

**are we
having
fun
yet?**

ALSO BY LUCY MANGAN

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Lucy Mangan



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For Theresa, Emily and Sally.
Great mothers. Great friends.

Wednesday, 4 January

'Get up! Get up!'

We have overslept. It's good to start the new day – and in this case a new term and a new year – with a familiar failure, I think. Eases you back into routine.

'What's for breakfast?' asks my seven-year-old ('Seven and a half and a bit,' says his voice in my head) as he slides bonelessly from his bottom bunk onto the floor for another five-minute doze.

It was going to be homemade porridge. It is now going to be 'Toast. Or bread on the walk if you don't hurry up.'

'Can I have jam?' asks Thomas's five-year-old sister as she vaults from the upper bunk and lands, like an Olympic gymnast, inches from her brother's supine form. 'Or honey? Or jam and honey?'

I inwardly calculate the time saved by them happily motoring through sugar-laden breakfast versus the time shaved off their lifespans by the Type 2 diabetes that surely beckons, and hang the morning's first bagful of compromise on my mental Peg of Weary Resignation.

'You can have jam,' I tell Evie. It's fruit, and the raspberry seeds are probably fibre or something.

Eventually the children are dressed and eating ('Over the plate! Over the plate!') round the table while I check their bags against the equipment list the school sent home before the holidays, and try to keep track of infant conversation.

'D'you think,' muses Thomas, 'it would hurt more to be hit on the head by a mallet or a hammer?'

'Uh ...' I reply, transferring one of the three trainers Evie has in her bag to the matching single one in Thomas's.

'It would depend,' says their father, suddenly sweeping downstairs. He is freshly suited and booted, ready for a day's

work in chambers after his leisurely shower, and to give us the benefit of his fatherly wisdom – which apparently does not encompass having the sense to take a shorter shower at times of domestic punctuality crisis. ‘It would depend on how hard you hit the head in question with each. But the respective forces being equal, the hammer would pain it more. And why?’

The children, their young minds still energetically curious, find a barrister’s constant willingness to perform a deep dive on every passing conundrum exhilarating. I find it less so.

‘Because metal’s harder than wood!’ says Thomas.

‘Exactly.’

‘Else how would a woodcutter cut the tree down?’ says Evie, triumphantly.

I am torn between praising this impeccable piece of reasoning and protesting against the violent tone of the discussion. So I say nothing. This is always my preferred strategy, particularly before noon.

His parental responsibilities discharged, Richard turns to me. ‘I’m going to work now,’ he announces. ‘Where’s my bag, phone, travelcard, glasses, shoes, tie and documents for the thing today?’

I know where all these things are. I could lead the way to them blindfold. He turns his head from side to side as if expecting them to materialise before him in the kitchen. I say nothing, but sort of wish he was dead.

He gives up (gives in?) and goes.

‘I’m full,’ Thomas says, exhaling in loud satisfaction and blowing toast crumbs everywhere.

‘I’m not,’ says Evie, reaching for another slice, smearing it and large parts of herself with jam and pushing the whole thing into her mouth like a log into a sawmill.

‘Too bad,’ I say, hauling them upstairs to the bathroom. ‘Teeth.’

Somehow – I presume courtesy of my jam manoeuvres – we leave in time to catch Fiona and David on the way to school.

David runs on ahead with my two while Fiona and I walk for a bit in silence. It is broken by Fiona saying morosely, 'Half past fucking eight and I'm already knackered.'

Fiona says most things morosely, which is one of the reasons she is my best friend. The others are:

- a) She is, like my parents, northern. This grounds me. She and her husband Iain moved to London a couple of years ago because Iain, a university lecturer, got a job at UCL. She hates it here. But to be fair, as she points out, she hated the north too.
- b) She lives just a few doors down. After children, adult friendships become predominantly geography-based. Can they pick up the kids from school in an emergency? Can you nip round whenever you fancy or do you have to carve out the time to Make a Trip? Does a playdate involve more travelling than hours freed? Can they, basically, assist you in the fight to put some slack in what you increasingly inaccurately call your system or not? Whether you genuinely like the person or not barely matters. Though I do like Fiona. Love her, actually.
- c) Our first conversation was about having hated our NCT classes. We were the only people in our groups who had come for comradeship in the coming adversity rather than because we believed in natural childbirth. 'I'd have had mine sponsored by ICI if I could,' was and remains Fiona's last word on the subject.
- d) Our second conversation was about the apocalypse. Like me, she is both a natural pessimist and extreme catastrophiser, and this makes us a great comfort to each other. We spend much of our time together (as indeed we do apart) planning for what we consider to be the inevitable. She's basically planning to hijack a helicopter ('You need to get up, Dashwood. No point going across. They'll be closing borders. There'll be

marauding hordes. Up. Up is where you need to go. To a hill fort, ideally. Have some sense, do') while I am concentrating more on the necessary post-apocalyptic skills: farming, first aid, filtration systems, that kind of thing. Together we will make a formidable team.

- e) She will happily join me in a glass of wine at any time of day.
- f) David, though he is in Thomas's class at school, gets on with both of my children. This alone would make him a pearl beyond price even without the preternaturally calm and stoic attitude with which he faces the world. His ability to spread peace through a harassed home and heart is a gift as estimable as it is bizarre. I adore him. He inherits at least part of this talent from his father Iain. Iain does not speak. No, that's not quite right – Iain does not initiate conversation. He will happily, if never lengthily, respond once someone else starts, but he will equally happily sit in silence until and unless they do. He is simply never moved, himself, to speech. Sometimes Fiona tests him by not saying anything when he comes home from work and seeing how long it takes him to kick things off. So far she has always cracked before he has even noticed anything might be remotely amiss. It drives her mad.

