Opening extract from

Living with Teenagers. 3 kids, 2 parents, 1 Hell of a Bumpy Ride

Written by

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Published by

Headline

Acknowledgements

These columns would never have existed if Sally Weale at *The Guardian* hadn't been such an inspired and trusting (and trustworthy) editor, convincing me that it was finally time someone told the truth about life with teenagers. A big thank you to her, as well as Beccy Gardiner and Steve Chamberlain on *The Guardian* family pages, who have gone to such great lengths to conceal our family's identity.

And I would never have dared make all of this into a book without the infinite wisdom and protection of a wonderfully secret agent who took me on out of nowhere, and her ruthlessly discreet assistant who has never blabbed. Thank you so much to them, as well as that cabal of best friends who have always known the truth and kept it to themselves. And to my darling husband, whose idea and fault all of this was. I mean the kids, not the book.

A Letter to My Teenage Children

Dear Eddie, Becca and Jack,
If, one day when you're no longer teenagers, you ever bother or dare to read this book, there are some things you should know.

I always wanted children. Maybe because I loved being a child myself, I don't know. But all my motherly instincts always seemed to be there, ready and waiting. I can't remember a time when I didn't want to take care of things, feed and stroke them, make them safe, make them happy, make them feel loved.

So I had pets (far too many). Some of them settled in and joined the family and some of them died and when they died I grieved for them, passionately. I loved my dolls, too. I'd dress and undress them and line them up on the lawn in the sunshine and bathe them in a bright-red washing-up bowl – Sindy, Sarah, Suzette and Claire. They were my babies, my earliest memory of happiness. You'll laugh because none of you, not even Becca (especially not Becca!), ever played with dolls, but to me those children

were absolutely real. I remember the huge wave of responsibility and love I felt at night when I fell asleep pressing my hot seven-year-old cheek against Sindy's shiny plastic hair.

I was lucky. In my twenties, life was smooth and happy and things seemed to work out for me. I had a job I really liked and then I met your father and began to love him at a time when I was still young enough not to have to worry at all about when – or even if – my real babies would come along. Looking back, this was more of a luxury than I realised. There seemed to be so much time then – enough time for everything. I never doubted I would be a mother one day.

We didn't have much money and our jobs were constantly changing, but we were perfectly happy. So it felt absolutely right when, after being married for a couple of years, we were talking about babies and your father shrugged and said, 'What are we waiting for?' One of the things I love about your father is that he never sits around waiting for real life to start. He doesn't hesitate or make excuses. He just gets on and lives.

So you were very much wanted, all three of you. And as soon as we knew I was expecting Eddie, the first, we did all the things that all careful, excited parents-to-be do. We went to the classes, we read all the books. Your father teased me about how hard I revised, how I could have sat an advanced exam in pregnancy. Every night in bed I lay there, flicking backwards and forwards, frowning, reading all about which trimester I was in, how to breathe, how

to walk, what to eat and what not to eat, trying to reconcile the strange, cold diagrams on the page with what was happening inside me.

That was you, Eddie. You were slowly taking shape inside me, cell by cell, limb by miraculous limb. The first time I felt you moving – butterfly wings snaffling in my belly – I burst into tears. Because already I knew I loved you and suddenly I realised how very much there was at stake, how much there was to lose.

I look back and think how touchingly optimistic we were, how much we trusted in our bodies, our love, luck, life. I don't remember ever being scared, or even apprehensive, about this monumental journey we were setting out on, this thing from which there was no turning back. We thought we knew exactly what we were doing and we never for one moment imagined anything could or would go wrong. But we were very young then – not a lot older than you are now, Eddie. I think if I had done all this in middle age I would have been so much more cautious, so much more afraid.

Your three births were the best moments of my life. Yes, they were messy and painful, but still in my memory they shine out as bright and uncomplicated – the kind of moments when everything suddenly comes clear. I remember a feeling of utter well-being. I was so alert and awake and alive. I remember seeing each of your faces for the first time and experiencing that full-on flood of recognition which is love.

We really liked being parents. We liked the romance of it. I think we imagined that as long as we tried to do things right – as long as we fed you good food, kept you warm and safe, held your hands, took special care of you – it would all turn out fine. So I breastfed you all for as long as I could and then researched exactly what teat and bottle to use. We washed, we sterilised, we made up formula milk in exactly the right proportions, rejected shop-bought baby food for the freshest home-cooked. Your father boiled and puréed carrots and parsnips with a look of intense satisfaction on his face. He was quite proud that, by blending it with peas and potato, he could get spinach down you. Especially you, Jack.

