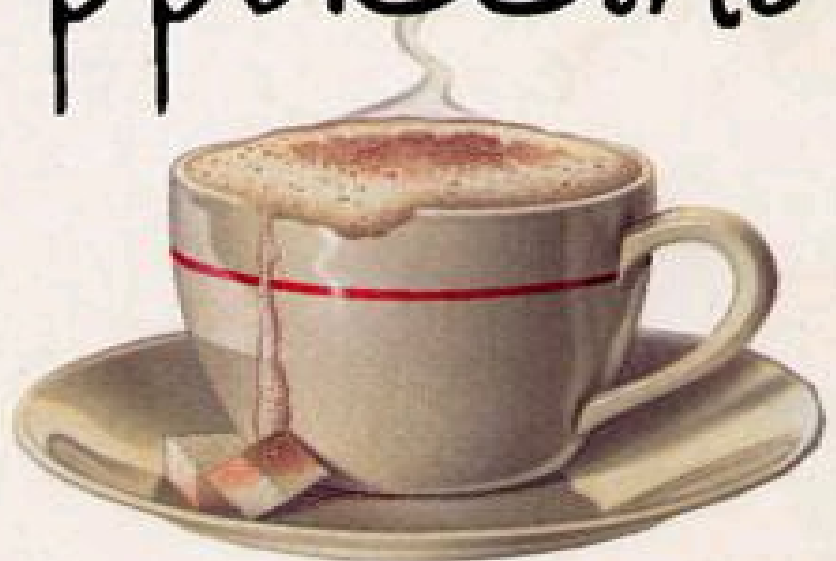


SUE TOWNSEND  
ADRIAN  
MOLE

*the Cappuccino  
Years*

'Thank God for  
Sue Townsend and  
Adrian Mole'

*Observer*



THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

SUE TOWNSEND  
**ADRIAN  
MOLE**

*the Cappuccino  
Years*



***Sue Townsend***

## **Adrian Mole**

*The Cappuccino Years*

1999

An accidental celebrity, with a spreading bald patch, despairing of family values, Mole is still worrying: Is Viagra cheating? Why won't the BBC produce 'The White Van', his serial killer comedy? Mole, aged 30 1/4, chronicles the closing years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with slanderous abandon.

# List of Principal Characters

ABBO AND ALAN: Representatives of the Ashby-de-la-Zouch branch of the Terrence Higgins Trust, selected to walk in the procession behind Diana's coffin.

ANDREW: Archie Tait's cat.

ANNETTE: Standard vendor on the Strand, enjoying carnal relations with Malcolm, the washer-upper at Hoi Polloi, the restaurant where Adrian works.

ASHBY: Rosie Mole's plastic role-play baby.

ATKINS, JEFFREY: Adrian's second-opinion dentist. A gentle man with ginger eyebrows.

AZIZ: Assistant cook at Hoi Polloi.

BANKS, LES: Unlucky builder engaged by Adrian to do work to Archie Tait's house.

BAXTER, BERT: Deceased acquaintance of Adrian, Communist pensioner and Leicester's oldest and most objectionable man. Died one day short of his 106<sup>th</sup> birthday.

BELINDA: Zippo Montefiori's PA.

BOTT, GLENN: Son of Sharon Bott. Could have been fathered by either Barry Kent or Adrian Mole. According to Rosie Mole, he is a psycho, but has Adrian's nose.

BOTT, SHARON: Old flame of Adrian's. Mother of Glenn Bott. Also mother of Kent, Bradford and Caister.

BRAITHWAITE, IVAN: Father of Pandora. Supposedly a freelance dairy management consultant and freethinker.

BRAITHWAITE, DR PANDORA: Prospective Labour MP for Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Self-appointed 'Brightest Star in Blair's Firmament' and 'The People's Pan'. First love of Adrian Mole, who was the first person to insert his hand (left) into her white cotton training bra, in 1981.

BRAITHWAITE, TANIA: Mother of Pandora. Teaches Women's Studies at De Montfort University.

BROADWAY, BILL: Les Banks's subcontractor.

CAINE, ALFIE: Fake Cockney and presenter of The Fry-Up, a Pie Crust Production.

CATH: Production assistant on Offally Good!, another Pie Crust production.

CAVENDISH, JACK: Pandora's older live-in lover. Alcoholic and Professor of Languages at Oxford.

CHANG, MR: Dentist who no longer caters for the poor because 'they bring tooth decay on themselves'.

CLEVER CLIVE: Criminal acquaintance of Adrian's, can supply parking permits for central London.

CLOUGH, MS: Labour supporter and single mother of three.

DALE, LILLIAN: Green Party candidate for Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

D'ARCY, MABEL: OAP supporter of Sir Arnold Tufton. Great-great-grandfather was a surviving officer on the Titanic.

DOUGGIE: Sharon Bott's live-in lover.

DOVECOTE, CHARLIE: Pauline Mole's lawyer.

EAGLEBURGER, BRICK: Barry Kent's literary agent.

EDDIE STOBART: A lorry firm. Some of their drivers wave, some don't.

ELF, MISS: Adrian and Pandora's timid but ethical drama teacher at Neil Armstrong Comprehensive.

FLOOD, ELEANOR: Remedial reading teacher at Neil Armstrong Comprehensive, with fragile wrists.

FONG, DR: Doctor at Leicester Royal Infirmary who examines William Mole.

FOX, LEN: Criminal. Mobile-phone magnate and friend of Sir Arnold Tufton.

GIPTON, FRED: Actor with inside knowledge of general-election results.

GOLDMAN, LATER GOLDPERSON, BOSTON: Personal assistant to Brick Eagleburger.

GRIMBOLD, MARCIA: Bring Back the Rates Party candidate.

HETHERINGTON, GLORIA: Godfrey's wife. Ideal casting: Pauline Quirke.

HETHERINGTON, GODFREY: Hero of The White Van, Adrian's hilarious serial-killer comedy. Accountant by day, serial killer by night. Ideally would be played by Harry Enfield.

HUMFRI: Cat adopted by Malcolm. Looks remarkably like Humphrey, the Downing Street cat.

JIMMY THE GREEK: Owner of Greek taverna next door to Hoi Polloi.

JUSTINE: Lap-dancer at Secrets club.

KENNETH: Waiter at Hoi Polloi.

KENT, BARRY: Ex-skinhead and local thug, now prize-winning poet and novelist. Author of poem 'Naked' and the modern classic Dork's Diary.

KENT, EDNA: Barry Kent's mum. Toilet cleaner, later double degree-taker and Pandora's secretary at the House of Commons.

KEVIN: Unhelpful sales personage at Hamleys.

LARGE ALAN: Owner of Secrets, as well as The 165, a fashionable new drinking den.

LEAF, SANDRA: Square-jawed security guard with Citadel Security Ltd, who invokes Pauline Mole's wrath and threats of legal action by giving her a random body search on election night.

LO! THE FLAT HILLS OF MY HOMELAND: Adrian's novel, later rechristened Birdwatching, for which he is still, incredibly, searching for a publisher.

LUCY: Staff nurse at Leicester Royal Infirmary and single parent.

LUIGI: Maitre d' of Hoi Polloi. An Italian Communist who votes Lib Dem and lives in Croydon.

LUPIN, SKY: Adrian's stress counsellor.

MALCOLM: Washer-upper at Hoi Polloi. Voting position undecided.

MARILYN: A kamikaze bank official.

MICHELWAITE, AARON: Well-spoken but hideous youth whose company Rosie Mole enjoys.

MOLE, GEORGE: Adrian's father. Unemployed and suffering from erectile dysfunction.

MOLE, JO JO: Adrian's wife, from whom he is separated. Has moved back to Nigeria. Mother of William. Has beauty, brains, money and talent, and frankly was out of Adrian's league, as well as being four inches taller than him.

MOLE, PAULINE: Adrian's mother. Unsatisfied, unfulfilled Germaine Greer fan.

MOLE, ROSIE: Adrian's sister. Foul-mouthed fifteen-year-old vamp.

MOLE, SUSAN: Adrian's aunt and Prison Officer of the Year 1997. 'Married' to Amanda.

MOLE, WILLIAM: Adrian's small son. Fascinated by Teletubbies and Jeremy Clarkson videos.

MONTEFIORI, ZIPPO: Managing director of Pie Crust Productions, makers of Offally Good! and The Fry-Up.

MUTTON, KEITH: Monster Raving Loony Party candidate.

NEIL ARMSTRONG COMPREHENSIVE: Alma mater of Adrian, Pandora, Nigel and Barry Kent.

NG, DR: Adrian's doctor. Prescribed Prozac for him.

NIGEL: Adrian's best friend from school. Now a gay Buddhist van-driver for Next clothing store.

NOBBY: Labourer for Les Banks.

NORBERT: Nigel's boyfriend.

O'CASEY, LIAM: Student. Archie Tait's neighbour.

PANKHURST, MIRANDA: Sharon Bott's solicitor.

PARVEZ, MRS: Liberal councillor; owner of Kidsplay Ltd, William Mole's private nursery school.

PATIENCE, ROGER: New headmaster of Neil Armstrong Comprehensive.

PEACOCK, IDA: OAP Liberal Democrat supporter. Believes Tony Blair is going to give her new hips.

PERKINS, BOB: Owner of eponymous garden centre.

PURBRIGHT, LENNIE: Pandora's election agent. Cockney, formerly a whelk-stall owner.

RAJIT: BP service-station worker.

ROD: Owner of the Hot Rods shop in Soho, opposite Hoi Polloi.

SASHA: Assistant cook at Hoi Polloi.

SAVAGE, PETER: Foul-mouthed, aristocratic owner of Hoi Polloi. Believes in a 'Traditional English, No Choice' menu. Suffers from stress incontinence. Hates Tony Blair and New Labour.

SAVAGE, KIM: Savage's ex-wife and ex-society florist.

SEAN: Waiter at Hoi Polloi.

SCRUTON, MR: A.K.A POP-EYE SCRUTON. Former headmaster of Neil Armstrong Comprehensive and rabid Mrs Thatcher devotee.

SINGH, DEV: Double-entendre-loving co-presenter of Offally Good!.

SPICER-WOODS, CHRISTINE: Socialist Lesbians Against Globalization Party candidate.

STOAT, ARTHUR: Editor and managing director of Stoot Books Ltd, wants to produce Offally Good!--The Book.

SURINDER, DR: Doctor at Leicester Royal Infirmary who examines William.

SWAYWARD, JUSTIN: Shoe Mania! employee and court representative.

TAIT, ARCHIE: OAP Socialist Labour Party voter.

TRELLIS, MISS: Glenn Bott's maths teacher.

TUFTON, SIR ARNOLD: Conservative MP for Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Pandora's rival in the general election.

TWYSTLETON-FIFE, JULIAN: Pandora's gay ex-husband.

VALENTINE DUFF, RON: Repatriate Foreigners Party candidate.

VLJKJKJV, JAKKJ: Belgrade translator interested in Birdwatching.

WELLINGBOROUGH, MRS: Mr Chang's receptionist.

WONKY, DAVE: Zouch FM DJ.

WORTHINGTON, HARRY: OAP Labour supporter.

ZO: Hair- and make-up artist for Pie Crust Productions.

# Dean Street, Soho

**Wednesday April 30<sup>th</sup> 1997**

I take up my pen once again to record a momentous time in the affairs of men (and, thank God, because this is intended to be a secret diary, I am not required to add 'and women').