When it gets too much, I remind her that she would be no better off with the opposite situation. Richard's inability to have an unexpressed thought drives me insane. 'Never a moment's pause!' I tell her. 'You've got too much peace in your house? Cry me a river!' It is good to trade perspectives like this. We theorised once that we should swap furies – she could be angry with Richard on my behalf and I on hers with Iain, in a kind of psychological Freecycle – and enjoy harmony inside our homes. But, alas, the human mind is not as fungible as secondhand bikes or courgette gluts. So on we go.

- g) She is a GP, which saves me having to go to the doctor. Apart from getting the kids vaccinated, who has time to go to the doctor?

'How was Christmas At His Mother's?' I say, as we turn the final corner before school.

'It was Christmas At His Mother's,' she says, by way of full explanation.

'Ah. And what did she give you this time?'

'A lipstick.'

The first time Fiona ever met Mrs Slater, as Iain's fiancée, the woman gave her a blouse. It was stained, the wrong size, and had a button missing. 'Thank you so much,' said Fiona the Desperately Polite Fiancée, 'but I'm afraid it won't fit.'

'It was only three pounds in Oxfam,' said her proto in-law. 'So you won't be too out of pocket.' And she held out her hand for the money. Fiona the Inwardly Convulsing Fiancée paid up. Relations have deteriorated substantially since then. The last time Mother-in-law came to visit she brought her daughter-in-law a single pleather man's glove that she had found on the floor in Boots.

'What am I supposed to do with this?' Fiona said.

'It's a perfectly good glove,' said her MIL. 'You can carry it in one hand and nobody will know you don't have the other.'

'A lipstick? That's better than usual,' I say encouragingly.

'It was one of her old ones.'

'You mean ... used?'

'Yep. She gave me a used lipstick. "I thought it would be just your colour," she said, like the absolute sociopath she is.'

'Wow.'

'Yep.'

'Wow.'

'Yep.'

Not for the first time I reflect on my good fortune in avoiding the whole in-law thing. Richard was a late, only and wholly adored child, born long after his parents had given up hope

of a family, and they died when he was in his early twenties, before we'd even met. I'm sure they wouldn't have approached even the foothills of Mrs Slater's towering monstrosity, but the older I get, the more I crave simplicity and long only to streamline my life – two things to which a partner's parents, anecdotal evidence at least tells us, rarely seem to contribute overall.

Just before we arrive at the school gates we bump into Céline who has just dropped off Romilly, ten, and Olivier, seven – Thomas and David's classmate. 'I cannot stop,' she says, stopping to kiss us both because Céline is French and, unlike the rest of us, considers there to be standards of civility and civilisation to be upheld even at eight thirty on the first Monday back at school. 'My au pair is drunk again so I must call her parents and have her taken away.'

'Like so much rubbish?' says Fiona. The ruthlessness of Céline's way of living is of perennial fascination to us.

'Well,' says Céline, rolling her perfectly made-up eyes, 'she is a rubbish au pair. She does not 'elp but 'inders.'

Though Céline definitely takes much less shit than any of us, this is not quite as cold-blooded as it sounds. Céline depends on having an au pair because her husband Philippe is a management consultant who is for ever flying off around the world to, uh, management consult? consultantly manage? Her parents are in France, Philippe's widowed mother has dementia and Céline herself is a lawyer who works all hours. (After years of being sexually harassed at work in the UK, she started specialising in sexual-harassment cases and has worked her way up to big class-action type things and is now feared throughout the corporate world. 'I don't understand why your men are such peegs,' she once said. 'In France, of course they want to have sex with you but they are charming and if you don't want to, *bien*. Everybody shrug, find someone that does want to have sex with them and carry on with work. Here they must humiliate you. Peegs.' I hope she gets to work on legislation one day. I quite fancy watching the Enoss Wiz Zese Peegs Act work its way through Parliament.)

Anyway. Although I don't know anyone else who has one, for Céline an au pair is necessary. Apparently the problem (though I feel a bit Maggie Smith in *Downton Abbey* calling the matter of finding staff a problem) is that the bad ones are ten a penny and the good ones tend to leave after six months when they realise that looking after children is, as one lovely Danish girl put it apologetically to Céline as she packed her bags, 'really, really boring'. 'I know,' said Céline. 'This is why the advert said, 'I will pay you ten thousand a year and give you a room and meals', instead of 'Come and have a lovely treat of looking after children.' But she still left.

This one arrived about three months ago and seemed good at first - quiet, considerate, vigilant with and interested in the children. Then she seemed to realise that she was alone, unfettered by parental supervision at the age of nineteen, and if not quite in a world city then certainly somewhere with excellent transport links to one and duly went nuts for it. For the last two months she has been using Céline's house merely as somewhere to crash when she gets home after a seventy-two-hour bender, and to shower before she goes to get the morning-after pill.

'We meet on Thursday, yes?' says Céline, as she prepares to dash off. 'One of my clients has been paid off by her boss but I am not telling mine, so my week is quite easy. *À bientôt*.'