As you grew older, we encouraged you to take care of your teeth, bought you the right width-fitting shoes and taught you all to kick a ball and to swim (hoping to cure Becca's long-held terror of hair-washing). We got you all doing sport, delayed the purchase of a Playstation for as long as we could take the moaning, and agonised over how much TV you should watch each day. We got as many expert opinions as we could about whether Eddie should have his tonsils out, reassured Becca that it was great that she was the only girl in the basket-ball team, worried about how to break it to Jack that his beloved stick insects were not 'standing still' but dead.

We checked you all regularly for nits and worms and when you had them we treated you with the least harmful, most organic and natural formula. We washed you, dried

you, dealt with nappy rash, chickenpox, ear infections, projectile vomiting, nightmares and homework.

It didn't stop there. We read you books, told you stories and jokes, we watched your endless, hilariously shambolic home-rehearsed plays. We bought you Lego and Duplo and (second-hand) Brio and covered the kitchen table in newspaper so you could paint. We helped you make necklaces out of pasta and castles out of cardboard and your father endlessly changed batteries in all your various gadgets, while I sat up late making Ninja Turtle outfits out of old curtains, always with a matching one for Becca's teddy.

We tried hard to treat your growing minds with care and respect. We tried to talk openly with you about life and death and how babies are made. Working on the basis that information is always empowering, we tried to tell you honestly what the world was like, to answer your questions without either frightening you or giving you more than you could cope with. When our (elderly) dog fell down dead, we let you see and touch the body, and took it as a good sign that you immediately got bored and asked for burgers.

We took great care of you, but not (we hoped) too much care. We wanted you to be safe, but we also believed that children need to be allowed to take risks. So we vetted each space for possible danger – we knew where the ponds and biting dogs and strangers were – but still we tried hard to give you freedom and time. I knew that my own

imagination had been nourished by long childhood afternoons left unsupervised in the open fields, so we tried to give you that, too, the essence of a good growing-up – the chance to explore, to make your own way, your own mistakes, to get dirty, exhilarated, straightforwardly exhausted.

We did the things, in other words, that all loving parents do. And do you know, we enjoyed every single moment. That's the eerie hypnotic spell of parenthood: that you find yourself just lapping it up, the good, the wonderful, the scary and the plain old middle-of-the-night awful. If all this sounds a little smug, then maybe it's meant to. I think we were very smug, your father and I. I think back then we thought we'd got it mostly right and at the same time managed to enjoy it, too. Family life was great. You were bright, happy, delicious, naughty, funny children and we adored you. Could any parent ask for more?

And then, one by zombie one, you turned into teenagers.

How could we not have seen it coming? When you have babies, toddlers, people warn you that It All Goes By So Fast. You laugh and say I Know What You Mean. But you don't. You have no idea. You don't realise till it's too late. And it happens in a jolt, a burst, an instant. It happens on a dull October night when you're innocently chopping tomatoes for supper, wiping the counter, boiling the kettle, while your back is turned. There's no warning, no sign or clue to alert you to the fact that life is about to change completely.

One day Jack was still climbing into our bed for a morning cuddle (warm and pissy pyjamas, bliss of curly, honey-blond hair) and the next moment there he is, towering four inches above me in an open doorway, spotty and hooded and growling. One day Becca was crouched on the floor in white vest and knickers, chewing the long dark end of her plait and asking me what colour crayon she should use for the princess's hat; the next she's staring at me with narrowed, sooty eyes and asking me if I realise how much everyone hates me.

And Eddie, our calm, serious, frank, open Eddie. I still don't know where that boy went. The boy who was kind to animals, who tried hard to be good at cricket, who used to pat my hand and ask me brightly how my day had been. My first baby, my darling.

'One day he'll tell you to fuck off,' his father had joked when we brought him home from the hospital in his Moses basket and the fuzzy black curve of the top of his tiny head nearly broke my heart. I laughed. We both laughed. And then one day, of course, he did.

Sometimes I feel that the harder we try as parents, the more we are destined to get it wrong. Some days I feel that we probably did get it all wrong – that we knew nothing in those days of brown bread and carrots and Start-rite. Sometimes, weeping at the latest insanity in our family, I can begin to think it's all pretty hopeless.