The day after tomorrow on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, as dawn breaks, I predict that the Labour Party will just scrape in, and will form the next government. Talk of a landslide victory is hysterical rubbish whipped up by the media.

My own prediction is based on 'insider' knowledge. The insider is an actor called Fred Gipton who was in An Inspector Calls with Tony Booth, the father-in-law of our future Prime Minister. Gipton spilled the beans in Hoi Polloi, the restaurant where I work, after two bottles of Jacob's Creek, a Pernod and a vodka sorbet. After begging me to keep 'shtum' he told me that he had heard, via a tortuous grapevine, that Mr Blair expected to win with a tiny majority. Three was mentioned. He also told me that Mr Blair wears a wig, but I have freeze-framed a News At Ten video of him alighting from a helicopter on to a school playing-field and I am satisfied that no wig could stand up to the air turbulence caused by the chopper blades. Tony wears his own hair, it is cer-tainement.

So, every vote counts, which is why I will drive up to Ashby-de-la-Zouch tonight after I finish my shift in the restaurant. When I told Savage that I would need to take a day off in order to vote, he went into a tirade about the foolishness of giving 'hoi polloi' the vote. 'If I ruled the f...country,' he said (I cannot bring myself to write f--), 'I'd restrict the vote to men over forty-five years of age, and I'd narrow it down to those who earned over seventy K a year.'

'You wouldn't allow women to vote?' I checked.

'No, I f--well wouldn't,' he raged. 'They're all f...mad. If they've not got PMT they've got HRT or VPL.'

I pointed out to him that VPL stands for visible panty line, but he was, as usual, beyond reason. When he began to recount the crimes and misdemeanours of his estranged wife, Kim, I went into the kitchen and made onion gravy for the toad-in-the-hole.

After he calmed down a bit I approached him again. 'Mr Savage,' I said, 'I have not had a day off for six weeks.'

'How do you intend to vote?' he asked, chal-lengingly.

I resented him asking, but I replied, 'Labour.'

'Then no f--way, Jose,' he shouted, pushing a highball glass under the rum optic, and keeping it there until the glass was half full (or half empty, depending on your personality type). He drank deeply from it, as though the contents were Ribena.

'Why should I lose a valuable member of staff on one of the busiest days of the year and help that shirtlifter Blair get elected?' He coughed, lighting one of his filthy French cigarettes. I pointed out to him that Mr Blair is far from being a poofter, and has, in fact, fathered a trio of children. Savage gave a horrible phlegmy laugh, during which he crossed his legs (he suffers from stress incontinence). He took me to the front door of the restaurant, pointed at the Hot Rods shop opposite. Rod himself was in the shop window, arranging some studded leather underpants on a collection of tiered display plinths. 'Now that's a shop for poofters, am I right, Mole?' he said, breathing rum fumes in my face.

'The shop specializes in clothes and equipment for gay men,' I conceded.

'And are none of Rod's customers happily married?' he asked, dropping his voice theatrically.

I said, with heavy irony, 'So, Mr Blair's marriage is a sham and his children are nothing but ciphers conceived in the bed of cynicism, so that one day he will deceive the British people into voting for him, thinking him to be a heterosexual socialist, whereas...'

'Mark my words, Mole, Blair is a 'friend of Rod's' if ever I f--saw one, and he's no f--socialist either.'

I began to cook the cabbages for dinner. Savage likes them to boil for at least half an hour. My work as a chef has been a doddle since Savage instituted his Traditional English, No Choice menu. Tonight's repast is:

Heinz tomato soup (with white bread floaters)

Grey lamb chops

Boiled cabbage avec Dan Quayle potatoes Dark brown onion gravy

Spotted Dick a la Clinton

Bird's custard (skin PS6.00 extra)

Cheddar Cheese, Cream Crackers

Nescafe

After Eight Mint

There are two types of wine--white PS46, red PS46

Service charge not included. You are expected to smoke between courses. Pipes and cigars are particularly welcome.

The restaurant is fully booked six weeks ahead. Savage turned Princess Michael of Kent away from the door last night. She was distraught.

The restaurant critic A.A. Gill said in his review in the Sunday Times that Hoi Polloi served execrable nursery food. 'The sausage on my plate could have been a turd: it looked like a turd, it tasted like a turd, it smelled like a turd, it had the texture of a turd. In fact, thinking about it, it probably

was a turd.'

Savage has had Gill's review blown up at the Copy Shop and stuck it up in the window, where it draws admiring crowds.

Around about midnight I asked my fellow workers, those who could understand English, if they intended to vote today. Luigi, the maitre d', is a Communist in Italy, but he will be voting Liberal Democrat in Croydon, where he lives. Malcolm, the washer-upper, said he was thinking of voting Conservative, 'because they help the self-employed'. I pointed out to Malcolm that he was only self-employed because Savage refused to pay for a National Insurance stamp and tax, but Malcolm then went on to say that he liked John Major because he (Malcolm) had been fostered by a couple who lived in Huntingdon, Major's constituency. As Malcolm grappled with the Spotted Dick tin in the sink, I asked him about the Conservatives' election pledges.

'They've said they won't put the taxes up,' he said, in his reedy voice.

I said, 'Malcolm, you don't pay tax, remember?

You get paid cash in hand. You're off the books, which enables you to draw benefits from the DSS. You get free teeth, free travel to hospital, free everything.'

Malcolm said, 'On the other hand, I might vote Labour.'

## Thursday May 1.

Dean Street, Soho, London, to Wisteria Walk, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire, in three hours. Not bad considering I kept under the speed limit all the way. On the way down I heard the Labour Party candidate for Ashby, Dr Pandora Braithwaite, talking about the importance of family values on Talk Radio. I was so outraged I almost choked on an Opal Fruit and steered into the fast lane. Talk about hypocrisy!

Pandora has shown open contempt for family life. Her first husband, Julian, was openly, in fact boastfully, gay. And her live-in lover, Jack Cavendish, has been married three times and has ten acknowledged children, three of whom have been in drug rehabilitation units up and down the country. The eldest is still languishing in jail in Turkey. Most of the others seem to be attracted to strange religious sects. Tom, the youngest, is a vicar in Hull.

How Pandora ever got past a Labour Party selection committee is a mystery to me. She smokes at least forty cigarettes a day. The radio interviewer asked her about her partner.

'He's a professor of languages at Oxford,' she replied, in her husky voice. 'And he's enormously supportive. But then,' she added, 'I support him too.'

'How very true,' I shouted at the car radio. 'He needs your support because he's a chronic alcoholic and can't stand up unaided after eight o'clock at night.'

At junction eighteen I ran out of Opal Fruits, so I pulled into the services and bought three packets. Are the manufacturers putting something extra in? Something addictive? I seem to have been getting through rather a lot of them lately. The other night I woke at 3 a.m. and was distraught to discover that there wasn't a single Opal Fruit in the flat. I tramped the streets of Soho looking for them. Within two minutes of leaving home I was offered lesbian sex, heroin and a Rolex watch, but an innocent packet of Opal Fruits took over half an hour to track down. What does it tell us about the world we live in?

A Labour government will change all that. Mr Blair is a committed Christian, and I forecast that a religious revival will sweep the land. I long for the day that I wake up in the morning and realize that, Hallelujah! I too believe in God!

As I was tearing open the Opal Fruits on the way back to the car, a tall man in a lorry-driver's overalls approached me. I could tell that he was annoyed about something by the manner in which he barred my way with his thick arm.

'Are you the dick'ead in the Montego?' he said. 'The one who's been hogging the middle lane at sixty-five miles an hour?' I didn't like his aggressive tone. I pointed out to him that the motorway was quite damp, and that in my opinion sixty-five miles per hour was quite fast enough.

'You've had a bleeding truck behind you since Watford,' he said. 'Didn't you see me flashing my bleeding lights?'

I replied, 'Yes, I thought you were being friendly.'

'Why would I wanna be friendly to a dick'ead like you?' he said.

I sat in the car and watched him jump into the cab of his lorry. I was relieved to see that he wasn't driving for Eddie Stobart, whose drivers wear a shirt and tie under their overalls, and whose lorries are kept in immaculate condition. This oaf was driving a truck full of mineral water from Cornwall to Derbyshire. Why? Derbyshire consists of mineral water. You can't move without falling into a beck, tarn or raging river.

I sat in the car park for a few minutes to allow the lorry-rager to put a few miles between us, then I rejoined the motorway and, mindful of my recent contretemps, put my foot down and got up to sixty-nine mph.

Immediately after I had turned off the motorway I was confronted by Pandora's lovely face staring down at me from an election poster nailed to the trunk of a chestnut tree at the side of the road. I stopped the car and got out to take a closer look. It was a glamour shot, reminiscent of 1940. Hollywood. Pandora's highlighted dark blonde hair fell to her shoulders in rippling waves. Her glossy lips were open, showing Harpic-white teeth. Her eyes said bed-room! She was wearing a dark jacket thing; there was a hint of white lace underneath, and beneath that more than a hint of voluptuous cleavage. I knew that every man in Ashby-de-la-Zouch would walk on his knees to vote for her.

And to think that I, Adrian Mole, was the first to kiss those divine lips, and the first to insert my hand (left) beneath her white cotton training bra. Also, on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1981, Pandora declared her love for me.

The fact that she has been married once is of no consequence. I know that I am her only true love, and that she is mine. We are Arthur and Guinevere, Romeo and Juliet, Charles and Camilla.

When I married Jo Jo, Pandora came to my wedding and I saw her wipe the tears from her eyes before saying to my new wife, 'Commiserations.'



She quickly apologized for my faux pas and said, 'I meant, of course, congratulations.' But I knew that her slip of the tongue betrayed her deep hurt that it was not she who was Mrs Adrian Albert Mole.

I said, 'I love you, my darling,' to the Pandora on the tree, then I got back into my car and continued my journey into Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Pandora's face smiled down at me from windows and signposts along the route, vote braithwaite--labour, the poster said.

Occasionally, the grotesque porcine features of her Conservative rival, Sir Arnold Tufton, were to be seen on posters in the windows of the larger houses. Were he to enter for the Best Pig Class in the Leicester Agricultural Show he would stand a good chance of winning a rosette. Against the youth and radiance and intellectual brilliance of Dr Pandora Braithwaite he stands no chance at all--besides, Tufton has been embroiled in a row about his close friendship with Len Fox, the mobile-phone magnate (something about a Jiffy-bag in Marbella), decreasing his chances even further.

The people of Ashby-de-la-Zouch are not known for their tempestuous natures, so it was difficult to tell whether or not they were in the mood for revolution. Even the dogs and cats looked quiescent in the early-morning sunshine.

There was a Labour Party poster in the living room of my parents' house on Wisteria Walk, and a Spice Girls poster in my sister Rosie's window. Behind all the posters the curtains were closed. It took five minutes of banging on the door before it was opened. My mother stood before me in a grubby white towelling bathrobe and a pair of men's grey wool socks. A Silk Cut Ultra Low burned between her fingers. Her purple nail varnish was chipped. Last night's mascara was smudged around her eyes. Somebody, possibly in a hairdressing salon, had done something terrible to her hair. Two pairs of spectacles were slung around her neck on gold chains. She lifted one pair and put them on. 'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'I was hoping it was the postman. I've ordered a red trouser-suit from Next and it was supposed to come today.' She took off the first pair of spectacles and replaced them with the second. She peered up and down the avenue, sighed, then kissed me and led the way down the hall and into the kitchen.