Mr Handsome, the headmaster, is waiting in his immaculate suit and tie and crisp white shirt at the school gates to welcome the children back. Thrillingly, he took over from the old - in every sense - headmaster last year and has set about with his new broom ever since. He has great academy ambitions for the school. Richard misheard me at first and brightened considerably at the thought of someone with academic ambitions in charge. I had to explain that they're not quite the same thing. We've had 136 million emails about it and it seems to be more to do with having smarter uniforms and walking quietly in corridors than learning better. But we'll see.

His name's not really Mr Handsome, of course – it's Mr Harrison – but as he's ten years younger than most of us, slim, clean cut, and we are very easily pleased, he is generally known among all but the very coolest mothers (who refer to him as John, though not to his pleasing face) by this incredibly inventive nickname.

'Good morning, Evie, Thomas, David,' he says, shaking their hands and nodding to us.

'Good morning, Mr Harrison,' they chorus, and he waves us through the gates. Evie darts off to join her gang without so much as a goodbye. Thomas's little hand creeps briefly into mine for reassurance, then he advances too.

'Well,' says David resignedly, hefting his backpack more securely onto his shoulders. 'Best be off then. Ta-ra.' He trudges towards the maelstrom of running, screaming children, contempt for the whole set-up radiating almost visibly from him.

'He seems glad to be back,' I say.

'I literally had to drag him out of bed this morning,' says Fiona. 'He kept shouting, "I've learned enough! I've learned enough!"'

Mr Handsome blows his whistle and we mothers watch the children fall into lines and be led from the playground into school, youngest class – only a year younger than Evie but already so impossibly small – first. Her first day seems so long ago but somehow I remember my own as if it were yesterday. As they skip and slouch in, as temperaments dictate, their arms as thin as spaghetti, their knees as knobbly as potatoes, into the world of safety scissors, doll-sized toilets and canteen cutlery, the thirty-odd years I have lived since collapse and vanish. All is as it was. Better security on the school doors, perhaps, which would make me feel nostalgic for gentler times if I didn't remember how many unkempt weirdoes our headmistress's secretary (very much not a head teacher's PA) had to turf out on a weekly basis, back in my day.

Just as in my day, the school is a solid Victorian effort, taking absolutely no nonsense on the outside, while its innards

are a riot of colour – every classroom and corridor wallpapered with the children's work. Unlike in my day, though, I see this profusion of artwork and stories now less as evidence of the children's hard graft and more as that of the teachers'. Looking at the mounting, coloured bordering, printing, pinning, trimming and arranging that goes into making an attractive display – gold out of straw, the ceaseless dedication of it – makes me want to cry and lie down for ever.

Looking at the parents – well, that always takes me back to a slightly later era. The four or five immaculately turned-out mothers who stand in scattered groups – a clutch per year – in knee-high boots, cashmere sweaters, discreetly expensive jewellery and perfectly cut jackets, each carrying a signature bag, sporting the occasional subtle tweakment, and swishing good, good hair: these are the cool girls of secondary school all grown up. They chat and laugh carefully together, constantly scanning the perimeter, always conscious of the picture they make. Do you become conscious of the picture you make if you look like that, I wonder, or do you make yourself look like that because you're conscious of the picture you make? All of a sudden, I'm fourteen again. I didn't even enjoy it the first time round, and I was thin then.

Then there's the much larger group you remember from big school: the normal ones – louder, more relaxed, more colourful. They've grown into louder, more relaxed, more colourful mothers. They're still one big gang, who go round to each other's houses endlessly and gossip – over coffee and wine now instead of orange squash and supermarket cola – and know each other inside out. Easy friendship on the outside, eternally riven with secret rivalries and hatreds within. I know this because the fourth corner of what Richard calls our 'coven square' is Nadia, and Nadia is one of those rare people – Fiona calls her The Unicorn – who is so innately lovely that everyone welcomes her. She is the bridge between all cliques, and Fiona, Céline and I mine her for info as soon as we've got enough drink down her every Thursday night when we meet.

Their normal children generally play on the scrubby bit of grass in front of the playground fence, falling over each other like a mass of puppies in racing-green sweatshirts. Evie regards them with disdain, Thomas with envy and fear. He has inherited a double dose of physical ineptitude from his parents and knows he would be killed if he joined in. I wonder if I should update the allergies and disabilities section on his emergency contact form: 'This child can fall over lying down. Please beware.'

Around the edges of the playground are my people. The nerds. The congenitally shy. The merely antisocial. For whatever reason, perennially near the group but never of it. Occasionally I make efforts to change this by holding a coffee morning or sending out a flurry of WhatsApp messages suggesting playdates while Fiona looks at me askance, but I can't sustain either the effort or the conversations in any resultant gatherings for long enough to gain traction. 'People don't change,' she periodically tells me, but I can never decide if this is reassuring or depressing.

On the way out we get caught by queen cashmere bee Savannah (works for a merchant bank, mother of three and, most importantly of *course*, Still Thin), who between braying about how glad she was that she and the family had had such an *active* Christmas skiing instead of *lounging* around 'eating chocolates and drinking!' is forcing people to sign up to the half-term fundraiser. She and her lieutenant Susannah (stay-at-home mum of another three; both smug and bitter about it because, like all of us, she knows that work is by far the more rewarding activity day to day but she enjoys people knowing she doesn't have to; beautiful boot collection; also Still Thin) haven't decided what it will be yet. 'We're thinking either a sweet little disco, a family fun night, a spelling bee, a school sleepover, a movie night, a carwash day, a balloon pop—'

'That's when you put different amounts of money in balloons, blow them up and then sell them for the chance to pop and win!' says Susannah, with a delighted smile that absolutely cannot be real.

