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Opening extract from
All About Pumpkin
The Diaries of Bluebell Gadsby

Written by
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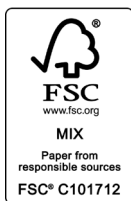
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Being a combination of conventional diary entries and transcripts of short films shot by the author on the camera she was given for her thirteenth birthday, beginning at the end of summer.

The Film Diaries of Bluebell Gadsby

Scene One Arrival

Plumpton railway station. A single track, an old stone platform, a bench, a low white building housing a ticket office (empty), toilets (closed), a café/newspaper/sweetshop (also closed). On the railway side, overgrown hedgerows bursting with cow parsley and brambles. On the Plumpton side, a road stretching one way into town, the other out towards the Devon countryside. The car park, mostly made of potholes, is empty. The whole scene bakes in the afternoon sun.

Two children sit in the shade of the station building. JASMINE (ten years old, long tangled black hair,

sparkly flip-flops, not very clean dress) sits on top of her suitcase, eating chocolate biscuits and scowling. TWIG (twelve years old, skinny, brown hair flopping into his eyes) sits on the floor, reading Victor Hugo's one-thousand-three-hundred-and-seventy-six-page novel *Les Misérables*. He mouths the words as his eyes follow them across the page. Their sister BLUEBELL (aka CAMERAMAN, fourteen) is off picture behind the camera she uses to record her family. She wears denim cut-offs, a purple T-shirt, faded green sneakers and tortoiseshell glasses. Her long brown hair hangs past her shoulders in two neat braids.

They are waiting for their grandmother.

JASMINE, to CAMERAMAN

Try calling her again.

CAMERAMAN (BLUEBELL)

I told you, there's no signal.
There's never any signal here. She's
probably just stuck in traffic.

TWIG

She's over an hour late.

JASMINE

What if she *never* gets here? What if she's had an accident and died?

TWIG

We'd get the next train home.

JASMINE

(ignores him)

What would happen to us without a telephone? We'd be stuck here for ever!

CAMERAMAN

(sounding a little disapproving)
If Grandma died it would also be very, very sad.

TWIG

And a little bit our fault, seeing as she was driving here to pick us up.

JASMINE

But I don't even *want* to be here!

Jasmine's wails are cut short by the sound of an approaching engine. Camera turns to entrance of the car park. A Land Rover (the really old kind like you sometimes see in films) bounces towards them across the potholes, and stalls in front of them. Grandma waves cheerily out of the window.

Saturday 19 July

It was meant to be the four of us and Mum coming to Devon in the car, but then Twig dropped the baby on his head.

He was just trying to pick Pumpkin up from his cot because he was crying, but Pumpkin is really wriggly. It wasn't a big drop. He only bounced a tiny bit on his mattress, but he howled for ages, it was five o'clock in the morning and Mum was even more tired than usual because Zoran and Gloria came for supper before he went to Bosnia to visit his sister, and they stayed for ages.

'I was trying to help,' Twig explained when Mum staggered into Pumpkin's room to see what all the noise was, but she told him to just go back to bed.

'I have had the most shocking night,' she told Grandma on the phone this morning. 'I am thoroughly exhausted and it's not safe for me to drive. I'm afraid we shan't be able to set out until I've had a nap.'

Grandma, who is often quite tactless and who shouts so loudly on the phone that everyone can hear her, yelled 'REALLY, CASSIE, I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT AFTER SIX BABIES YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO COPE!' and Mum hung up and called Dad on his film set in New Zealand.

‘We’re about to start shooting,’ he told her.

‘I don’t care,’ she said.

She waved us out of the room. We tried listening at the door but we couldn’t hear anything except for when Mum shouted, ‘Why do you think I’m tired, David, I’m looking after four children single-handed; one never sleeps more than two hours at a time and the others are trying to kill him!’

Jas and I looked at Twig.

‘I was trying to *help*,’ he repeated.

‘I don’t care if it’s too much for your mother since her fall,’ Mum was yelling. ‘If she can’t cope with three responsible children without me there, then they can stay here. I can’t look after an old lady, three kids and a baby.’