My son, William, was sitting at the kitchen table eating Coco Pops with a serving spoon. When he saw me he jumped from his chair and hurled himself towards my genitals. I saved myself from considerable pain by snatching him up and throwing him into the air.

It's been three weeks since I last saw my son, but his verbal dexterity has improved considerably (I must stop using the word considerably--it's John Major's fault). He is only two and three-quarters, but is already, to my considerable alarm, besotted with that television motoring oaf, Jeremy Clarkson. My mother indulges the child horribly by videoing Clark-son's testosterone-driven programmes and allowing William to watch them continuously. I don't know where he gets this obsessive interest in cars from. Not from our side of the family, that's for sure. His Nigerian grandmother was once the managing director of a lorry-tyre importer in Ibadan. It may be a tenuous connection, but genes are funny things.

Nobody has ever been able to explain where I get my talent for creative writing and cookery from. My mother's family (Norfolk) were practically illiterate, and seemed to live on boiled potatoes with HP sauce, and my father's family (Leicester) viewed books with deep suspicion, unless they had pictures which 'broke up the pages'. My paternal grandmother, May Mole, was a plain cook, who regarded eating as a gross indulgence. Thank God she died before I became a professional chef. It was her proud boast that she had never eaten in a proper restaurant in her life. She spoke of restaurants as others speak of crack dens.

I must record that my son is a handsome boy. His skin is clear, and the colour of dark cappuccino. His eyes are the exact shade of 'dark oak' in the Cuprinol wood-stain range. Physically, his Nigerian blood predominates, but I think I can see a certain English something about him. He is very clumsy, for instance, and when he is watching Clarkson (for example) on the TV, his mouth falls open and he looks a tiny bit gormless.

'Have you heard from Jo Jo?' asked my mother, as she kicked out at the New Dog to stop it licking its prominent testicles.

'No,' I said. 'Have you?'

She opened a drawer and took out an airmail letter, which was plastered with Nigerian stamps.

'Read it while I take him upstairs and get him ready,' she said.

It gave me a jolt when I saw Jo Jo's extraordinarily beautiful handwriting. The slopes and curves of the black letters reminded me of her body, and her voice. My penis stirred slightly as if expressing interest in what my wife had to say.

My dearest Pauline,

I am sorry to have to tell you that Adrian and I are getting a divorce.

I know that you won't be surprised by this news, especially after my last visit when he lost the way to Alton Towers, blamed me and tore the map in half. I was sorry that you and George (and especially William) had to witness such a scene.

The truth is, Pauline, that there have been many such unhappy incidents, and I feel that it is better to end our marriage now. I am sick with longing when I think of William. Does he speak of me? Please send an up-to-date photograph of him.

I thank you, Pauline, for caring for William in the absence of his parents. One day, when the political situation here has improved, I will send for him.

Love to you and the family, from Jo Jo.

'You should've told me you were getting a divorce,' said my mother. 'Why didn't you?'

I said, truthfully, 'I thought she might change her mind.'

'Fancy letting a beautiful wife like Jo Jo slip through your fingers,' she said. 'You must be bloody mad. You'll never get another woman in the same league as her. She had everything, beauty, brains, money, talent--'

'She couldn't cook,' I interrupted.

'She cooked Nigerian food superbly,' said my mother, Jo Jo's biggest fan.

'Yes!' I said. 'But I'm an Englishman.'

'A little Englander,' scoffed my mother, who rarely crossed the boundary of Leicestershire. 'D'you want to know why I think your marriage failed?'

she asked.

I looked out at the back garden: the lawn was littered with garish plastic clothes pegs which had fallen off the washing-line.

'Go on,' I said.

'One,' she said, 'you resented the fact that she had a degree. Two, you postponed your trip to Nigeria five times. Three,' she continued, 'you never came to terms with the fact that she was four inches taller than you.'

I washed my hands in the sink in silence.

'There's a PS,' said my mother. She read the postscript with relish. 'PS. Did you see the A.A. Gill review of Hoi Polloi in the Sunday Times? I have to hide it from my family.'

So even in Lagos, Nigeria, they are sneering at my culinary skills! I should never have allowed Savage to persuade me to put bangers and mash on the menu.

And why, oh, why, did Gill and his blonde companion have to choose that night when we ran out of the traditional hand-made sausages I buy from the butcher's in Brewer Street? I should have looked Gill in the eye and admitted to the fact rather than send out to the supermarket.

There was the throb of a diesel engine outside, then an urgent knocking on the front door. I answered it to find a handsome blond man carrying a parcel. It was Nigel. He used to be my best friend at Neil Armstrong Comprehensive.

'Nigell!' I said. Then, 'What are you doing driving a van? I thought you were gay.'

Nigel snapped, 'Being gay isn't a career, Moley, it's a sexual orientation.'

'But,' I stammered, 'I expected you to be doing something artistic'

'You mean like cooking?' he asked, laughing.

'But I thought you were a Buddhist,' I continued, digging another conversational grave.

He sighed, then said, 'Buddhists are allowed to drive vans.'

'But you've dropped the yellow robes,' I said, unnecessarily, as he was wearing denim from head to toe.

'I now realize that the outer manifestations of spirituality mask the inner,' he said.

I asked about his parents: his father had been in hospital to have a new steel plate in his head, and his mother was still asking her son when he was going to settle down with a nice girl.

'You haven't told your parents you're gay?'

'No,' he admitted, looking at the van throbbing at the kerb.

'Look, this is a longer conversation, why don't we meet up sometime?' he said. We swapped our mobile numbers and he drove off.

When my mother came down with William she ripped open the parcel eagerly, saying, 'It's my Labour victory outfit. I'm wearing it at the count tonight.' Her face sagged past its normal levels when she saw the navy-blue trouser-suit nestling between the sheets of tissue paper. 'I ordered red,' she shouted. She ranted on about the impossibility of wearing navy blue at Pandora's victory party tonight. She threatened to sue Next for the psychological trauma she was suffering. I extracted the order form from the wrapping paper and spotted that my mother had ticked Navy Blue in the colour column. There could be no doubting her own distinctive mark. Eventually she conceded that Next was not at fault. Had he known, her lawyer, Charlie Dovecote, would have wept for his lost fees. She is waiting to appear in court against Shoe Mania! because a stiletto heel fell off on the summit of Snowdon. Privately I hope that she loses her case. If she were to win, the law would be made to look even more of an ass. Charlie Dovecote is clearly taking advantage of a half-crazed menopausal woman who can't find an HRT treatment to suit her.

I offered to ring Next and arrange an emergency delivery of a red suit. She said scornfully, 'As if.' But I called Nigel on his mobile and he promised to do what he could, though he warned that 'anything red' was sprinting out of the warehouse and prophesied that there was to be a Labour landslide. I tried to tell him about my informer, Fred Gipton, but my phone signal broke up. I was annoyed to see that some of William's spilled milk had seeped into the holes in the microphone.

I was even more annoyed when William, distracted by the New Dog, upset his second bowl of cereal and a vile mixture of brown milk and sugar dripped off the edge of the table and on to the crotch of my stone-coloured chinos. I leaped to the sink, grabbed a dishcloth and wiped myself down, but the cloth had obviously been harbouring another, worse stain among its folds--orange juice, possibly--and this stain transferred itself to the Coco Pops stain. The two transmogrified into yet another stain--one speak-ing of long-term incontinence. I looked around for the washing-machine, only to be informed that it was the subject of a dispute, and was residing back with the manufacturer. More work for Charlie Dovecote.

'You'll have to borrow a pair of your father's,' said my mother.

I laughed out loud at the notion that I would be seen decomposing in a ditch in my father's trousers. 'Where is he, by the way?' I asked.

'Upstairs in bed. He's got clinical depression,' my mother said, unsympathetically.

'What brought it on?' I asked, as we climbed the stairs (which were dangerously littered with a myriad toy cars).

She lowered her voice on the landing. 'One, he knows he won't work again, not in a proper full-time job. Two, he's got piles, but he's scared of the operation. Three, he's been impotent for three months.'

My father shouted from the bedroom.

'Four, he's sick of his bleeding wife blabbing his sexual secrets to all and bleeding sundry.' My mother threw the bedroom door open. 'Adrian is not all and sundry,' she shouted, through the cigarette haze.

No, but the bloke in the bloody video shop is,' he roared.

William threw himself on to my father's recumbent form and kissed him passionately. My father murmured, 'This little lad is the only reason I haven't topped myself.'

'What's 'topped myself', Grandad?' asked William, who had begun to unfasten the buttons on my father's pyjama jacket. (His physical dexterity is amazing.)

I leaped in quickly--my parents are perfectly capable of attempting to explain the notion of suicide to a two-and-three-quarter-year-old child. 'Topped myself, means...er...it means...getting better at something,' I lied. 'Wouldn't you feel better if you opened the curtains and the window and got some air and light in here?' I asked.

'No,' whined my father. Then, sounding like Blanche Du Bois, 'I don't like the light.'

I looked around the room and realized that my mother's mad clutter of books, magazines, cosmetics and beauty aids was missing. Apart from my father's bottles of tranquillizers, the room was devoid of those personal touches that make a house a home. They were obviously sleeping apart.

'Are you going to get out of bed and let me drive you to the polling station?' I asked him kindly.

My father groaned and turned his face to the wall. I noticed that his bald spot, the size of a fifty-pence piece on Wednesday April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1997, the last time I saw him, was now the size of a digestive biscuit (McVitie's).

I decided to attempt a breakthrough in our relationship: i.e. I would try to talk to my father as if he were a real person. I started by pushing William aside and lying next to my father on the bed. I patted his bony shoulder and said something I'd heard an expert in family therapy suggest on the Oprah show. 'I'm sorry you're not happy, Dad,' I said. 'How may I help you?'

My father turned to face me. 'You sound like a bleeding shop assistant,' he replied. 'And I'm sorry I'm not happy, Adrian, but do you know what Freud said about happiness?'

'No,' I admitted, 'I'm a follower of Jung.'

My father raised himself on one elbow. 'Freud wrote, in the Reader's Digest, 'To be happy a man needs two things: Love and Work,' and I haven't got either any more.' His mouth crumpled and he turned his face back to the wall.

'Oh, thank you very much, George,' said my mother, with heavy sarcasm. 'My love doesn't count.' Tears were gathering in her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks and bring brushfuls of mascara with them. She addressed my father's back. 'Tony Blair will give you a job, George,' she said, 'and we can sort the love thing out.' She turned to me and lowered her voice. 'When he says love he means sex.' She leaned over and kissed my father's bald spot. 'We'll go back to that sex therapist, shall we?' I got up and inched towards the door, wishing now that I had not instigated this Oprah-like family confessional. William put his hand in mine, and we left the room together, but unfortunately not before I had heard my father say, 'But I'm not having those injections in my dick, Pauline.'

'Who's Dick?' said William, as we walked down the stairs.

One of the Spice Girls, Emma, was ironing a skirt the size of an African postage stamp in the kitchen. It was Rosie, my sister.

'How's your revision going?' I asked.

'What effing revision?' She sniggered. I felt it was my duty to remind her of the importance of taking her GCSEs seriously. Her parents were obviously too busy trying to revive their clapped-out sex life to care about their daughter's education. I was only halfway through my little lecture when Rosie flew into a tantrum and slammed the iron down on to the board.

Steam hissed as she shouted, 'Chill out, man, I'm, like, cool about the effing exams, y'know?'

'Please,' I said, 'don't swear in front of William.'