But then suddenly it's another day and it'll only take the smallest thing – a sliver of the old Ed showing

through, or Becca caught looking at me with soft eyes, or Jack struggling so hard to be reasonable that he practically implodes with the effort. And your heart lifts and you think yes, it's true what people say. It does go fast, you do lose them . . . but you also get them back. Leave the nursery window open and they fly back in eventually.

So one day, instead of fuming about whatever expletive had most recently been flung at me, I sat down and wrote about it. Writing it calmed me down. It also made me laugh. It made me see how absurd some of my expectations are, how ludicrously selfishly teenagers behave, and how much I still love and enjoy them despite all this. And it made me realise – with a sinking heart – that I know nothing. The longer I am a parent, the less I seem to know. I used to think experience counted for something, but I'm not so sure any more. As parents we are programmed (thank you, God) to forget. So each day is a new day. Into the battle. Your only reliable weapons are consistency, forgiveness and love. Out of this feeling a newspaper article, and then a column, and now this book were born.

I've insisted on anonymity for all of us throughout. It's not because I'd mind you reading it all one day if you want to. I stand by every single word that is written here and it's all true, all done (I hope) with warmth and love. But I know that teenage life is tough enough, excruciating enough, and I don't think you need this – the attention

and glare of it. It would be too embarrassing, and just by existing (I know you'd all rush to agree) I've embarrassed you enough already.

One more thing I need to tell you.

Having babies is the most transforming thing. It changes everything – every idea, every person, every shape, idea or colour. Everything is different from that moment on, and you never get your old self back. The funny thing is, you don't even want to. All you can think of is making things OK for your child. And holding your breath and keeping all your fingers crossed and shutting your eyes and hoping things will turn out all right.

You three have frightened me, amazed me, delighted me, upset me, driven me to seriously low and high places – despair but also, definitely, ecstasy. You've been my best and worst times, you've made me laugh till I cried, and sometimes you've just made me cry. But still somehow – simply by existing – you fill me with hope. Even when we've screamed and shouted at each other in the morning, when I hear the sound of your key in the door, your gloomy little sigh as your school rucksack hits the ground, my heart jumps.

And that's it, that's all that matters. My life has been a million times bigger, better, richer and more special for having you three. You're such a gift, such a blessing, my biggest and best adventure. Nothing has made me feel so alive as being your mother, and I cannot thank you enough for this.

I love you. That's the big thing, the only unchanged thing, the big, definite unchangeable. I love you and I'll always love you – steadily, crazily, hopefully. That's the deal your father and I made when you came out of us and there's no getting out of it. To keep on loving you whatever happens, however surprising or sad or worrying or uncontrollable life turns out to be.

I know nothing at all about being a parent, except how good it feels to love you.

May 2007

Eddie's Parts

Remember those long-ago days of dealing with toddlers? Guileless, smiley darlings one moment, venom-spitting monsters the next? Remember how an entirely innocent action on your part – the inadvertent suggestion of the wrong dungarees, the Weetabix milk straight from the fridge – could provoke unquenchable two-year-old fury and, in one quick second, transform a sunny morning into the black den of hell?

Well, what they never tell you is that a dozen or more years on you'll find yourself right back there in that same dark place. Except that this time there's a crucial difference: they're taller than you. And cleverer. And considerably more ruthless – only this time they can't be strapped into a pushchair or bodily carted to their rooms. This time you'll be the one sobbing helplessly, banging your head against the glass wall of their impenetrable selfishness.

When our Eddie was two and a half he was a happy boy. But if you produced the wrong-coloured bib in the morning, his lip would wobble and, like an insufficiently

electrocuted cat, he'd stiffen, throw his head right back and attempt to slide off the high chair. So either you gave in and got him the red one (it was all about fire engines) or you stuck with the lilac and fastened your safety belt. No prizes for guessing which option was favourite.

Now, a decade and a half on, here he is, seventeen furious years old, over six foot, skinny rock 'n' roll arms, hair straggling onto his shoulders. January, 7 a.m. Deepest winter. It's the first day of term and he stands on the stairs, towel round his waist, yowling.

'What's the matter, darling?' I am all motherly zen calm.

'It's this fucking bollocks, for fuck's sake, I'm so fucking sick of it. I can't go on like this.'