‘Or a pancake breakfast, a board-games tournament, or a movie night!’ finishes Savannah. ‘And, of course, all of these can be combined with fancy dress too!’

‘I’ve learned enough,’ mutters Fiona. ‘Run.’

I spend the day unable to settle at work, endlessly alternating between joy and melancholy as I always do on the children’s first day back at school. No sooner has joy won out than it’s time to go and collect the little buggers.

‘How was your day?’ I ask, as we walk home with Fiona and David.

‘Great!’ says Evie. ‘Everyone was really pleased to see me again!’

‘There’s new cushions in our quiet corner,’ says Thomas.

‘Red ’uns,’ says David. ‘Bit bright.’

Fish fingers, pasta and peas for tea. They ate the pasta.

Then bath, book and bed, except we ran out of time for the bath. I contemplate wetting the inside of the tub with the showerhead so that Richard doesn’t find out and start helpfully listing all the ways I could have done things differently throughout the day to avoid this outcome, and decide I will just tell him to shut up instead.

He gets home, as is customary when he’s working on a big case, just as the kids are falling asleep and goes in to say goodnight.

‘They say they haven’t had a bath,’ he says, as he comes downstairs and into the sitting room.

‘Shut up,’ I say, handing him a glass of wine slightly smaller than my own.

‘All right!’ he says, clinking it against mine. ‘But not for long!’

Thursday, 5 January, Twelfth Night

'Right, time to take all the Christmas decorations down!' I say.

'Yes!' says Evie, jumping up and immediately starting to tear down cards and strip the tree of baubles.

'No!' wails Thomas, his eyes filling with tears. 'I don't want Christmas to be over!'

'It is over!' says Evie, flinging cards at the bin. 'It's been over for ages!'

'But I still have a Christmas feeling inside me!' sobs Thomas. 'I want it to stay on the outside too!'

'Let's burn the tree!' says Evie, seconds away from lighting the match. 'It'll be great!'

Richard comes home to find me pinned to the sofa as one child cries on my lap while the other whirls round the room in a frenzy of sanctioned destruction.

'What's wrong with Thomas?' Richard mouths.

'The ineffable pain of life.'

'I see.'

'We're taking down the Christmas decorations, Daddy,' yells Evie, gleefully. 'But Thomas says it hurts him! He's a wally!'

'No, he's just a romantic,' says Richard. 'A porous-hearted being, who cannot help but privilege imagination and the emotional life above mere fact or practicality.'

'Can I punch you in the tummy?' Evie says, which is her usual response when she feels matters are getting away from her.

'Yes, not hard – well done. A romantic and a pugilist in the family. An excellent set-up, all in all.'

Thomas achieves emotional closure through the offer of sausages for tea, done with bacon round them like at Christmas.

'If I pretend I'm stupid and that I feel sad about Christmas tomorrow,' says Evie, 'can we have them again?'

Friday, 6 January

'Is Mary dead?' asks Thomas, through a mouthful of teatime savoury pancake. (Thursday is my work-from-home day after three in the office, so I managed to make batter. Friday is my 'day off' – i.e. the day I complete unpaid what I should have done over the previous four, then embark on cleaning the house until I get sidetracked by a hundred more urgent tasks that emerge as the day wears on – so I have managed to cook the actual pancakes because I have an actual half-hour to stand over the hob, frying and serving.) Evie has already bolted three and disappeared behind the kitchen sofa to put the finishing touches to her scale model of Porton Down or whatever she is building with her Lego back there, but her head pops up at this news of a possible fatality.

'What?' I say, startled. 'Mary in your class? No!' My mind starts racing. She can't be. I would have heard if there'd been an accident or if she'd fallen ill. The class WhatsApp would have gone mental. Part of my mind starts composing the message that will subtly check what's going on. The other part starts rearranging drop-off and pick-up arrangements if it turns out she's been kidnapped by a paedophile gang and the school institutes new rules until it's taken down, running through all our household items for things I might legitimately carry yet could be repurposed at a moment's notice if I needed a weapon to fight them off, and prioritising the local parks and playgrounds in order of clear sightlines and escape routes. Richard considers this part of my catastrophising temperament. My friends call it good planning.

'No.' Thomas sighs impatiently. 'Mary-the-mother-of-Jesus.'

Richard walks in as Thomas is speaking. He turns on his heel and walks straight back out again. I glare futilely at his retreating back. 'Why are you asking about this?' I say weakly. 'Christmas is over.'

'We had Christian assembly today,' explains the head above

the sofa. 'And people wanted to talk about the baby Jesus. The activity scene was still out.'

'Nativity,' I say.

'So?' demands Thomas. 'Is Mary dead?'

'Yes,' I say reluctantly. 'She is.'

'Why?'

'Because she lived a long time ago.'

'Oh. Is Jesus dead too?'

'Well,' I say, after a pause in which I wrestle briefly with a conscience that will not let me ignore several thousand years of Judeo-Christian doctrine, and think a variety of very unJudeo-Christian thoughts about the husband I can see sinking even further into the recesses of the armchair in the sitting room. 'That's sort of a tricky question.'