'Effing is not swearing, you sad bastard,' she said.

In a deliberately calm voice I pointed out that the iron was burning her so-called skirt. She snatched up the iron and stood it on end. A cloud of vapour momentarily obscured her face, reminding me of a horror film I'd seen about a female killer running amok in a New York sauna.

As I watched my son chomp through his third bowl of Coco Pops, I tried to remember if I had been as obnoxious as Rosie when I was a young teenager. But quite honestly, dear Diary, I feel sure that I was a happy-go-lucky lad, polite, considerate and extremely well adjusted. And, bearing in mind that I had no parental encouragement (no encyclopedias, no Anglepoise) I did quite well in my GCSEs: five at C grade.

I rang the Next headquarters and ordered a pair of chinos from their catalogue. I then rang Nigel on his mobile again, and requested that he deliver the chinos to me, together with my mother's red trouser-suit.

He said, 'How about a duvet cover and a pair of pillowcases?' But I assured him that I was OK for bedlinen.

I said to him, 'Please check the size of the trousers, thirty-two-inch waist, thirty-one-inch inside leg.' I heard him crash the gears, then without him saying goodbye, his phone went dead.

To keep myself awake as William chewed each individual Coco Pop twenty times (the kid is a genius--how many almost-three-year-olds can count to twenty?), I read Pandora's election leaflet, which was fastened to the fridge with a Postman Pat magnet. It was a tawdry document. She'd been far too profligate with her exclamation marks.

Dear Voter [it started]

\* Are you sick of hearing the same tired excuses about sleaze from the clearly morally bankrupt Tory candidate for Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Sir Arnold Tufton? Yes! So am I!

\* Do you think that his record on civil liberties (petitioning Ashby-de-la-Zouch council to deter vandals by installing closed-circuit TV cameras in

the cubicles of public lavatories) is disgraceful? Yes! So do !!

\* Do you agree with Sir Arnold Tufton that TV licence dodgers should be jailed for a minimum of fifteen years? No! Nor do !!

\* Do you demand an explanation as to why Sir Arnold Tufton was photographed in Marbella in the company of the notorious criminal Len Fox? Would you like to know what was inside the Jiffy-bag that was passed from Len Fox to Sir Arnold in the Bar Espanol? Yes! So would !!

\* If you vote for me on May 1<sup>st</sup>, I pledge that I, Dr Pandora Braithwaite, Oxford Don, Linguist of Leicestershire Stock, will work conscientiously, honestly and fearlessly to represent the wishes of the people of Ashby-de-la-Zouch. In this cradle of democracy! The mother of parliaments! Send me to the House of Commons! IT CLEARLY MAKES SENSE!

At nine o'clock I took a cup of Nescafe up to my father. He lay where we had left him, his face to the wall, his hands clasped together as if in anguished prayer. He said he could hear Tony Blair's voice whispering from the corner of the room. For a split second I thought madness had set in and that he would leave the house in a straitjacket, but then I realized that the clock radio had turned itself on and Radio Four was transmitting Tony Blair's soundbites. I crossed the room, turned it off and my father seemed to relax a little. But I couldn't persuade him to leave his bed and come with me and my mother to vote.

I went to his side of the wardrobe and riffled through his pathetic collection of trousers, a hymn to man-made fibres and Elvis-in-Las-Vegas styling, and discarded them all. However, in a drawer in his side of the chest of drawers I found a pair of 501s that he'd never worn, a Christmas present from my mother in 1989 apparently. As I tried them on and looked in the wardrobe mirror, a shaft of sunlight touched the top of my head, and I saw with horror that my hair had thinned so much that light was able to penetrate to the very follicles. I went into the bathroom and examined my scalp in the devastating light of the magnifying mirror on the window-ledge. The evidence was unmistakable: I was losing my hair.

Even as I watched, a hair detached itself, floated from my head, and landed in the bottom of the washbasin. With great difficulty I picked it up, and put it into my shirt pocket with the Ralph Lauren logo. Don't ask me why I did this.

I took William and the New Dog for a walk around the block. The street was a riot of cherry blossom. Is it compulsory to have a cherry tree in your front garden in Ashby-de-la-Zouch? Did the council pass a by-law? There were drifts of fallen blossom on the pavements. William ran through it, grabbed handfuls and covered the New Dog. It looked like a grizzle-faced bride.

I've tried hard but I can't get used to the New Dog: it's got a miserable kind of face--the Old Dog was always smiling. Also, the New Dog displays no curiosity: it never tugs on its lead or gets excited. However, when a white van trailing blue balloons, blasting 'Land of Hope and Glory' from a crackling public-address system, went by, the New Dog turned its shaggy head and bared its teeth. So I warned to it, very slightly.

While William was on the swings I phoned Nigel in his van and cancelled my order for the chinos. He was very short with me, said he'd been to the warehouse in person, and had been to enormous trouble, etc., etc. He said he was on his way to deliver them as we spoke. I explained about the 501s but he didn't want to know. I hate ending a conversation on an unpleasant note, so I asked him if he was going to vote for Pandora. He said he had already voted for the Green candidate, Lillian Dale, who had canvassed on a mountain bike until it was stolen. Nigel is a keen cyclist now, apparently. I pointed out to him that too much pressure from a saddle could affect sperm production (according to an American report). He said, sarcastically I thought, 'Oh dear, and I'd planned to have at least four children, with that nice girl my mother is always going on about.'

I asked him where we were going to meet up and have that drink, but he said he hadn't got his electronic organizer with him, so we said goodbye. I dragged William off the swings and we went home.

My mother and I left William in the care of his depressed grandad and his foul-mouthed aunt and walked the quarter of a mile to vote.

There was a gaggle of voters outside the Scout hut polling station. Some enterprising senior Scouts had set up a stall and were selling chilli-flavoured Doritos and little pots of salsa. There was a choice of Coke or Diet Coke to drink. 'Whatever happened to tea and home-made scones?' asked my mother of a Scoutmaster-type person, who appeared to be in charge.

'We've had to move with the times,' he said politely. This is what the public want.'

'Baden-Powell would turn in his grave,' she said.

The man blushed and turned away, and began fiddling with the salsa dip as though embarrassed. 'What did I say?' she asked of me, as we went into the smelly hut.

'Baden-Powell has been discredited by World in Action. He got a bit too fond of the boys,' I said.

'There are no heroes left any more,' she said. 'Apart from Tony Blair...'

A woman in urgent need of orthodontic treatment smiled and handed us our ballot papers. It gave me a thrill to see Pandora's name--I had forgotten that she had two middle names: Louise Elizabeth. I wondered if she ever used her initials. I went into the voting booth and took up the pencil on the string and paused, savouring the moment. I, Adrian Mole, was about to exercise my democratic right and vote for a government of my choice. My reverie was broken when a scrutinizer inquired, 'Are you all right in there, sir?' I drew a thick, pencilled cross next to Pandora Louise Elizabeth Braithwaite's name, and withdrew from the cubicle.

As I stood before the ballot box, folding my voting paper into a small square, I tried to fully realize the awesome significance of the moment. It may have been the tawdry surroundings of the Scout hut--the limp pennants hanging from the walls, the battered stacking chairs, the faded photographs of summer camps--that prevented me from registering any strong emotion, apart from a slight feeling of anticlimax. Surely our voting procedure should be accompanied by the sound of trumpets or massed choirs, or at the very least a singer singing freedom songs accompanied by a guitar. We should celebrate our democratic rights. Perhaps champagne or beer should be served (strictly one glass per voter) after we have dropped our papers into the ballot box. If I see Pandora tonight I may mention it to her.

My mother took my arm as we strolled home together. I didn't mind because she looked so old now (she is fifty-three) and I knew that nobody seeing us together could possibly mistake us for lovers. As we reached the top of Wisteria Walk, she dug her nails into my arm and said, 'I don't want to go home.' She sounded like a small child. When I asked her why, she said, 'Three reasons: George, Rosie and William.' Seeing my face, she said, 'They're all such hard work, Adrian.' She sat down on a low wall where some blue stuff was growing, and lit a cigarette. 'I'm constantly on the go,' she said. 'And the New Dog is nothing but a bloody nuisance. I've wasted my life.'

I rushed to contradict her, but after saying, 'No, no, you haven't,' I couldn't think of anything else to add. The highlight of her life seems to have been in 1982, when she ran away to Sheffield with rat-fink Lucas, our next-door neighbour.

'Look at all the initials Pandora's got before and after her name.' She took a crumpled election leaflet out of her pocket, and we both looked down at it. 'She's a Doctor, a BA, and MA, a PhD, and she'll be an MP by tomorrow. I've got nothing after my name and only Mrs before it,' she said bitterly. 'And,' she added, 'Pandora speaks six foreign languages, fluently. All I can say is 'Two beers, please' in Spanish.'

Just then an old woman with a zimmer frame came round the corner of the house and shouted, 'You're squashing my aubrietia.' I had no idea what she was talking about, but I apologized to the wall owner, and we moved on.

I was waiting for a Salisbury's lasagne to defrost in the microwave when the phone rang. It was Ivan Braithwaite, Pandora's father. He asked if my mother was there. I said, 'Hello, Ivan, it's Adrian.'

'Oh, hello,' he said, unenthusiastically. 'I thought you were in London. I read something about you in the Sunday Times, something about sausages--or was it sewage?'

Dear Diary, is that A.A. Gill piece going to dog my footsteps for the rest of my life? Perhaps I should get in touch with Charlie Dovecote and ask him to write to Gill threatening litigation unless Gill retracts his ridiculous statement.

I shouted my mother to the phone. She came into the kitchen with William clinging to her hip and passed him over to me, saying, 'Don't put him down On the floor, he's pretending it's the open sea.'

After saying, 'Ivan, how lovely to hear from you,' my mother fell silent, only nodding now and again (Ivan Braithwaite always did like the sound of his own voice). Eventually she broke in and said, 'Of course we'd love to help, we'll see you in half an hour.'

When she put the phone down, her tired eyes were shining with excitement. 'We're needed, Adrian,' she said. 'Pandora is short of cars and drivers to ferry old people to the polling stations.'

'Will they pay for the petrol?' I asked, not unreasonably, I thought. A dark look came over my mother's face. 'This is an opportunity to unseat that fat scumbag, Sir Arnold Tufton, and you're quibbling about the price of a few gallons of petrol,' she said, stretching for her make-up bag, always within reach. By the time she had disguised her face it was 2 a.m. I'd been on the go for eighteen hours.

The Labour Party had set up a temporary office in an abandoned sweet shop, which was in a dismal shopping parade on the outskirts of Ashby-de-la-Zouch. The headquarters were flanked by Jolie Madame, a hairdresser's in which could be seen several unjolie-looking Madames, sitting under metal drying hoods. On the other side of the campaign headquarters was a futon shop. A man with a droopy moustache was staring out of the window, there were no customers in the shop and, judging by the man's disconsolate expression, there never had been. The futon revolution has bypassed Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

Pandora was sitting with her back to me, her stockinged feet resting on the old sweet-shop counter. A pair of black suede court shoes was lying on the floor, where she'd kicked them off. She was wearing a tight-fitting scarlet suit, a large red rose was pinned over her left breast and a rosette was fastened over the right. She was talking in a husky voice into the smallest mobile phone I'd ever seen. Her other hand caught up her long golden hair and scrunched it into a topknot, before letting it fall to her shoulders.

A plain-faced woman in a gored skirt and a cardigan handed her a cup of tea. Pandora smiled her radiant smile, and said, 'Mavis, you're a sweetie.'