'Like what, sweetheart?'

'With no fucking clean underwear, that's what. Where the fuck is all my clean underwear?'

'Have you looked in your drawers?'

'Of course I fucking well have, you fucking moron. What do you take me for?'

'Well, the laundry basket is empty so are you sure there are no dirty pants on the floor of your room?'

'Oh, fuck off!'

He thumps back upstairs and I stand for a moment in the hall. It's a wintry morning, dawn struggling to squeeze itself between the trees. He just told me to Fuck Off. I sprint upstairs two at a time, passing a white-faced Rebecca (fifteen) on her way down. She raises two dramatic hands in front of her face and flinches as though I'm about to assault her.

'There's food on the table,' I say, ignoring the histrionics.

I push open Eddie's door without knocking. His cat sits hunched on his bed, watching the wall as if it's TV. 'Don't you dare tell me to fuck off just because you and you alone have failed to put your underpants in the wash,' I tell him. I bend and gather no fewer than three dirty pairs off the floor.

He stares at me as though I'm a serial killer. 'I – have – no – underwear,' he says slowly.

'What do you call these?' I shake them at him.

In addition to the underwear, his floor currently boasts a light sprinkling of Rizla papers, three encrusted bowls (mustard? banana? worse?) and fifty Minidiscs. Maybe a hundred.

He continues to assess me with cool, glittery eyes. 'I really think you should calm down, you know. Listen to yourself. Are you in therapy? You should be.'

I want to slap him. I want to cry. Instead, I turn and leave the room.

His younger brother, Jack (fourteen), stumbles onto the landing in a haze of deodorant and with the punched-in-the-eyes look of someone who's formed too intense a relationship with his computer. Jack has promised he will turn over a new leaf this term and get all his school stuff ready the night before.

'What's up?' he says, seeing I look tearful. He has his mud-scuffed school bag in one hand and battered art folder in the other. I silently pray that his pen, travel pass and house keys are also in there somewhere.

'Just please go and eat some breakfast,' I tell him.

He gazes at me. 'You're scary.'

'Scary? Why?'

'I don't know. You just are.'

Downstairs I sink into a kitchen chair.

Jack sniffs the milk carton. 'You don't get it, do you?' he says.

'Get what?'

'Oh, never mind.'

When they were little, we had three pale beech chairs from Scandinavia – I'd read they were good for posture. We used to line them up in these little chairs – Eddie, Becca, Jack – and feed them vegetables, wholemeal toast, mashed fruit. When they'd finished, we lifted them down, one by one, wiped them with a clean, damp cloth we kept by the sink. Then I'd brush their teeth with special expensive paste that didn't contain fluoride. We thought we were so very clever, so loving, so in control.

I don't feel in control any more. Sometimes I feel it would be good to disappear, to walk away without stopping, drop off the edge of the world.

'Please,' I ask Jack as quietly as I can. 'I cooked you an egg. I am literally begging you to eat it.'

Jack looks down at his plate. The dog pads over with a hopeful look.

'Would you pay me?' says Jack.

I shut my eyes.

'Jack,' I say, 'all I want is for you to go to school with

something inside you. All I want is for you to be well-nourished.'

Rebecca, immobile and hunched in front of a piece of bread, glares at me. 'You talk like that and you expect us to be well-adjusted. No wonder Ed needs to get out of his head all the time on drugs.'

My heart flips exactly as she intends it to.

Cruel and Neglectful Parenting

One time, when Eddie was about ten months old, we were in Asda, cruising the flickering fluorescent aisles. Suddenly I realised that the trail of wet I'd vaguely become aware of on the floor was coming from us. From Eddie, to be precise.

It was a hot June day and, like any sensible mother, I'd brought him out wearing just nappy and vest. But the nappy was now soaked and – for once – I'd forgotten to bring a changing bag or indeed a clean nappy. Even if I bought a pack right now, I could hardly change him on the supermarket floor. I remember the (then) excruciating choice: abandon the exhaustive trolley and take wet baby straight home. Or finish shopping as quickly as possible while pretending not to notice the incessant dripping.

In the end, since Eddie was perfectly happy, I went for the latter. And it was all OK until I came to the checkout.

'Scuse me,' said an old lady behind me as Eddie gummed a banana, blissfully unaware of his sodden state. 'Don't you know your baby needs changing?'