'Why?'

'Because ... because Jesus did die, but—'

'When he was a baby?' says Evie, popping up interested again now.

'No, later on, when he was a grown-up. About thirty, I think.' My phone pings. 33 says the text from Richard.

'Thirty-three, to be exact,' I say, through gritted teeth, as I send a one-fingered emoji back.

'Oh. Okay. So he did die, but you said "but". But what?'

'Well, the people who believe in Jesus say that then he came alive again.'

'Does that happen often?' asks Evie.

'Not often, no.'

'Why did it happen to Jesus, then?'

'Because he was ... because the story says that he was the son of God. So the normal rules didn't wholly apply.'

'What's that mean?'

'It means that normally, if you're just an ordinary person, you die once' – for example, if your wife murders you for dereliction of teatime and religious-education duties – 'and that's it. But if you're a ... a little bit made of God, then you can come back to life after you die. Just for a while.'

'And then what happens?'

'Uh, you tidy up a few loose ends and then you go up to Heaven to be with God.'

'That's what the story says?' asks Thomas.

'Yes.'

'Do you believe the story?' asks Thomas.

'I enjoy the story. I think it's a very good story.'

'But do you believe it?'

I am saved by Evie, who says, 'But it's Father Christmas who brings us presents, right?'

'Yes,' I say, relief driving out both hesitation and compunction over this lesser lie.

'Will he ever die?' Two infant faces creased with concern turn to me.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I've got to wash up now,' I say firmly. 'Run and ask Daddy. Don't stop until you're completely happy with the answer.'

Off they go. Jesus Christ.

Monday, 9 January

A text from my sister Kate arrives as I'm binning a batch of fish fingers I've burned because half a decade of making children's teas has not yet been sufficient to teach me to catch them at the nanosecond of viability that comes in the journey from inedible frozen lumps to inedible charcoal sticks. I bung a new load under the grill and read it.

Life as a location scout takes me to New York in a few weeks, Kate says. Do you want anything from Sephora?

YES PLEASE! I text back excitedly. I want anything, in the colours and finishes you think I should have and in service of my flaws in the order of priority you deem correct. THANK YOU!

She replies with a thumbs-up emoji, a gif of Alexis Carrington in a marabou-trimmed satin robe applying

blood-red lipstick at a mirrored dressing-table, and a fart noise to amuse – I presume – any children in the vicinity.

I muse on the phenomenon that is my sister who, despite being five years younger than me, has always been a repository of unfair amounts of wisdom. She knows everything about everything. From beauty products to violin-making (we once lost sight of her for a year when she vanished to Italy to learn how to make her own), art history and architecture (hence the location scouting job for ever bigger and more expensive productions) to zoology (her degree) – nothing escapes her, and once she has acquired any new knowledge, her mind closes round it like a steel trap and it will never be dislodged.

But what I find even more impressive than the fact that Kate is human Google is that all her life, since long before it was technically possible – I mean you're just not supposed to have those kind of synapses until you're an established adult, if then – she's always known herself. She is not married and has no children because she doesn't want them and never did. She wanted exactly what – as you'd expect from that kind of early knowledge and certainty – she's got. A life of complete freedom.

I force her into a deep 'n' meaningful conversation every couple of years ('I'm your big sister and it is my duty ...' I always begin, so that she can roll her eyes so far back I can see only the whites, and stage a dramatic collapse to prove how *boooooored* she is by the very idea) to find out if anything's changed. The only worry I've ever had is that she might one day feel trapped by the Bohemian image we all have of her and be unable to admit that her goals have altered – but it is slight, and it is fading.

The last time we spoke she pointed out that once you've moved past the last vestiges of teenage wanting-a-boyfriend-for-the-sake-of-it, the prospect of a relationship takes on a very different hue. 'If you're not someone who needs someone,' she said, 'if there's no emotional damage you need someone to fix, or void within that you need someone to fill, and if you don't want a baby – and I don't, I'm an aunt, I get all their best bits and you do all the rest – then all you've got left is a life of endless,

needless compromise with someone who's never going to suit you entirely. Haven't you?

I could muster neither a full nor convincing rebuttal to this, and not just because her unencumbered lifestyle makes Kate a fabulous and devoted aunt who – among many other contributions to my family's health and happiness – several times a year swoops in to put together spectacular bespoke birthday and assorted other celebrations for my children that have entered the annals of local legend. I have thought it wise not to cogitate for too long upon my absent stock of persuasive evidence since.

I am roused from my musing by the smell of burning. I shout to the children that it will be ham and pasta instead and make a note to buy shares in Birds Eye. Might as well insure against my incompetence where we can.

Thursday, 12 January

Our shiny neighbours are back.

'I wonder where they went this time,' I sigh, as I stand on tiptoe at the sink to watch the two of them – Sofia and Amrit, very early thirties, she possibly even late twenties – tripping gaily up the weedless path of their herringbone-brick and minimal, manicured-flowerbed garden as the taxi driver unloads their luggage. They open the door, check briefly inside, then go back down the path to collect their bags. Imagine being so young and energetic you still want to do everything together, doubling instead of halving your labour whenever you can.

'God knows,' says Richard. 'Why are you sighing, anyway? You hate holidays. You hate travelling.'