Mavis beamed as though Richard Gere had just declared his love for her and asked her to run away with him to Malibu.

I stood at Pandora's side and waited for her to finish her conversation with somebody called Boris from the Daily Telegraph. 'Boris, darling, if I'm elected tonight, I promise we'll have a celebratory dinner very, very soon, and if I lose we'll have dinner even sooner. Bye, you horrible Tory, you.'

She switched the smile off with the phone, stood up and put her shoes on. 'What are you doing here?' she said. 'I thought you'd be in London cooking turds for A.A. Gill.'

'I've come to help,' I said, ignoring her mocking laughter.

She lit a cigarette and one of the volunteers, a thin man with a beard, rushed forward with an ashtray. 'Chris, you're a sweetie,' she croaked. Chris stumbled away, as though he'd glimpsed paradise.

'You've got everybody eating out of your hand, as usual,' I said, looking around at the volunteers, who were doing busy things with paper, tea-bags and phones.

Pandora said, 'They're happy to be associated with my success. They know I'm going to win tonight.'

I replied, 'The last I heard you were slagging the Labour Party off, saying it had betrayed socialism.'

'Oh, grow up!' she snapped. 'Do you want the bloody Tories in or out?'

'Out, of course,' I replied.

'Then shut the fuck up,' she said. 'I live in the real world.'

I looked around the HQ. It was the real world all right. My mother was holding a clipboard, and having a red rosette pinned to her jacket by Ivan Braithwaite. The back of his hairy hand brushed her left breast, and he apologized. She stretched her lipsticked lips and dipped her head to one side, in a submissive gesture I'd last seen on an animal-behaviour documentary (gorillas) on television. I'd seen that head-tilt gesture before, and it usually spelled trouble.

Mavis rushed up and said, 'Pandora, the latest exit polls are awfully good.'

She handed Pandora a piece of paper, which Pandora glanced at briefly before crumpling it and throwing it into a wastepaper basket. 'I'm going to romp home,' she said. She laid a red-taloned hand on my shoulder. 'It's so good to see you, sweetie,' she said.

'Don't you dare call me sweetie, Pandora,' I said. 'I've known you since you were thirteen and three-quarters. I lived in your boxroom when you were in a menage a trois with a gay husband and a dyslexic bodybuilder. I know your secrets.'

'Sorry,' she said. 'I've turned into a bit of a monster since this campaign started. I've been taken over by ambition,' she added sadly, as though ambition were a terminal illness. Her mobile phone trilled. She pressed a button. 'Mandy!' she said, and turned her back on me.

I prised my mother away from Ivan Braithwaite and his silly sculptured side-whiskers, and we drove to the first of our pick-ups: an old woman called Ida Peacock whose house smelled of dead cats. She walked with sticks. She told me that Tony Blair was going to give her two new hips. Our second pick-up was Mabel d'Arcy, whose great-great-grandad was a surviving officer on the Titanic; she bragged to my mother about the fact until Ida Peacock said, 'He shoulda gone down with his ship like a gent.' They didn't speak to each other again.

Our last pensioner was an old bloke called Harry Worthington. He said he hadn't been out of the house for a week. My mother said how sorry she was that he was so isolated. Worthington said he was far from isolated, he'd recently fallen in love and had spent most of the time in bed with his new girlfriend, Alice Pope. Ida and Mabel giggled like girls and gave Harry many admiring glances. He was seventy-nine, but the old git carried on as if he was Hugh Grant. He'd got a thick head of hair, and a bushy moustache. I asked him why Alice wasn't voting, and he said that she was an anarchist who didn't believe in any form of government. I asked him who, in the unlikely event of Alice Pope's anarchists coming to power, would maintain the drains. He said Alice didn't believe in drains. I pointed out that drains are absolutely pivotal to civilization. Worthington said that Alice didn't believe in civilization. No wonder he didn't get out of bed for a week. She sounds like an animal.

As I helped Mabel out of the car at the polling station at Rosie's school, it transpired that she was a supporter of Sir Arnold Tufton, and intended to vote Conservative. 'He was very good when I was burgled,' she said.

'Did he catch the burglar, or recover your stolen property?' I asked in a faux-naif fashion.

'No, but he told me that if he was Home Secretary he'd chop the thieves' hands off,' she said, benignly.

'Dr Pandora Braithwaite is very strong on Crime and Punishment,' I said. This was no lie. I knew for a fact that Pandora had studied Dostoevsky's masterpiece for A level, and received the highest grade in the East Midlands.

As Mabel staggered down the drive of the comprehensive, I tried to brainwash her into changing her political affiliation. I told several lies: that Pandora was a blood relation of Winston Churchill, that Pandora hunted with the Quorn, that Pandora made her own bread. But who knows how the old bat voted in the end?

Harry was a Pandora devotee; the things he admired about her were 'her kissable lips, her delightful breasts' and her legs, like Cyd Charisse'.

Ida Peacock voted for Paddy Ashdown because 'He is a military man.' Didn't she mind his admitted adultery? I asked. Ida smiled, showing her eighty-one-year-old teeth. 'All the nice girls love a sailor,' she sang.

Harry Worthington joined in, then sang the hideous song 'I'll See You Again', complete with throbbing vibrato and ludicrous Noel Coward accent, all the way back to his pensioner's bungalow. I was glad to see the back of them all.

My life was once blighted by a pensioner called Bert Baxter, a Communist with an unstable Alsatian called Sabre who was addicted to beetroot (Bert, not the dog). Baxter bullied me into such unsavoury activities as cutting his horny toenails, and burying his decomposed dog in hard-baked earth with a coal scuttle. Sabre's interment was one of the worst days of my life. It still rankles with me now. Bert died two years ago. I was quite surprised at how much I cared, though I have to admit that my main emotion on hearing the news was relief that I wouldn't have to cut his toenails ever again. Bert was Leicester's oldest and most objectionable man. On his 105<sup>th</sup> birthday Pandora and I were present when he was interviewed in the lounge of the Alderman Cooper Sunshine Home, where he was surrounded by the Lord Mayor, Lady Mayoress, fellow residents, staff and friends. The interviewer, a young woman in a pink suit called Lisa Barrowfield, tried manfully to stop Bert from making references to her breasts, which were not particularly prominent, as I recall: slightly larger than Jaffa oranges, but not quite the size of Marks & Spencer's grapefruits.

Lisa asked, 'Bert, you're 105 years of age. To what do you attribute your long life?'

Poor Lisa asked this question fourteen times. None of Bert's replies could be broadcast before the watershed of nine o'clock. Eventually, after the mayor and his wife had dissociated themselves from the occasion, Lisa phoned her boss at Central TV and asked for guidance. She was told to record several interviews with him and they would do a 'heavy edit' job in the studio.

My disenchantment with television began the next night. Bert Baxter had been edited into a harmless, pleasant old man. Here, just for the record, is one of Baxter's real replies.

LISA: Bert, you are 105 years old. What's your secret?

BERT BAXTER: Well, I reckon that the sixty Woodbines a day I've smoked have sort of put a healthy lining on my lungs. I've never jogged or played games or been to bed sober, so I've slept well. I shagged my way around Europe during the war, and I live mainly on beetroot sandwiches, Spotted Dick and custard. But the secret of a healthy life, and I'd tell any youth this, is don't let your sperm collect up inside your balls, let it out! (Laughs) Let 'em all out! (Coughs) Light me a fag, Pandora, there's a good gel.

What was transmitted was this manifestation of the TV editor's black art.

BERT: Beetroot sandwiches have kept me healthy, I've slept well, and played a lot of ball games in my youth. I've never smoked and I've jogged my way around Europe.

Bert was horrified when he saw Midlands Today, which had been trailed by teasers all day, e.g. an unseen announcer would say between programmes, 'And in Midlands Today at six-thirty, the Leicester pensioner who says that jogging around Europe has kept him alive for 105 years.' Why the stress on 'has' was there, I don't know. Was there a dispute about this? I don't think so.

I was glad that Bert died in a stair-lift accident the day before his 106<sup>th</sup> birthday. I couldn't have gone through another grisly birthday party. And I know for a fact that the Mayor and Mayoress of Leicester had booked a holiday in Tenerife to encompass that very day, May 9<sup>th</sup>. Still, I think Bert would have been pleased with the size of the headline in the Leicester Mercury, if not the content.

**STAIR-LIFT TRAGEDY: OLDEST JOGGER DIES**. Bertram Baxter, the oldest man in Leicester, died early today in a tragic accident involving a dressing-gown cord and the mechanism of a stair-lift at the Alderman Cooper Sunshine Home, in Brook Lane, where he had resided for many years. Mr Baxter, whose wife Queenie died in 1982, was described by the senior nursing officer, Mrs Loretta Harvey, today, as 'quite a character, who didn't suffer fools gladly'.

Mrs Harvey recalled the time that Mr Baxter had sued the Alderman Cooper Sunshine Home for damages--claiming that he was not being provided with his dietary needs. Mr Baxter ate only beetroot sandwiches, Spotted Dick and custard. The case became a cause celebre when Mr Baxter went on hunger strike and for a while he enjoyed considerable national notoriety, becoming known as 'Beetroot Bertie'. His victory was widely applauded as a triumph for common sense--though Mrs Harvey claimed that the kitchen staff were 'greatly inconvenienced'.

I shouldn't be sorry if I never saw another old-age pensioner again. I have decided that I cannot bear their slowness, their ill-fitting teeth and their mania for pickled vegetables. My mother soon got bored with assisting the pensioners: she said she'd rather be 'at the hub of things', so I dropped her off at Labour Party HQ. I continued alone.

The next person I picked up was another old man called Archie Tait. He was infuriatingly slow in getting into the car. He hawked and coughed into a large white handkerchief, and when I asked him sarcastically if he was all right he said no, he wasn't, he had pneumonia. He spoke very nicely for somebody who lived in a terraced house.

'Shouldn't you be in bed, or in hospital?' I said.

'No,' he said, 'I must vote, I'm a socialist.'

'Mr Blair wouldn't want you passing out at the polling station,' I said.

'Mr Blair?' he said, disdainfully. 'I've just said I'm a socialist, I'm voting Socialist Labour, for Arthur's party.'

'Arthur?' I checked.

'Arthur Scargill,' he said, as if talking to an idiot.

I tried to persuade him to change his mind and vote for Pandora. I told him that she had supported Mr Scargill during the miners' strike by holding a raffle at school and sending the proceeds (PS19.76, I recall) to the Strike Fund, but he would not be deterred.

'I left my left lung and my right leg at Arnhem,' he informed me, as he lurched out of the back of the car. 'And I didn't do that so that English men and women would turn into Europeans, drinking lukewarm cappuccino.'

To try to counter his fanaticism I said, 'Cappuccino is a perfectly harmless pleasant-tasting beverage. I drink six cups a day.'

'It's a little bit of coffee and a bloody lot of froth,' he said.

He shook my hand and thanked me for the lift. I told him that I would wait and take him back home.

Morally I would have been perfectly entitled to leave him, with his right lung and left leg, stranded at Carts Lane Primary School.

I felt a bit aggrieved that he had accepted a lift under false pretences, claiming to be a Labour voter when he was, in fact, a socialist all along.

When we were driving back towards his house, he apologized for swearing earlier. I said I no longer noticed profane language. I explained that I worked in a Soho restaurant where derivations of the F-word were used as nouns and adjectives and verbs--they were the building blocks of most Soho sentences.