I blushed, laughed apologetically and said we were on our way home.

She gave me a look of keen disgust. 'That child's wet, he is, sitting there in his own filth. Call yourself a good mother?' She raised a disdainful chin and swapped queues.

Eddie is as unlikely to wet himself now as he is to accompany me to the supermarket, but how he would leap with joy to hear such a reaction from a member of the public now. Because these days, at a vengeful seventeen, he believes himself to be the undeserved victim of outrageously cruel and neglectful parenting.

He believes it to be unforgivable of us, his parents, to want to try to get him to bed by a decent time on a school night, when All His Friends get to crash 'whenever'. He sees it as nothing short of sick and perverted that we harbour this sadistic desire to have him eat three square meals a day and refrain from ingesting a clutch of illegal and habit-forming substances. None of His Friends' Parents ever make a fuss about food, or even think of suggesting their offspring might fancy unloading the dishwasher or indeed doing anything whatsoever to lend a hand with the family chores. Not only that, but all His Friends' Parents manage to be pleasantly and unjudgementally stoned most evenings, while (amazingly) holding down responsible jobs, making sure there is plenty of fast food and Diet Coke in the fridge and being nice to their kids.

'Nice', of course, means giving those same kids money. Lots of it. Because in the end, what it boils down to is this:

how can we be so downright evil as to deny him the regular, unconditional cash handouts that he sees as his basic human right? Even though he refuses to take up any of the many neighbourhood offers to earn a gobsmacking £7 per hour babysitting, still he is appalled at our miserliness. He says it's all very well for us to go on about earning money, because we're lucre-grabbing capitalists who measure our karmic worth in pound signs. He on the other hand, is an Artist. He has Things To Do. Sometimes he writes poetry, sometimes he sketches. Sometimes he just walks the streets and lets his mind . . . well, drift. But how can he be expected to do it without a decent pair of Onitsuka trainers on his feet?

Interestingly, maybe even ironically, Eddie's best friend breaks all these rules. Adam – whom he's known since primary school – is polite, good-looking, well-mannered and works hard at school. Adam doesn't seem to be swimming in cash; in fact, Adam did a paper round a year or so ago and sometimes goes so far as to do decorating work for his father in the holidays. Inconveniently for Eddie, Adam often seems to spend at least part of the weekend willingly doing things with his parents, and in the summer he goes away on holiday with them, apparently without having to be forced. Eddie really likes Adam and spends a great deal of time with him. But because he knows Adam is a hopeless advertisement for his cause, he's taken to rolling his eyes at the mere mention of his friend's name, giving the vague impression that he's either a lost cause or a moron, or both.

The way Adam is – polite, thoughtful, intelligent – that's how I used to think Eddie would turn out. OK, not 'think'. I was certain. When our Eddie was about two and a half, we went away for a weekend with some friends with a similar-aged child. At bedtime, Eddie had his bath and his story and went down in his cot without a murmur, only calling me back for one more kiss. (I remember that kiss – the clean warmth of bedtime Eddie, stiff-washed pyjamas, baby spit and honey hair.)

The Other Baby stayed up and sat grizzling on the sofa while his parents cooked supper. He was so tired his face kept on crumpling into angry, confused tears. But every time he was asked if he wanted to go to bed, he shouted 'No!' (like, duhhh!) until, at eleven o'clock (yes, eleven!) he was finally carted, half wailing, half manic, to his cot.

Eddie's father and I looked at each other, shocked, happy, smug. Call that parenting? Who exactly was in charge here? Didn't kids need boundaries and lots of them? We would never let that happen to us.

Now Eddie stays up till two, three, four on a school night, phone in one hand, computer mouse in the other. Some nights he falls asleep only half undressed, teeth uncleaned, and it devastates me to discover him in the morning, in a tangle of crumb-strewn bed linen, one arm round his cat, face still lit by the blueish light from the monitor.

Yes, of course we try to get him to sleep. We beg and plead and threaten and cajole him. We talk to him like a baby and we talk to him like a man. No words have yet

been coined which will make him turn his light off earlier and get some sleep. And yes, it pains me to realise that The Other Baby is probably now asleep by eleven, working hard at school, apple of his parents' eye. We don't dare ask.