'I do now,' I agree. 'But at their age? If I'd had their money? Who knows?' We don't know what they do, this quintessential young professional couple – Amrit did tell Richard once, but Richard didn't understand ('There were too many new words in his description. I couldn't make it all hang together') – but they

travel a lot for work and then go away for holidays innumerable times a year on top of that. They don't tell us they're going – there's no need. They don't have a cat or a dog or – it goes without saying – children. (They do have a gardener, a cleaner and someone who comes and does the gutters and drains and touches up the paintwork every year. I don't know how they're better adults than we are, but there you go.) So they just lock the front door and leave. Off to enjoy themselves or to work for copious amounts of money. I love to watch them. I try to keep the sighing to a minimum.

Mrs Bradley, on the other side, is out too, of course. She is an elderly Scottish lady of the old school – of robust proportions and even more robust undergarments to keep them under control. The Battleaxe, Richard calls her, or Mrs Buttress, but I'm much too in awe of her to do likewise. I revere her. If the shiny pair on our right are what I wish I had been, Mrs Bradley is what I hope to be in the future. She speaks only when she deems it necessary. Direct (but polite) requests to move our car if she is having a compost delivery, perhaps, or occasionally snippets of gardening advice. ('Needs staking,' she will tell me, gesturing at one or more of the dismal patches of vegetation in our front garden. 'Campanula will fill in' was another. I googled campanula, bought one, and she was right. It has grown despite me. I love it.) And she has been known to exchange a few words with Evie, in whom I suspect she senses some kind of kindred spirit, if Evie's out by herself in the back garden when Mrs Bradley is doing her roses. She's also supremely independent – she does all her own gardening, cleaning, painting, gutter-clearing – and answerable to absolutely no one except her faithful aged hound, which she walks three times a day, come sun, rain or apocalypse. If there has ever been a husband, there isn't now. She told Evie once that she had never wanted children and made sure she never had any ('How?' said Evie. 'Bagpipes,' said Mrs Bradley). She has an unfurrowed brow, an implacable air and surveys her world as the undisputed mistress of it. I wish only that she wasn't an almost daily and, I can only infer

from the steely gaze and styptic blinks, unforgiving witness to my family's various failings. But one day I shall be just like her. Proud. Unflinching. Mistress of all I survey. One day. One day.

Thursday, 19 January

The day begins with Richard announcing that the dishwasher has started making a funny noise and that 'we' need to find out what's wrong with it.

'We' on the other hand know that the dishwasher has been making that funny noise for about three weeks now and that there is nothing to be done with dishwashers that are making a funny noise except wait for things to become worse, then rapidly fatal, then order the one 'we' have picked out on johnlewis.com and hope it arrives before the very last piece of crockery has been used and piled perilously high in the sink. That is the way of dishwashers and the world.

The marital 'we' is one of the most cherished aspects of our life together. It's the opposite of the royal 'we'. The Queen's means 'I'. Richard's means 'You'. 'You need to find out what's wrong with the dishwasher'; 'You need to keep this place tidier'; 'You need to [insert any tedious, repetitive, unrewarding chore here].'

Me finds it wearing.

It's a good job today is coven-meeting night, when Fiona, Céline and I head to Nadia's house (because she not only has a seven-year-old, Leo, in Thomas and David's class but also a four-year-old plus a toddler who is not yet sleeping through the night) to drink and vent. As, I suspect, has been the main purpose of coven meetings throughout history. The only difference now is that we return home to husbands eager to tell us the heroic story of how they put the children to bed on their own instead of burning us at the stake.

Sometimes my best-friend-since-school days Claire joins us too, but it depends how she's feeling. She had her third

unsuccessful round of IVF a few months ago – I went to visit as usual, and she just cried and cried, and there really wasn't anything I could say to make it less awful. At least I'm old enough now to know not to try. When I think of what my gauche younger self might have tried to dredge up in the name of comfort, I go weak with horror. Some things don't resolve into words, so keep schtum. Anyway, Claire may want to come out and drown her sorrows this week or she may still just want to hunker down at home. We understand, obviously, either way.

Of course, it rarely happens that even we core four can make it. Someone's always got a work/child/laundry crisis or is just feeling too bone-weary to drink anywhere other than their own sofa. All excuses are valid. But we keep aiming. The dream of a couple of hours in adult company outside the house gets us through the week.

My main contribution, as we split what turns out to be just the first bottle of wine (it's the first meet of the new year *and* we've all made it, so it feels only right to celebrate), is a diatribe about the dishwasher, the immorality of built-in obsolescence and (second bottle) modern capitalism generally and the accursed appliance's status as the emblem of all that is wrong with the division of labour in the Modern Marriage. The covenant and slosh in understanding and give me recommendations for plumbers. I will start calling them in the morning.

Friday, 20 January

'What do you like best about going to Grandma and Granddad's?' asks Richard, as we set off.

'The nice food, not pasta!' says Evie, bouncing up and down in her booster seat at the thought of basic nutrition being combined with flavour.

'It's so quiet,' says Thomas, dreamily. 'Even though Grandma's noisy, it's sort of quiet underneath. And calm. Our house always feels noisy even if it is quiet on top.'

‘That’s because Grandma and Granddad have *systems*,’ says Richard. ‘We’ – there’s that marital ‘we’ again – ‘will have systems one day too. And then our lives will be transformed!’

‘Will there be nice food too?’ asks Evie with interest.