‘Is Grandma the old lady?’ Twig whispered.

‘I suppose so,’ I said.

‘And are we the responsible children?’

‘You’re not,’ Jas said. ‘You’re a baby dropper.’

‘Shh,’ I said. ‘I think Mum’s crying.’

And then we all jumped up and pretended to be very busy on the landing as Mum came out of her room, sniffing a little bit and saying that if we hurried, we just had time to catch the 10.46 from Paddington.

‘I thought we were driving,’ Twig said.

‘I’m not coming to Devon.’ Mum couldn’t quite look at us as she said that, but I could see her eyes were red. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just for a little bit.’

‘But what about Pumpkin?’ Jas cried.

‘Also staying in London with me.’ Mum smiled, the way people do when they really hope you’re not going to make a fuss.

‘For how long?’ Twig asked.

‘A couple of weeks.’ She still couldn’t look at us. ‘Maybe three? I’m sorry, darlings. Just think of it like any other year. You always go to Grandma’s on your own.’

‘This is my first summer holiday with a baby brother,’ Jas declared. ‘If Pumpkin’s staying, so am I.’

Mum closed her eyes and said very calmly, ‘You are all going to Devon.’

Jas complained all the way to Paddington, but it didn’t change a thing, not even when she started to cry.

‘Be good for your grandmother,’ Mum said. ‘And I’ll see you soon.’

It’s not true that we always come to Devon on our own. Before Iris died, Mum and Dad always used to come too. This was supposed to be the year when Mum finally came with us again, and she was going

to stay all summer because she's on maternity leave until September.

She looked relieved as the train pulled out of the station. We all saw it. The train doors closed, and she held Pumpkin up and waved his little hand at us, and then her whole body relaxed as she buried her face in his neck.

'Your fault,' Jas snapped at Twig.

'IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!' he roared.

'Please shut up,' I said.

'You can't talk to us like that,' Jas informed me.

'I can, because I'm the oldest.'

'You are *not* the oldest,' Twig pointed out.

'I am for as long as Flora's with Dad in New Zealand,' I said, and everyone sulked.

Grandma's Land Rover has room for three in the front, with two benches facing each other in the back. It used to be blue, but over the years it's faded to a sort of dark grey. The engine makes a rattling noise like it's dying, you can't lock the doors and there's a hole in the roof, but Grandma loves it. Years ago, when she and Grandpa still had dogs and sometimes sheep, they put a dog guard separating the front from the back, and they never took it away. The result is that anyone who goes in the back always

ends up feeling like they should really be an animal, especially as Grandma has never bothered to clean it up. There are still dog blankets all over the floor, and a stainless steel water bowl, at least four leads and quite a lot of straw.

When we were little, we used to curl up on the floor and pretend to be puppies.

‘Get in, get in!’ Grandma cried. ‘The sun is shining and the garden awaits!’

‘You’re late,’ Jas informed her, climbing into the back.

‘Only a few minutes!’ she carolled.

‘Over an *hour*.’

‘SHALL WE GO CROSS COUNTRY?’

Grandma didn’t wait for an answer, but veered suddenly off the road onto a farm track.

Bowling across the countryside with the windows wide open, hedgerows bursting with flowers, the bright blue sky above and the wind whipping through my hair, I almost forgot about everything – Mum not coming, and Pumpkin, and Iris. The track came to an end and we were back on the single-track road across the moor. The landscape opened up, the moor spread out on either side as far as we could see, and despite everything I felt a bubble of excitement at being here. I peered through the dog guard into

the back. Jas was still sulking. Twig was hanging on to a hand strap with his eyes closed and his face turned into the wind.

‘Woof,’ I said. Twig opened his eyes and smiled.

‘Woof woof,’ he replied.

And then we turned off the road onto the private lane down to Horsehill. The trees thickened as we came off the moor, and the lane became less tarmac and more grass and moss, and we were driving through the old white gate into the gravel courtyard and there was the house, all grey stone and big windows, and we were here.