Eddie says we stress him out, that we're his only problem. He says that if we really loved him, we'd give him enough money to lead his Own Life and never have to talk to us at all. 'Call yourselves parents?' he scowls. 'You should be fucking well ashamed of the way you're bringing up your kids.'

Oh, old lady in Asda, I should have listened to you.

Sensitive Souls

The thing you have to remember about teenagers today is they're sensitive, poetic, tortured – nothing like the dull, bourgeois losers we were at their age.

Thursday, 6.45 a.m. I push open Rebecca's door to reveal a room strewn with Kotex (thankfully unused) and crumpled copies of *Cosmopolitan* (read, re-read and re-re-read).

She moans loudly. 'Go-away-leave-me-alone-don't-touch-me-get-your-hands-off-me,' while dragging her long, dark hair across her face like a molten hijab.

'I'm not coming near you,' I assure her, gathering up the sanitary towels like so many pieces of Kingsmill. 'Please don't go back to sleep. And you shouldn't have these all over the floor. Have you got a period?'

'No! Have you?' She rolls out of bed, stands swaying for a second like a newborn colt, then collapses lavishly. Something about the way she flings her arms out among the glossies – expertly epileptic – stills all my feelings of sympathy. I notice that her toenails are painted black.

'Do you have a pain?' I ask her calmly.

'How can you be so fucking cruel?' she explodes in reply, clutching herself.

I tell her to get dressed and eat breakfast then see how she feels.

Downstairs, Eddie, canvas rucksack dangling from a shoulder, is spreading Marmite on toast. He arranges the toast with the fastidiousness of a Ritz waiter, then takes a clean tea towel and wipes it carefully round the edge of his plate.

'I don't like shit on the plate,' he says when he sees me watching. He sniffs and drops the tea towel on the floor. 'The thing is, Mum,' he says, detaching each crust from the toast and flicking it vaguely towards the bin, 'what am I meant to do about Gran's birthday?'

'How do you mean "do"?'

'I mean,' he says, turning up the volume, 'how in fuck's name am I meant to get cash to get her something?'

'Well, let me see,' I say. 'You could rob a bank. Or you could start a multi-million-pound corporation. Or . . . you could just do a paper round like everyone else your age.'

During this speech, Rebecca staggers into the room and collapses face-down on the floor. We both ignore her.

'Do you want me to die?' she mutters. And then, when this elicits no response, 'He spent his pocket money on Guinness.'

'Fuck off,' says Ed.

'When I was your age,' I begin, 'I had a Saturday job—'

'But it was different then,' he says. 'You had no social life. And anyway how am I meant to have some time to myself to chill and do my drawings?' (Eddie plans to be the new Robert Crumb.)

Jack, who throughout this exchange has been wiping every square millimetre of his trainers clean with saliva-drenched kitchen towel, says, 'It is different, Mum. You have to admit you were quite a boring person at his age.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Well, you didn't have any friends. You were happy to work in a shop because you had no social life.'

Their father comes in ready for work. 'Swimming starts today, yes?' he asks me, referring to Becca and Jack's team sessions which he normally chauffeurs.

'No, it's next week.'

Becca sits up quickly. 'Really? Not today?'

She gets up, opens the fridge door. Her whole body has relaxed, smoothed, lengthened.

I'm in the middle of making a mental note to probe this anxiety source as soon as she's in a better mood, when she switches into attack-mode. 'The thing is, Mum,' she says, swigging milk from the carton, 'Ed's right. You can't

possibly compare you as a teenager with us now. It's like the way you don't know how to listen to music.'

'Yeah,' says Jack. 'Basically there's a bit more to it than just letting it go into your head and out again.'

'While trying to think up something clever to say about it,' adds Becca.

'But,' Jack says, lacing his trainers, 'it's not your fault. It's the way you are.'

'It's like a disability, I guess,' Rebecca says, with a happy smile.

'Who wants a lift to the bus stop?' asks their retreating father.

'Is he disabled, too?' I ask.

They hesitate. 'Well, he has shit taste in music but he has an iPod at least.'

After they've all gone, I start to load the dishwasher but find myself frozen in the mid-1970s. I think of the chilly bus into the centre of Leeds on a Saturday morning to my dull job at Dolci's. The lunch hours spent buying David Cassidy singles. ('You lived through Punk and you listened to *him*?!') Yes, there were long afternoons of stacking shoe boxes and measuring feet, but I did go to parties and I also wrote poetry. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure I was polite to my parents and I certainly bought everyone a birthday present.