‘Could everyone be quiet and listen to their audiobooks now, please?’ I say. ‘We’ll have enough family time later.’

The rest of the half-hour to my parents’ house thus passes relatively peacefully. The trading of bickering between back-of-car siblings for improving literature (or, failing that, a collection of poo and fart jokes strung along a frail narrative thread) seems to me one of the few unquestionable gains humanity has made over the last ten years. Or is it twenty? I have no sense of time any more. Richard and I once had an actual argument about how long ago the nineties were.

I, too, am almost relaxed. First of all, I still enjoy the fact that leaving the house with the children no longer involves packing nappies, bottles, wipes, warmers, muslin squares, teething rings, soft toys so beloved that they appear to function as another vital organ, more muslin squares, squeeze pouches, breadsticks, Tupperware potfuls of puréed hours of my weeping time, more muslin squares and spares of all the above before we can even think about going anywhere. Second of all, although it is only thirty minutes away, on the fringes of Kent, spending the weekend at my parents’ is like travelling to another world. They have a large, tidy house and a large, tidy garden. They have time. They have patience. And so they have us, escaping the exact opposite, at least one weekend in four. I tell them to think of it as their boomer tax: the price you pay for having lived through a time when it was possible to buy a comfortable family home without inventing a world-changing algorithm or marrying into the Russian Mafia. ‘We got tax relief on our mortgages, too,’ my mother once told me, as we sat drinking gin in the two spindly outdoor chairs my garden can accommodate. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘No,’ I said. I did try, though, several times after that. I would pour myself a large glass of something and try to conjure up

a world in which the government gave you money back for buying a home big enough for a family of four (and to put up a guest in the spare room) on the salaries of a part-time manager of a solicitor's office and a dentist, but it gave me nosebleeds. 'Maybe don't try any more,' said Richard, in one of his rare moments of usefulness.

My mother's job, incidentally, was meant to be full time. It had been for the man she took over from, but she got it down to three days a week within a month. So she told them they could compromise and just pay her for four ('Well, clearly I was better at the job than they deserved,' she said, when I once remarked on the boldness of this move). And they did, for the next thirty years. I try to channel this energy into my own life occasionally but somehow I never quite succeed.

We have barely braked outside my parents' house before my mother is wrenching open the car doors, gathering the children into her arms and smothering them with kisses.

'Hello, my darlings! What would you like to do today? Give me a cuddle! I thought we'd make apple crumble, then do some painting – you've lost a tooth! We'll have to tell the tooth fairy you're here tonight! We'll write a note ...' She waves vaguely at me, her firstborn, who is but an indistinct non-grandchild-shaped blur to her these days. The sound of happy chatter fades as they disappear into the house.

'When I was little,' I remark, in wonderment, to Richard, 'I sometimes used to sit with my toes clenched and she used to slap them.'

'Why?'

'To get me to relax.'

'She used to slap you to get you to relax?' says Richard, as he wrestles the suitcase out of the boot, followed by the boxes of secondhand books and toys Mum has demanded we donate to all the charity events she's involved in.

'Yes. It annoyed her that I wasn't.'

'Almost everything about you is explained.'

We go in to find Dad in his usual place – the kitchen

– somehow contriving to read the paper while chopping carrots and watching four different pans simmering on the spotless hob in preparation for a delicious meal that will be served on the dot of six without him breaking sweat, crying or suddenly panicking about a forgotten ingredient and trying to run in seven directions at once, which is what happens every time I am foolish enough to attempt such a culinary feat.

He acknowledges my entrance with a raised hand, which is a northerner's hug. 'It's slow roast pork belly,' he says, by way of greeting, because he knows where my priorities lie. 'With red cabbage, mashed potato and honey roast carrots. I've done Yorkshire puddings too, though I shouldn't. But then I thought, Why not? You're dead long enough. You can take the leftovers home in that.' He nods towards a washed ice-cream carton. 'Your mother's performed her calculations and says it'll be just the right size.'

'Then I'm sure it will be. Where have the kids gone?'

'They're helping Grandma turn the mattress,' says Dad.

This is my mother's genius. The children fit in with her day and her chores, not the other way round. Why did I not see this in time? My whole life could be different.

The three of them come galumphing down the stairs, the children both with duvets round their necks like giant capes.

'I take it,' Richard murmurs into my ear as we watch their descent, 'you would have been literally killed for this?'

'Maimed, certainly. Severely, probably.'

'I'm Queen Emperor Captain Evelyn the Best!' roars Evie.

'I'm going to make a nest and fall asleep!' cries Thomas, crumpling delightedly at the foot of the stairs and curling up.

'I'm going to finish altering Granddad's trousers,' says my mother, perching on the sofa and pulling the sewing box towards her.

'What does that mean?' says Evie.

'It means I've bought him a new pair of navy trousers from Marks & Spencer because I couldn't stand the sight of the old ones any more.'

'Gravy stains,' says Dad, sadly, wandering in from the kitchen.

'He won't wear an apron when he's cooking! He's daft!'

'I can't reach behind to do it up.'

'Then ask me!'

'You're always out or up a ladder somewhere.'

'Then you'll have to think ahead.'

'What are you doing to the trousers?' asks Evie, a child rarely deflected from her original goal.

'I'm setting three inches in at the waist and taking four inches off the legs.'

'Why?'

'Because getting clothes to fit a seventy-seven-year-old man of Irish Catholic stock, like your grandfather, is tricky.'