When we stopped outside his terraced house, he had a violent coughing fit that made his face go red and his eyes run. It took a long time for him to catch his breath, so I helped him out of the front passenger seat and supported him to his front door. He took a bunch of keys out of his trouser pocket and handed them to me while he leaned against the wall, gasping.

As the front door swung open, I saw a bookcase stuffed with books. Facing me were Das Kapital, Ulysses and Harold Nicolson's Diaries. Under the window that faced the street there was a single day bed. A low table stood next to it, covered with a clutter of medicines and jars. A coal fire glimmered in the hearth. A fat cat sat on the mat. Tait lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. He was a tall man, his feet (foot) hung over the end board. As I went into the tiny back kitchen to put the kettle on, I cursed God and socialism for sending this pensioner to me. Am I never to be free of them? Are pensioners my albatross? Am I destined to voyage through life with their liver-spotted hands circling my neck?

I made him as comfortable as a one-legged, one-lunged old man with pneumonia can be and took his phone number. I ascertained from him that he had no relations (of course), and no friends (naturelle-ment), he had quarrelled with his neighbours (mais oui) and guess what? Quelle surprise! He is alone in the world. Apart from the huge ginger cat, which is called Andrew. I complimented Tait on the creature, saying it was the biggest cat I'd ever seen.

Then I wrote out my mobile number, stuck it under a jar of sweet piccalilli on the low table, and told him to ring me if he needed help tonight. He assured me that he was perfectly all right, and asked me to go away and leave him in peace. I knew he wouldn't drink the tea I'd made him in the big china cup with the rose design and the gold rim. He didn't look as if he had the strength to raise his head from the pillow.

As I drove back to the committee rooms, I wished that everybody over fifty years of age would commit mass suicide and give the rest of us a break.

I understand that certain 'grey' industries would collapse; garden-trellis and thermal-underwear manufacturers spring to mind. But the benefits are obvious: no pensions to pay out, no residential homes for the elderly to maintain, and at least half of the disabled parking spaces outside Marks & Spencer's would be reclaimed by the young and the able-bodied.

Once again I thank Pepys, the god of diarists, that my own journal will never be read in my lifetime. I would not like to be thought an uncaring ageist. I know that when I reach fifty, I will happily sacrifice my life so that the young are not saddled with the old.

On reflection, perhaps fifty is too young. Fifty-five would be a more reasonable cut-off point (if in good health or a non-smoker), but sixty would be my absolute limit. What's the point of anybody living after then? Sans teeth, sans muscle tone et sans sex?

My last job before the polling station closed at ten o'clock was to pick up a Ms Clough of Bevan Close, Beveridge Estate. To my horror she had three little kids with her. 'I've got to bring 'em with me,' she said. 'I 'aven't gotta babysitter.'

Ms Clough was excited by the prospect of a Labour victory. She thought that Tony Blair would 'support single mothers'. She had heard him say so on the Jimmy Young programme, so she knew it must be true. I assured Ms Clough that Mr Blair was a trustworthy, caring man who had dedicated his life to righting the wrongs of our inequitable society.

'Do you know Mr Blair?' she asked, looking impressed.

I watched in the driving mirror as my expression changed from confident to enigmatic. 'Does anybody really know Tony?' I said. 'I think even Cherie would say she doesn't really know Tony.'

Ms Clough disciplined her children, who were fiddling with the pine-tree air-freshener, and, with a touch of irritation in her voice, said, 'But have you met him and spoken to him? Does he know your name?'

I was forced to admit that, no, I had never met him; that, no, I had never spoken to him; and that, no, Tony Blair did not know my name. We passed the rest of the journey in silence. Ms Clough should join the Leicestershire Constabulary--she would be very effective in the Criminal Investigation Department.

Nigel's Next van was parked outside the house when I got home. He was in the kitchen drinking tea with my mother and Ivan Braithwaite. My mother was parading between the worktops in a new scarlet trouser-suit, which (I thought) clashed horribly with her red hair. However, Ivan Braithwaite (fifty-five, so ripe for the cull) was saying, 'It's immensely elegant, Pauline, but it needs high heels.'

How dare Braithwaite advise my mother on suitable footwear! The man is a sartorial disaster area. He is the Pompeii of menswear in his hideous Rohan outdoor trousers and his Birkenstock sandals/white socks combo.

I remarked to him that I was surprised he had the time for tea-drinking--wasn't he meant to be Pandora's local media co-ordinator? He said he had already written the local press releases. One if Pandora wins, and one if she loses. He said there was a lot of national press interest in Pandora because she was exceptionally beautiful and had long hair. Most of the other women Labour candidates had short hair, and couldn't fill a thirty-six AA-cup bra. Also, despite grooming lessons, they applied their make-up as though they were toddlers who had run amok at Boots' Ndeg7 make-up counter.

I was shocked at Braithwaite's shallow attitude to the democratic process. At no time did I hear him talk about his daughter's beliefs, principles or policies. I said as much, and reminded him that he had once resigned from his local Labour Party branch on a point of principle (somebody had been fiddling the tea money).

No doubt to fill the conversational void that ensued, Nigel said he was sorry to hear that my marriage was over. I shot one of my venomous glances at my mother, who had the good grace to blush and look away (another hideous clash of reds). I said to Nigel that, on the contrary, I was better off out of it. My mother said, 'On the contrary, it's Jo Jo who's better off out of it.'

I said I could not understand why she had divorced me on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour. My mother replied, 'Come on! What about the Cotswolds sneezing row? That went on for three days.'

She was referring to the time when I accused Jo Jo of sneezing in an exhibitionist manner, by putting unnecessary emphasis on the shoo! of Ah-tish-shoo! And also of extending the shoo for longer than is functionally necessary. I accused her of wanting to draw attention to herself. Jo Jo pointed out that she was a five-foot-eleven, heavily pregnant black woman with braided and beaded hair walking down a Cots-wold street, which was entirely populated by white people who were staring openly at her. 'I lack many things, Adrian, but what I do not lack is attention?' She sneezed again, extending the shoo! to ridiculous lengths. Men have murdered for less. I said so. My mother and father, whom I had foolishly invited to stay in our rented cottage, took Jo Jo's side totally. I was virtually sent to Coventry.

Meanwhile Jo Jo's exhibitionism worsened. She began to put even more stress, an inordinate amount of stress, I thought, on the Ah! before the tishl I was in torment. Dr Ng, my personal GP, put me on Prozac when we got back home to Soho.

Shortly after the Cotswold disaster, William was born into a paddling pool at the Royal Infirmary Maternity Hospital, Leicester--at my specific request--thus joining a dynasty of Moles who had drawn their first breath there (the Infirmary, not the birthing pool). It was my wish that William should enter the world via warm water, candlelight and Bach, as described in a leaflet issued by the Society of Radical Midwives. Jo Jo, however, was curiously resistant at first, saying that she would prefer to be unconscious throughout the labour. When I expressed surprise, saying, 'I'm sorry to hear you say that, Jo Jo. I'd have thought that you, as an African woman, would have had a more natural attitude towards childbirth,' to my utter amazement she became tearful and angry, and raised her voice to me, saying, 'When my waters break, why don't you find me afield that I can work in throughout my labour? And there must be a tree in this field, because, as an African woman, I will naturally want to give birth under its branches. And, of course, as soon as I have done so I will strap the child on to my back and return to my work in the fields.'

As it happened, the birthing pool was a grave disappointment. The midwife put me in charge of catching Jo Jo's afterbirth in a child's fishing net. The last time I used such a net I was eight years old, and my catch was tadpoles, which I put into a jam jar. Tragically I missed the actual moment of my son's birth because my mother chose that very same time to telephone the maternity unit and ask for a progress report. I will never forgive her for that.

Ivan Braithwaite invited my mother and me, and Nigel and Nigel's boyfriend, Norbert, to the count at the Town Hall, and to the celebratory party afterwards, at the Red Lion Hotel. At no time was my father or Mrs Tania Braithwaite mentioned. They have already been airbrushed out of history, like Stalin or Anita Harris.

After a horrible meal cooked with haste and ill grace by my mother (lobster nuggets and Uncle Ben's Oriental Rice), I went upstairs and tried to persuade my father to leave his bed. I told him that Pandora's exit polls looked good.

'I don't care, Adrian,' he said. 'I don't care about anything. My life has been a total waste, I've done nothing and been nowhere. Nobody knows my name outside my own family, and the storage-heating industry. I haven't even had my fifteen minutes of fame as promised by Andy-bloody-Warhol.'



'It was Marshall McLuhan,' I corrected.

'You see?' he said, and turned his back to the wall.

I tried to rally him by reminding him that he had been famous--perhaps not for fifteen minutes but certainly for five. When we were on holiday at Wells-next-the-Sea, he had been blown out to sea on a lilo shaped like false teeth. He had drifted for two miles before being winched to safety by the RAF. It made the regional TV news--Midlands Today--and the front page of the Leicester Mercury. Even the Daily Telegraph picked it up.

MAN SAVED BY SKIN OF TEETH! A Leicester man who was rescued drifting in the Wash on a lilo in the shape of a pair of false teeth was described by Captain Richard Brown of the RAF Helicopter Rescue Service as a 'damned fool'.

'There was a slow leak in a lower left molar,' said Captain Brown, 'he wouldn't have lasted long.'

Captain Brown called for legislation which would ban civilians from using the sea. 'The sea is not a toy,' he said today.

This was a mistake. It brought it all back to him. 'The waves were feet high,' he said, with horror in his eyes. 'And all I was wearing was a pair of Speedos. I was dying for a fag.'

I calmed him down by lighting and handing him a Rothman's king size.

William cried and hung on to my legs when my mother and I were about to leave. Rosie, who was meant to be babysitting, was giggling at The Jerry Springer Show, where a hugely fat black woman was berating her husband for his transvestism. I carried the boy upstairs to my father's bedroom and said, 'Grandad is poorly. Do you want to play doctors?' I went into the bathroom and got the first-aid box out of the bathroom cupboard. I removed the pathetic out-of-date pills and medicines (a tube of eye ointment bore the date February 1989) and gave the box to William. I said, 'You are a doctor, William, make Grandad better, there's a good boy.'

My father lay apathetically on his pillows as William began to wrap a bandage around his left arm. As I went back downstairs my father whined, 'Not so bloody tight! You're cutting my sodding circulation off!'

Just before I closed the front door I heard William shout, 'Don't say swear words, Grandad, or I'll send you to prison.' The boy is certainly right-wing when it comes to law and order.

As I turned on the car engine, Radio Four boomed out of the speakers--a panel of writers were talking about the implications for literature of a Labour victory. Some old female git blathered on in a strangled voice about Harold Wilson, somebody called Jennie Lee and the Arts Council, and then Barry Kent, ex-skinhead and prize-winning poet and novelist, interrupted her and said in his exaggerated Leicester accent, 'Yeah, but 'oo gives a toss about all that bleeding Arts Council crap? A writer's gotta be a revolutionary. His true function is to subvert the [bleeping] establishment, whether it's the [bleeping] Tory scumbags, or the [bleeping] Labour toe-rags. And if a writer needs a [bleeping] pathetic grant before he can put a few poxy words down on paper...' He laughed scornfully. 'Let him spend a few days with me. I'll open his [bleeping] eyes, I'll show him poverty and degradation, I'll take him to where people are on the [bleeping] line.' Here Kent went into one of his ranting poems. The type of ludicrous thing that has won him six poetry prizes (three British, three French):

Kill the rich!