Like they said, I was a very boring person at their age.

Jack's Underarms

'By the way,' says Jack as we settle down together to watch a recorded episode of *Morse* (a strange new craze), 'I'm getting hairs under my arms.'

'Are you, honey?'

Jack is my baby. He was born on a winter's lunchtime – a birth so exhilaratingly easy that I got up straightaway afterwards and walked around with him still moist in my arms. I'd never seen such a gloriously feral-looking baby, covered in the monkey fur they call lanugo all down his back. Adorable, dark-eyed: I could tell he was going to be nice to know.

'Yeah, just three hairs. All under one arm, actually.'

'Well, don't worry, I'm sure you'll get some under the other one soon.'

'I'm not worried. And anyway I already got pubes.'

'Pubes?'

'You know. Down there.'

I'm about to explain that it's all, in fact, called pubic hair, when the sitting-room door bangs so hard against the wall that plaster showers onto the carpet. Becca – furious-faced, kohl eyeliner halfway down her face – lurches into the room. I can't help noticing she's wearing two of my socks. Not a pair but two odd ones. Has she pinched both pairs? I decide this isn't the moment to ask.

The dog moves swiftly out of her way as she places

herself in front of the TV ('Hey, fuck off,' says Jack) and turns her demon gaze on me.

'Can you please tell Him, your sweet dear little angel, not to take my portable DVD player – in fact not to *ever* go in my fucking room at all without my specific fucking permission or else I will cut off his fucking balls.'

I sigh and press PAUSE. Everyone in Oxford freezes.

'Did you do that?' I ask Jack.

He shrugs and does his blank-eyed, yob-mafia face.

'Well, did you?'

He gazes stonily ahead. Then: 'Isn't it between me and her?'

I make the mistake of considering this possibility for one nano-second too many.

Becca throws herself to the ground and seems to bite the carpet. 'I can't believe it. I simply cannot believe you're doing this!'

'Doing what?'

'Letting him get away with it! I saved up for that. For years!'

I'm trying to begin to tell her that I haven't yet even made a judgement, when real, gusty, liquid sobs issue from deep inside her.

'Becs, for goodness' sake what is it?'

Jack grabs the zapper and unpauses John Thaw. I grab it back, refreeze him.

'My God,' Becca sobs, 'can't you see how out of control

he is? Call yourself a parent! You have the IQ of a fucking hamster. No wonder he's so fucking . . . remedial. Look at you both, snuggled up together. Christ.'

That's it. I stand up and switch the TV off properly. The dog also stands up. I turn to Becca.

'I am not snuggled up with him, I am not on his side and I am trying – if you will let me – to sort this out. How can I make myself any clearer?'

Becca flinches against the wall and covers her head with her hands. 'That's right, go on, hit me.'

'I'm not going to hit you, you silly girl. Why on earth would I want to hit you?' (This is a lie. Against all my better judgement, right now I would love to.)

But Becca's lying in such a strange scrunched-up position that something black and shiny is protruding from her Levi's back pocket. I recognise it immediately as the Chanel lipstick I mislaid last week.

'Becca, is it true you're wearing my socks?'

'Shut up.'

'And have my best Chanel lipstick in your pocket?'

'That's right, very clever, change the subject!'

'It's just I can't see how you can accuse Jack of going into your room and taking your things if you're perfectly happy to swipe my stuff.'

Becca springs up to her full height, which is only a little less than mine. Her eyes are steady and as her hair swings I catch the rancid-sweet smell of smoke in it.

'And please tell me you haven't been smoking?' I add – a calm if reckless afterthought. That does the trick. She backs out of the room slowly as if I were on fire.

Jack puts the TV back on. 'I think that's the murderer.' He grunts happily.

'I handled that very badly,' I tell him.

'Hey, don't cry,' he says.

'I'm not crying.' I wipe my eyes on the back of my hand.

'Anyway, she's a mangy cunt.'

'Jack! I never, ever want to hear you say that again.'

'OK, OK. But . . . can I ask you something, Mum? About sex?'

I relax. 'Of course you can, sweetheart. Fire away.'