'It's like trying to dress a potato,' says Dad.

'Can we do apple crumble once you've finished?' says Evie.

'Of course, my darling. Have a sweet while you're waiting.'

I look at Richard to urge protest but I have lost him to the assorted actual newspapers my parents still actually buy. I turn back.

'Can I have a glass of wine, Dad?' I say.

'Of course, love,' he says. 'Or there's prosecco in the fridge?'

'Should you?' says Mum, peering up over her sewing glasses at me. 'You're driving.'

'On Sunday,' I say. 'I'm driving on Sunday.'

'Still,' she says, 'you can't be too careful. You've got my grandchildren to think of now, you know.'

I make my way to the kitchen to ensure that it's a large glass.

Mum takes the children upstairs to give them their joint bath. I hear giggling as she washes their hair. I text my sister: *You know how in hot weather we can still feel the pulse of blood in our heads along the groove Mum wore in them while shampooing our tender scalps every other night as if they had done her a recent and grievous personal wrong? It's different now.*

Times change she replies. And the most unexpected people change with them. Drink.

Saturday, 21 January

I come downstairs after an extravagant lie-in. Had I known before I got pregnant that sleeping in till nine or managing to complete a bowel movement without anyone interrupting me with a Lego or Nickelodeon emergency would come to seem as much of a treat as a weekend in the Maldives – I imagine – I would have thought longer about chucking the Microgynon away. I yawn my way to the kitchen, wondering exactly where the Maldives are and why I don't know, to find Dad teaching Thomas to play chess.

I know he is a man with the patience of a saint on a Thorazine drip, but even so this seems like quite an undertaking.

'He's seven, Dad,' I remind him. 'And until very recently his favourite pastime was biting balloons.'

'Be that as it may,' Dad replies.

Richard's eyes are alive with hope. 'This could be his thing!' he says. 'He could be a chess prodigy. You just don't know until they sit down with a board and ... just ... get it. He could be the Bobby Fischer of south-east London.'

'Did Bobby Fischer like to bite balloons?'

'One thing has nothing to do with the other. A child can contain multitudes.'

Thomas and Granddad sit at the kitchen table and frown over the board together. 'I love Grandma and Granddad's table,' Thomas once said in awe. 'There's never anything on it. You can always just sit down and ... use it.'

'That, you little scrote, is because Grandma considers any sign of human habitation in a home a moral failing and Granddad has been wholly committed over the past fifty years to the path of least resistance,' I did not say.

'And finally,' says Granddad, as I make my morning coffee,

'the castle can go forwards or sideways. Never diagonally. But the bishop can *only* move diagonally.'

'Why?'

'Because that's the way the game works.'

'Who invented the game?'

'Well, that's a very interesting question ...'

'I just want one of your short answers, Granddad.'

'People in India.'

'Can *they* move diagonally?'

'Yes. Now, the point of the game is to try to protect your king while trying to take your opponent's.'

'Which one's Yurruponents? Is it the horse?'

'No, I mean – you have to try to take the king that belongs to whoever you're playing against.'

'But the king is boring! I don't want to protect him.'

'What do you mean?'

'You said he can only move one space at a time! That's stupid. I like the queen. She can do everything! Look – zoom, zoom, zoom! All the way across the board if she likes. It's her we should keep.'

'Attaboy,' says my mother, who is kneeling in front of the ancient chest of drawers in the corner of the kitchen and, with Evie's help, sifting through a drawerful of what some would call precious family mementoes and she calls useless clutter. The light of divestment shines bright in her eyes. She makes Marie Kondo look like Steptoe.

'He clearly has an indefatigably curious and questing mind,' says Richard. 'It's a good sign.' But a little bit of the light in his own eyes has gone out.

'Why don't we let you make your first move?' says Granddad. 'Off you go!'

'I want to checkmate you.'

'You can't do it on a first go. It takes time.'

'How much time?'

The light is definitely dimming in Richard's eyes.

'It depends.'

'I'll tell you what's a much better game I've got, Granddad.'

'What's that?'

'Let's pretend all the pieces are Transformers,' offers Thomas. 'The queen is Optimus Prime, the stupid king is Chase, the horse is Blades, the castle is Boulder, and the bishop is – what's the last Transformer's name, Granddad?'

'I don't know,' says Dad, resignedly.

'Heatwave!' shouts Grandma, as she consigns a lapful of family history to the bin, held open by an eager Evie.

'And the pawns can be everyone from *PAW Patrol!* Pawn Patrol! Do you get it, Granddad?'

Thomas excitedly gathers up the pieces, jumps down from the table and starts setting out his new game on the floor.

'I suppose Bobby Fischer never had Nickelodeon to contend with,' says Richard, mournfully.

'It's game over,' I say, with a sigh. 'Checkmate.'

Sunday, 22 January

I come downstairs after another beautiful, restorative lie-in to find Granddad at the kitchen table frowning over the chess-board again. 'Has Thomas gone to the loo?' I ask. 'Or are you playing against yourself?'

'No – Evie wanted me to teach her after breakfast. She's the one in the loo. And I think,' he says, peering closer at the board, 'she's left me in checkmate.'

'In ten years' time,' says Richard, overhearing, 'she'll be in prison or ruling over London as an independent state. I await with eager interest to see which.'

Monday, 23 January

Bloody Mondays.