‘Home!’ Grandma stalled again and pulled on the handbrake. She clambered down from the Land Rover and reached under her seat for a walking stick.

‘Since when do you use that?’ I asked.

‘Just get those cases into the house,’ she said, and hobbled away from the car.

‘Why’s she walking like that?’ Jas asked.

‘She had that fall.’ I frowned, remembering. ‘Right after Pumpkin was born. It was raining and she slipped. Mum was upset because Dad spent all the Easter holidays shuttling between London and here.’

‘But that was ages ago,’ Jas said.

‘She seems OK now,’ Twig observed.

Grandma was standing at the front door, waving her stick at us.

‘I MADE CHOCOLATE CAKE!’ she bellowed. ‘And it’s not going to eat itself!’

Mum always used to say that Iris was always most herself when she was here, because she was free to do everything she loved most, climbing and exploring and running about. On the first night of every holiday, she used to lie in the bed next to mine and plan everything we were going to do. Even after she died, I would still lie in bed every first night, thinking about all the things I was going to do, the same things I did with her, like our favourite walks and eating raspberries straight from the bush and lying in the stream with our heads under water. That’s the thing about having a twin sister. It’s been four years since she was hit by that van, but in my head, she’s always with me.

I was planning not to come this year. Dodi invited me to go to Spain with her family, to her parents’ villa in the south where they go every summer. ‘We’ll spend all our time at the beach,’ she said, ‘and we’ll get you a tan and a new haircut and nice clothes and find you a boyfriend. Now that I’m going out with Jake, you have to have one too.’

Even though I’ve told her a million times that

I'm really happy for her and she's still my best friend, Dodi still feels awkward about the fact that she's going out with Jake because I went out with him first. She never listens when I tell her I don't even *want* a boyfriend, but I don't – not one like Jake anyway, who is lovely but a bit hopeless. One day, I want to fall in love like Flora did with Zach – totally, completely, absolutely. I want a soul mate – like Iris, though different, obviously. Otherwise I'm not really interested.

I did want to go to Spain though, because I thought it would be nice to go somewhere with no sad memories, and also fun to be with Dodi and swim in the Mediterranean Sea and reinvent myself as a glamorous, suntanned, sophisticated person, but Dad said no because Grandma would be disappointed.

'Grandma would totally understand,' I argued. 'She loves travelling. She's always zooming around the world doing exciting things.'

'She would be disappointed,' he repeated. 'And besides . . .'

'Besides what?'

But he wouldn't say.

So I'm in bed now, trying to hold on to the excitement I felt in the car. The night's still warm

and the window's wide open, and outside I can hear all the sounds of the countryside at night – animals hunting, a car far away, the stream rushing by under the bridge. Horsehill is exactly the same as it is every summer. The house is big and friendly and smells of wood smoke and Grandma's cooking. Apples and plums are starting to grow on the trees, the kitchen garden is full of carrots and lettuces and tomatoes. Marigold and Hester, the fat old ponies, are dozing in the paddock, roses are climbing all over the walls and a few fields away the moor is sitting purple and green, waiting for us. Before coming to bed, I said goodnight to Jas and Twig in the room they always sleep in, with the same night light on because Twig doesn't like the dark. I have the same white bedspread over the same green and pink flowered duvet cover.

If Zoran were still our nanny and not an aspiring musician going out with a glamorous riding instructress, maybe Mum wouldn't be so tired. Maybe he would be here with us, and she would have come too, with Pumpkin. And if Flora were here, the room would be a mess. There would be clothes all over the floor, and empty mugs and glasses and chocolate wrappers on the table. She'd be sitting up in bed listening to music and complaining about

there being no Wi-Fi or mobile reception and how she didn't know how she was expected to survive without hearing from Zach every five minutes and how no one understands what it's like to be in love.

But Flora isn't here. She is in New Zealand with Dad, playing a tiny part in the film he wrote about King Arthur, and we are here for the first time without her, Zoran is in Sarajevo and Grandma has a stick and Mum is staying in London with our four-month-old baby brother.

Everything feels different this year.