'Well, it's just . . . I heard this thing at school, right? That a woman was having sex with this guy, right? And she had this huge epileptic fit so her you-know went all tight, yeah? And they had to amputate the man's penis to get it out. I mean, otherwise he was going to die of suffocation or something and . . . and . . . I mean, could that really ever possibly happen, do you think?'

breakfast

Remember the furious toddler days, when you had to allow at least an hour to get them out of the house? Potty, wash hands, wipe faces, socks, find coats. Then – pushchair unfolded – there'd be a sudden explosion: which shoes? The red ones! No, the blue! No, the red! In less than

three seconds you're in meltdown and you're sitting on the hall floor, keys in lap, as a pair of chubby legs drums a skirting board in fury.

But one day, we thought, we'll be calm middle-aged people and our kids will be teenagers and, well, life will swing by.

Now I shall relate what happened here in this house this very April morning. You can trust me that every single word is true. I wouldn't make it up. I don't need to.

6.50 a.m. Nice Mother stumbles along corridor to re-wake three teenagers for school. Two growl at her like coyotes parted from their carcass. One says something that sounds too much like 'Fuck off.'

6.55 a.m. Nice Mother goes downstairs and starts toasting bagels and frying eggs.

7.05 a.m. Eggs are cooked and on the table. Nice Mother yawns and stares at them.

7.10 a.m. Eggs are chilling. Nice Mother goes to stairs and calls (in a loud but uncombative voice), 'Breakfast!'

Two replies are heard. One (Ed) is definitely 'Fuck off.' The other (Becca) is simply a long, gothic scream. Nothing from Jack. Nice Mother knows this means they're coming.

7.15 a.m. Eggs have now been cooked for twelve minutes. Jack comes in and starts eating his. Without any hesitation or complaint for once. Nice Mother, stupidly encouraged, makes mistake of asking him how he slept.

7.17 a.m. Becca enters in school shirt and knickers, takes one look at egg and says: 'Don't – eat – eggs.'

Nice Mother takes a breath. 'OK,' she says. 'Have some juice, then.'

Becca folds her arms. 'You have to make me something solid.'

'Poached?'

''Nother thing with bagel. Not egg.'

'Help yourself,' says Nice Mother and (frantically pleased with herself for staying calm) she walks steadily from the room.

7.31 a.m. Nice Mother dares to come back into kitchen. All children gone, getting ready for lift to school with Reasonable Father. She looks at dog. Dog looks at her. She puts egg plate on floor.

7.32 a.m. Dog happy. Another scream from Becca upstairs.

7.34 a.m. Eddie staring into the fridge.

The lift is due to leave at 7.40. Father stands in hall and rattles keys. 'Six minutes,' he says very pleasantly to Eddie.

'No need to shout,' says Ed.

Reasonable Father opens his mouth, then shuts it.

7.36 a.m. Jack runs through hall. 'Where the fuck are my gloves? Black gloves? And my blazer?' (Yes, Jack wears black woollen gloves even in late April).

7.39 a.m. Eddie is standing in front of open fridge door and eating a fromage frais.

'OK,' says Reasonable Father, 'I'm going.'

'He's going!' Jack yells up the stairs. Becca responds with a Carrie-like screech.

'I'm not ready,' says Eddie, calmly licking his spoon.

Becca appears at the foot of the stairs, face flushed with fury. 'How dare you! I really don't have my shoes!'

'Where are my gloves, for fuck's sake?' says Jack.

Nice Mother ought to scuttle for gloves and shoes. But today something snaps in her heart. Instead she looks out of the kitchen window and notices that, even though it's only 7.40, there's sun in the garden and one tree is on the edge of bursting into blossom. Her heart lifts. She wonders what time of year you're supposed to plant potatoes.

7.41 a.m. Reasonable Father has started the car, with only Jack in it.

'Such a wanker,' says Eddie. 'Why can't he hang on for two lousy seconds?'

Becca is screaming, only drawing breath to lace her shoes.

It all happens very quickly then: Eddie opens the door and the dog, seeing his chance, runs off up the road. Nice Mother rushes – not dressed for shelf display – onto the path to call him back. Becca runs past and sees Ruthless Father's car disappearing. She gives the most chilling scream of the morning so far, throws school bag and duffle on the pavement, closely followed by self. Black hair fans over asphalt. 'No, no, no!' she cries in anguish.

Eddie walks off.

'Goodness, Becca, calm down,' says Nice Mother, because several passers-by are probably already speed-dialling Childline on their mobiles.