Desirable, quiet, sought after, practical. And dull.

'Perhaps you're right,' I acknowledged, After all, how could I possibly run a business when I was struggling to make sense of the electricity bill, the car insurance, tax credit and all the things Roger had dealt with until six months earlier when everything, just everything, had been turned upside down and given a shake I could measure on the Richter scale. Of course, I thought, Roger's new partner Alice could probably quote her National Insurance number at will, juggle bank accounts around like oranges and get a tax rebate on…well, whatever people got tax rebates for. I still cringe when I think of the first time I met her and described myself as a sandwich designer and beverage entrepreneur. And I'm still trying to convince myself that her stiff smile was one of admiration.

As Trish and I started to prepare a fresh supply of sandwiches for the lunch trade, I realised that my job was the one constant, unchanging, predictable event in my shaken-up life and I needed to keep it exactly as it was. So I set about los-

ing myself in the routine of the day and shoved everything else to the back of my mind.

I got home from work that day feeling exhausted. Exhausted by responsibility, regret, bitterness and the intense love I had for the children I thought I'd let down. It was as if I had been pulling everything together so hard that my limbs were aching and my resolve slowly breaking down. My neighbour waved at me, and then stared at my overgrown lawn and the triffid-like borders of nettles and determined weeds. I waved back and shrugged my shoulders. It had hardly been an accusation from her and it wasn't much of an explanation from me, but I sensed we understood each other. I would deal with the front garden when I could, but as yet I had no idea when that would be.

When I got to the front door, I turned round to look at the small wilderness behind me. There was something rather pleasing about the wild garden which somehow distracted from the predictable box of a house which stood symmetrically between two identical boxes. I liked it, and decided to put a bird table and sundial somewhere among the long grasses. It seemed rebellious and slightly daring, and I went into the house feeling a little better about myself.

I put the Chinese takeaway I had collected on the way home on the table and called the girls. Eliza danced in and gave me a hug.

'Chinese—great,' she enthused, and started pulling the lids off the cartons.

The dishwasher was packed full and I had forgotten to switch it on before work. I rummaged around in the cupboard and found some paper plates left over from Eliza's birthday tea some months earlier.

TWO

BEFORE I started to write it all down, I wrote 'Lily Finnegan' at the top of the page. Then I found out Mum had done the same thing. Like this is all about Lily or something. Well, maybe it is. I'm not writing my life story—nothing like that. How can I? I'm still a teenager and everything stretches out before me. But I had to write about this slice of my life because Lily told me to. And because it changed things. For ever.

Did I have a happy childhood? Kind of. My parents divorced. Shit time but a lot of kids go through it. It was easier for my sister, Eliza. She thinks she's in a play or a film. That's why she's happier than me.

I was happy being me once. It was when I stopped being me that it went wrong. I couldn't put a date on it—'I got screwed up on 20th April 2001'—nothing like that. I just remember that I had to perform, so I started to pretend. And I guess the performance gradually took over from reality. I knew how to make other people happy—you just pretend to be who they want you to be. Act your knickers off. Smile on top, cry underneath. I can see all that now, but there was no set plan at the time. It just happened. I totally lost control of me.

One of my biggest performances was at my cousin

Victoria's wedding when I played the part of the perfect daughter. Oscar-winning stuff, but my mask slipped off. I went out of character. I let the real me show through, and raw emotions frighten people. I wasn't the only one playing a part. I had a talented supporting cast. Mum was acting out the role of the perfect mother of a jolly happy Sunday roast family. Me? I was eager to please, but at that time I didn't understand why.

When I got up that day and saw the dress hanging there, it looked boring and ordinary. It was suitable—for the weather, for the occasion, for someone who was frightened of standing out in the crowd yet who wanted to. The part of me that wanted to stand out felt a sort of regret. I draped the dress onto me and looked in the mirror. It looked better than it had in the shop. There would be boys at the wedding and I looked good. I had lost some weight for the event and the dress hung off me as if it were on a coat hanger. Perfect. Victoria would be the one in the wedding dress. I knew I would be envious. She was the one with the boyfriend, soon to be husband, but I was slim and very nearly elegant. And he might go off her.

Sixteen and no boyfriend. Sad or what?

Eliza came in.

'Where's your dress?' I asked.

'Oh, I'm wearing this,' she explained casually, fiddling with the make-up on my table.

I was stunned. It hadn't occurred to me that you could do that. Ignore the dress put out by your mother.

Eliza started to sing.

'Get out, Eliza, there's no singing in here.'

Eliza made me feel like a blob.

'Hello, I'm Jo, Lizzie's eldest daughter,' I practised.

Mum came in and sighed. She was relieved to see the version of the daughter she wanted.

'Do I look fat in this?' I asked.

She laughed. People don't always pick up their cues in this pantomime we call life. I told Mum I was excited about the wedding. I told Eliza it would be fun. Sometimes saying it can even make it happen and I think I *was* excited, but my feelings were damp that day. Ever since getting my GCSE results, it felt as if the only emotion that dared speak its mind was anger.

I remember sitting upright in the car when we drove up to the school on results day.

'You'll be fine,' Mum had said. It was expected. By the school, by Mum, by me. Expectation had its own pressure. Failure would be a steep fall, and I was nervous when I glanced at the piece of paper in my sweaty palm. Eight A* grades, four A grades. Best results in the school. Nearly perfect. I felt relief and pride and ecstatic joy. For about four minutes, before a feeling of disappointment and then indifference misted up my mind and dampened the positive stuff. I felt like screaming out, 'So what!' I phoned up friends and relatives, hoping their pleasure and excitement would transfer to me. Like catching chickenpox. But I was immune. A blob.

Still, I think I really did feel excited about the wedding. Underneath. Perhaps I had just forgotten how to let my emotions show, like a Coke bottle with the cap stuck on. Even shaking it up wouldn't help get the fizz out.

Mum sorted out the seating arrangements in the car. She organised who could choose the radio stations. She controlled the steering-wheel and the conversation. We sang and laughed and it sounded like happiness. Or something… We had to

drive all the way to the end of Norfolk, miles and miles and miles. The end of the world.

Mum drove in trainers. She had gone on and on about her new shoes. Mostly she goes on and on about my exams, on and on about Eliza's talents, on and on about the food she sells at work and on and on about how you have to laugh. No option—you *have* to laugh. These are permanent ramblings, they never change and she recycles them on a daily basis, like the repeats on TV—you know what's coming but there's nothing else to tune in to. Then there are the new episodes. Like the shoes.

When we arrived, Eliza leant over the back of the seat and retrieved the shoes. Giggling, we hid them behind our backs and waited for Mum to open the boot and think she'd forgotten them.

We often played jokes on Mum. And on Dad. Mum and I often played jokes on Eliza. But nobody ever played a joke on me. People were too careful with me. As if I had a 'Handle with Care' sticker across my soul. Was I really that fragile, even then?