Burn their houses!

Be unpleasant to their spouses!

Etc., etc., etc.

When he received his honorary doctorate from De Montfort University he grabbed headlines throughout the English-speaking world by parting his academic robes, revealing that he was totally naked beneath them, and intoning 'Yo! I'm a Man', the poem famous for being chanted on football terraces all over the civilized world.

Yo! I'm a Man

Yo!

I'm a man!

Don't!

Wash the pan.

Won't change a nappy,

This makes me happy.

I'm at the match

This is my patch.

Yo!

I'm a man!

Beer's in the can,

Fags in the packet,

Go on, boy, wack it!

Swear at the ref,

Threaten him with death!

Yo! I'm a man!

Yo! I'm a man!

Yo! I'm a man!

Yo!

The 500 students who had been sweating in an heated marquee for three hours went berserk and gave Kent a standing ovation. Then Kent called his mother, Edna, up to the stage and said, 'And this is Edna, my mum. She's a toilet cleaner, and why should she be ashamed of it, eh?'

Mrs Kent, who had never to my knowledge shown any signs of shame in her job prior to this moment, fidgeted uncomfortably and looked as though, when she got Barry backstage, she would give him a good hiding for showing her up. I know all this because my mother told me about it as we drove towards the court.

There was strict security outside the Town Hall, courtesy of Citadel Security Ltd. We had to queue to have our names checked off against a list. My mother quickly grew impatient and began to complain in a loud voice. It was no surprise to me when she was pulled, supposedly at random, from out of the queue and taken away by a grim-faced, square-jawed female security guard called Sandra Leaf for a body search. When my mother returned she was muttering dark threats against Sandra Leaf and Citadel Security Ltd. She said she would ring Charlie Dovecote in the morning and see if she could 'do them' for sexual harassment.

As soon as we got inside the hall, Ivan Braithwaite rushed up to my mother and said, 'Yes, Pauline, those shoes are perfect? What is it with the man? Is he a shoe fetishist? My mother pointed the toe of her vulgar red stiletto and Ivan practically ejaculated on the spot. I was relieved to see Mrs Tania Braithwaite approach and place herself between my mother and her husband.

I wondered how long Mrs Braithwaite had lingered in front of her open wardrobe before deciding on a suitable outfit for election night. Had she considered that she would be photographed and possibly filmed as the candidate's mother? It was a warm night. Was a green mohair sweater covered in embroidered French poodles a good idea? Was a pleated skirt in Prince of Wales check the perfect accompaniment? Did navy-blue Clarks sandals bring the outfit together? No! No! No! What had happened to the woman I had always admired for her elegant, bohemian style?

I consulted my mother. Mrs Braithwaite had suffered a slight stroke in December; she had made a good recovery, apart from the total loss of her dress sense. It was an appalling tragedy. I had been twenty-six years old before realizing that there were, in fact, six senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and dress.

Television crews were queuing up to interview Pandora. Between takes she used a small black compact, embossed with the Chanel logo, to powder her gorgeous face.

Sir Arnold Tufton stood in a corner surrounded by worried-looking men in pinstriped suits.

Meanwhile, on the trestle tables that lined the hall, there grew more and more bundles of Labour votes. The word 'landslide' was whispered around the hall. Pandora's election agent, a former Cockney whelk-stall owner called Lennie Purbright, introduced himself to me, saying, 'I'd like to shake your hand. I had the best meal in your restaurant the other night. In my opinion you ought to get a Michelin star.' Naturally I was flattered and asked him what he had eaten at Hoi Polloi. 'The tripe, fat chips and baked beans,' he answered, smacking his lips at the memory. 'Mind you,' he said, 'you kept us waiting.'

I explained to him that Savage would not allow a microwave in the kitchen, believing them to release 'evil rays' whenever the doors are opened, so thawing the frozen tripe is necessarily a slow process. He said, 'Yeah, yeah, they was worth waiting for, I ain't complainin'.'

I asked him about his unusual transition from whelk-stall owner to full-time political animal. He said he was driving back from Billingsgate early one morning, with a van full of whelks, and had heard Roy Hattersley on the Today programme on Radio Four, saying of John Major, 'He couldn't run a whelk stall'. Lennie Purbright was inspired by Lord Hattersley's metaphor into changing the direction of his life. I told him that Lord Hattersley was a regular at Hoi Polloi. Bubble and squeak with Fray Bentos corned beef and HP sauce was a particular favourite of his. Buster, his dog, was given special dispensation and allowed into the restaurant, providing he sat at his master's feet and didn't harass the poultry or the other diners.

At 1.30 a.m. an announcement was made, asking the various candidates to gather on the stage in five minutes. I ran to the lavatories. My bladder tends to be overactive at times of excitement. The urinal was crowded, so I looked under the door of the first stall to see if it was occupied. It was--by a pair of red stilettos and two Birkenstock sandals. There are, of course, many explanations for this conjunction of shoes, but nothing came to mind apart from the obvious one: that my mother and Pandora's father were so desperate for privacy that they were prepared to stand in a lavatory stall which reeked of uric acid to obtain it.

I fled from the men's lavatories and went into the ladies', where I found an empty cubicle. I was in mid-flow when I heard two women come in. They went into cubicles either side of me and they continued their conversation:

1<sup>st</sup> woman: I dread it, I do. Nine days!

2<sup>nd</sup> woman: My clots look like continents. I had a perfect Africa last month.

I fled without washing my hands.

The candidates were lined up on the stage. I noticed that Sir Arnold Tufton had a fly-button undone. A cheerful-looking woman with a shaved head was helped on to the stage, wearing a T-shirt with the acronym SLAG emblazoned across her chest. I asked my mother what it stood for.

'Socialist Lesbians Against Globalization,' she said. 'She's Christine Spicer-Woods, ex-RAF, all-round good egg.'

'What makes a woman have a hairstyle like that?' I said.

'Chemotherapy,' said my mother, with a withering look.

Ms Spicer-Woods was an arresting sight. But it was Pandora who drew all the eyes towards her. Nigel and his 'friend', Norbert, pushed their way to the front of the crowd where I was standing. Nigel said, 'She's the most beautiful thing I've seen since Leonardo DiCaprio.' His friend, an over-

muscular man wearing Gucci sunglasses, said, 'Yeah, she's a babe, Nigel--and that suit's a nice bit of shmutter an' all. It's Chanel, ain't it?'

Nigel explained that Norbert was in the rag trade, and could identify a designer label at a thousand paces.

The returning officer, a small man with a face like a beaver, glared towards us, and silence fell, apart from some feeble chanting of 'Keith, Keith, Keith!' from a group of Monster Raving Loony supporters at the back of the hall, in support of their candidate, a sad-looking man in a Groucho Marx mask, called Keith Mutton. Eventually, after intervention by Sandra Leaf and her Citadel colleagues, the Loonies fell silent, and the declaration began. I looked for my mother and Ivan Braithwaite, but they were nowhere to be seen. Just as the returning officer was saying, 'Marcia Grimbold, Bring Back the Rates, 758 votes,' there was a disturbance at the back of the hall, and I turned round to see Jack Cavendish, Pandora's elderly lover, being held in an arm-lock by Sandra Leaf. A uniformed policeman was moving towards them through the crowd. Cavendish was heard to shout, 'I'm Pandora Braithwaite's partner! I should be on the stage next to her, you bloody Fascists!' before he was bundled through the fire doors and out into the yard, to join the wheelie bins and broken office furniture.

I looked up at Pandora to see how she was reacting to her lover's brutal ejection. Never once did the smile leave her lips. She is ruthless in her ambition. She turned her ravishing gaze towards the lens of the TV camera. The lens winked back. It was obvious that Pandora and the TV camera were on the brink of a passionate affair.

Sir Arnold Tufton's wife--a marsupial-like woman in a silk two-piece, and what looked like Marks & Spencer's wide-fitting shoes, pointed angrily towards her husband's crotch. Tufton fumbled repeatedly at the empty buttonhole, giving the unfortunate impression that he was pleasuring himself. Dear Diary, I hold no brief for Tufton, I loathe his 'greed is gorgeous' philosophy, but I must admit that my heart went out to him on that stage, especially when the TV monitor showed his hugely magnified hand continuing to fumble with his hugely magnified and gaping fly.

Christine Spicer-Woods earned a huge cheer from her fellow SLAGS when she grinned and raised her arms at the news that she had earned 695 votes.

Sir Arnold and Lady Tufton examined the fluorescent light fittings above their heads as his results were read out: 18,902. It was time for Pandora's result. 'Pandora Louise Elizabeth Braithwaite...' began the receiving officer. He got as far as saying, 'Twenty-two thousand, four hundred and fifty-seven,' before the room erupted in a sustained cheer, which brought down dust from the rafters.

Pandora licked her lips; whether it was at the prospect of her new enticing career or to add gloss to her television smile I couldn't say. She stood with her eyes cast down, and her hands clasped together, as though praying.

She is a skilful actress. Few who were there will ever forget her harrowing performance as Mary in Manger!, the Neil Armstrong Comprehensive School nativity play. Miss Elf, the director, said at the end, 'It was Pandora's decision to give Jesus a forceps delivery.'

Pandora appeared to 'recover' herself, and strode up to the microphone. Her voice cracked with 'emotion' as she thanked the police, Citadel Security, the volunteers who manned and womanned the campaign headquarters. She pretended to break down and fight back the tears while making a passionate speech about justice and freedom. She ended with 'Ashby-de-la-Zouch has thrown off its yoke of Tory rule. For the first time in over forty-five years, you, the people of Ashby, have a Labour MP. I hope I will prove worthy of the trust you have clearly placed in me.'

I took my mobile phone from its hip-holder, and phoned my father to tell him about Pandora's triumph.

William answered the phone. 'Hello,' he said. 'Who is it talkin'?'

'Daddy,' I said, alarmed. Why was he awake at 2 a.m.?

'Where's Grandad?' I said, trying to keep the panic I felt out of my voice. There was no reply, but I could hear William breathing heavily down the phone and making the odd Teletubby-like sound. I raised my voice, hoping to cut through the boy's introspective episode. 'WILLIAM, WHERE IS GRANDAD?' Terrifying images flashed across my mind:

William fiddling with the gas taps next to the pseudo-log fire in the lounge.

William finding the lighters and matches, which are kept in a Toby jug on the mantelpiece. William moving into the kitchen and messing about with the Sabatier knives I bought my mother last Christmas.

William switching the electric kettle on and attempting to make tea.

William easily unscrewing the childproof lid and throwing paracetamol down his throat.

William letting himself out of the house and wandering the streets of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in his pyjamas. Police divers jumping into the municipal lake, watched by a regional TV news crew.

The signal on my phone started to fade. I screamed, 'WILLIAM, WAKE GRANDAD UP!' The signal went and I cursed whichever satellite had passed overhead without doing its bloody job.

After wasting a whole thirty seconds in futile button-pressing activities, I saw that the red 'battery low' warning light had come on. I looked around frantically for a phone. My mother ran up to me in a lather of excitement. Ivan Braithwaite was not far behind her. He said, 'We're going to La Zouch's to celebrate, as soon as Pan's addressed the crowd outside.'

I said to my mother, 'You've got to go home, William's roaming the house and Dad's asleep or dead!'

'He's your kid, and it's your father,' said my mother, belligerently. 'You go home. I'm staying for the celebrations.'

After ordering the pair of them to keep phoning the house, I ran from the hall and pushed my way through the crowds of excited Labour supporters who were gathering on the road and pavement outside. All eyes were turned towards the upstairs balcony, where Pandora was expected to show herself, Evita-like, to the peons of Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

I drove the car slowly through the crowd at five <sub>mph</sub>, nudging people aside. There was another obstruction ahead. A ludicrous stretch limo stood at the kerb. A chauffeur, wearing a grey uniform and cap, walked around the grotesque silver-coloured vehicle and opened all six doors. Barry Kent, in a scarlet leather jacket and sunglasses, got out of the car. Edna, Kent's mother, and his two lumpen brothers and three lumpen sisters emerged

and stood awkwardly on the pavement. Edna pulled her dress free from the crack of her large bum.

Two grinning policemen escorted Kent and his entourage through the crowd. He saw me shouting through the windscreen and stopped. I wound the window down.

Kent poked his head inside my car. He smelled expensive. 'Moley, ain't you stayin' to celebrate with your old squeeze?' he said.

'No, I've got a domestic crisis on,' I said. 'Ask him to move the car.'

Kent whistled with two fingers and shouted, 'Hey, Alfonso, lose the wheels, sharpish!

Once free of the car park, I drove like a madman through the deserted streets. I crossed traffic lights on amber. A vein throbbed dangerously in my neck. A sponge had attached itself to the roof of my mouth. I cursed the day that one of my spermatozoa had forced itself on to and into one of Jo Jo's eggs and made William. Why had no one told me that becoming a parent would expose me to such torment?

I blamed Neil Armstrong Comprehensive School. I received no parenting lessons whatsoever from that so-called educational establishment.

There were no emergency vehicles in Wisteria Avenue, and no flames licking the roof. In fact, the house was in darkness. I let myself in and called, 'William! William!' I heard faint noises coming from the living room. A Teletubbies video was running, and my father was asleep on the sofa. Somebody (it could only have been William) had scribbled in black felt-tip pen on his bald patch. I checked the house quickly. William was nowhere to be seen.

It was Rosie--arriving home disgracefully late from whatever debauch she'd been attending--who found my son. He was asleep, naked, in the dog's basket under the sink. He looked like a fund-raising poster for the NSPCC. He'd obviously been eating Winalot: there were crumbs of it around his mouth, and he still clutched some in his baby fist. If Social Services ever got to hear about this, the kid could end up in a children's home, and subsequently be nicknamed 'Wolf Boy' by the Sun.

As a punishment to my father I didn't tell him about the scribble on his head.

After I'd put William to bed I switched on the television and watched the election results. Gratifying as it was to see the arrogant and pompous Tory pins knocked over by the balls of the electorate in the skittle alley of history, the highlight of the coverage had to be Pandora's appearance on the balcony of Ashby-de-la-Zouch Town Hall.

Barry Kent stood next to her, leading the crowd in singing, 'Oh, Pandora, we adore ya', to the tune of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy'.

Her resemblance to Eva Peron was startling and, I am convinced, quite deliberate.

I remember the project on South American dictators she did in the fifth form at school, and how furious she was when she only received a B minus instead of her usual A plus. Mr Fagg, her history teacher, had written, 'A well-researched and, as usual, brilliantly expressed piece of work, but marred by the protracted and bafflingly irrelevant essay on Eva Peron's fondness for Balenciaga.'

Rosie joined me for a moment as I watched members of the new Labour government at the victor's celebrations at the Royal Festival Hall. As they waited for Tony 'n' Cherie to join them, they jiggled their hips and clicked their fingers to the tune of 'Things Can Only Get Better'.

I squirmed with embarrassment. I was reminded of watching my father dancing at Auntie Susan's wedding reception in the prison officers' social club. As soon as the DJ (a convict on parole), put on the Rolling Stones' 'Brown Sugar', my father leaped to his feet and began strutting around the hall, a la Mick Jagger.

Auntie Susan's new 'wife', Amanda, stood next to me at the bar, supping a pint of Guinness. The only comment she made was 'Poor, sad bastard,' as my father wiggled past, one arm stabbing the air, the other perched provocatively on his sunken hip.

I felt much the same disgust at the sight of Robin Cook's attempts to keep to a rhythm. I dread to think what he's like at sexual intercourse, where rhythm is all. Though I expect he must have given sex up long ago. I read somewhere that it's racing horses that inflames his passion.

As we watched the dancing politicians, Rosie put her fingers down her throat and made loud retching noises. I felt obliged to defend the new government, and their innocent pleasure in taking office.

I said, 'Show some tolerance, Rosie.'

'Tolerance!' she sneered. 'Tolerance is for, like, your saddo generation, not mine.' She sneered on, 'If I were a dictator I'd ban anyone over eighteen years old from f--dancing.'

There was a shot of Peter Mandelson clapping his hands in a loose, American kind of way. She said, 'Gross,' and went to bed.

## **Friday May 2<sup>nd</sup>**

At 6.14 a.m. I heard Ivan Braithwaite's faulty exhaust pipe turn into Wisteria Walk and stop outside our house. (Together with the rest of his car, obviously.

I mean, obviously!) I dragged myself off the sofa, peered through a chink in the curtains and saw my mother and Braithwaite in passionate conversation in the front seats of the car. My mother was drawing heavily on a cigarette. Braithwaite's eyes were half closed against the smoke. Suddenly my mother yanked the car door open. Braithwaite leaned across the gear stick with an anguished look on his unshaven chops. My mother ran round the back of the car, then up the path without looking back. I heard her keys scraping around the keyhole in the front door. She has never, ever managed to unlock a door in under three minutes, so I put her out of her misery and opened it for her. She looked shocked to see me.

I said, 'What was going on in that car?'

She took off her red jacket and hung it over the back of a kitchen chair. The tops of her arms looked pasty and saggy, as though they'd been injected with a lumpy white sauce. She said, 'I've just had an argument with Ivan...about, er...which Dimbleby gave the best election coverage!'

It was an obvious lie. I said, 'And which Dimbleby did you favour?' with some sarcasm.

'David!' she answered, but she couldn't look me in the eye. I heard the frame creak upstairs as she got into bed. Then there was silence.

I lay awake on the sofa and wondered if I should intervene before my mother brought yet another tragedy to our family. Trust her to spoil my enjoyment of Labour's victory. What should have been a glorious new dawn of optimism and a celebration of the transcendence of all that is best in humankind had been tainted by the potential threat to the Moles' and the Braithwaites' family units. And all because two late-middle-aged people have restless genitals.

1 a.m.

The household slept late. It was Tania Braithwaite who woke us by phoning and asking if Ivan was at our house. Apparently he hadn't been home and his mobile was switched off. My mother overheard my feigned concern and snatched the phone off me. While she cross-questioned Tania, I fed the New Dog and William, and took a cup of Nescafe up to my father. He was lying on his side, facing the wall. His bald patch was still decorated with black felt-tip scrawlings. As I put the mug down on the bedside table, he begged me to close the curtains against the sunlight, which was flooding into the room.

I said, 'You ought to feel happy today, Dad. Tony could transform your life.'

He gave a harsh laugh as he sat up in bed and reached for his Rothman's. 'Listen, son,' he said, 'under Mrs Thatcher I was a three-times-a-week man, and if the sun was shining I was a bloody sex machine.'

I said, 'I was referring to the socio-economic aspects of the new government.'

'Yeah, well,' he said, sucking on his cigarette, 'all I'm saying is that when Maggie was in power I had lead in my pencil.'

I left the room. As I saw it, there was no point in reasoning with a man who could see no further than the end of his pencil.

Before I left for London, I tried to get up the courage to talk to my mother about the disastrous consequences certain to ensue if she were to embark on an affair with her local MP's father. MI5 would follow her around Asda. Her phone would be tapped and, more importantly, was she really prepared to put my father through a divorce for a second time?

I went to tackle her and found her in the living room, deliriously happy, watching a video loop of the expression on Michael Portillo's face as the realization dawned that he had been kicked from office by his former constituents. She shouted at the screen, 'Yes, you arrogant bastard, how does it feel to be on the scrap-heap, like George Mole?' I didn't want to prick her balloon of happiness. And, anyway, I couldn't risk us having an argument that ended with her refusing to look after her grandson.

William had to be prised from my legs before I could get into the Montego. Eventually he was persuaded to let me go by the promise that he could watch a video of Jeremy Clarkson test-driving a Lamborghini. The kid waved until I turned the corner of the avenue. I was almost tempted to reverse and pick him up, take him back to London with me. But reason prevailed. What would I do with him all day when I was working?

It was a gloriously warm day, and I wound the window down and enjoyed the breeze on my face. Unfortunately just before I joined the motorway, an insect of some kind flew up my left nostril, causing my eyes to run all the way to London.

Saw eleven Eddie Stobart lorries. Only received nine salutes, though. Perhaps the other two drivers didn't see my greetings. Otherwise the journey was without incident.

I arrived at the Brent Cross shopping centre car park, where I habitually parked the Montego at 1700 hours, arriving in Soho, via the bus, at 1800 hours. Why is Brent Cross the nearest free parking I can find to Soho? I've got my name down for a resident's parking permit, but the waiting list is 2,000 names long. 'Clever Clive', a criminal acquaintance of mine, offered to supply me with an illegally obtained permit. 'The geezer's dead. He ain't gonna need short-term parking. He's in Long Stay, permanent.' But I turned him down. I cannot profit from the dead, and anyway Clever Clive was asking PS500.

I didn't have to start work until seven-thirty so I bought a Guardian and sat outside the Bar Italia in Greek Street. I was hoping to read that Frank Bruno, Paul Daniels and Bruce Forsyth had been spotted at Heathrow, fleeing a Labour victory as promised, but there were no reported sightings of them. I suppose it is early days yet. They've got mock-Tudor mansions to sell, and financial advisers to consult.

My friend Justine, who lap-dances at Secrets, joined me for an espresso and said that business had been excellent last night. 'You couldn't have got another bloke in the place if you'd cut their dicks off,' she said, causing me to wince at her graphic account of the crush. She went on, in her Gateshead accent, 'And they was mostly Labour supporters.' She told me that her boss, Large Alan, had been 'worrying his bollocks off' about a possible change of government. He had forecast massive redundancies for Soho's sex-industry workers should Labour win. 'It's the Conservative MPs who kept the 'discipline' side of the business going,' Justine explained. 'Large Alan always gives them a good discount--on production of a Commons pass.'

'So, what special services do Labour MPs request?' I asked.

'Well,' she said, bringing her sunbed-tanned face next to mine, 'I've got one old Labour MP from Preston who has a list of things he likes me to shout out when I'm pretending to come.'

'Such as what?' I pressed, urgently.

'Weird things,' she said, as she adjusted her breasts inside her Wonderbra to show them to better advantage. 'I have to shout, 'October Revolution', 'Clause Four' and end up with 'Betty Boothroyd', she said.

She was obviously in complete ignorance of the history of the Labour Party. I, of course, understood the references, because I was founder and leader of a political organization called the Pink Brigade. We were a bunch of radical teenage hot-heads. We demanded:

- Cycling lanes alongside motorways
- A moratorium on library fines for pensioners
- Zero-rated VAT on skateboards

- Cigarettes to cost at least PS10 per pack
- Babysitting wages to be linked to the cost of living index peace not war.

Pandora was on the Pink Brigade's executive committee, but resigned after three months after a bitter row about the party's anti-smoking policy. At the age of sixteen she was already on fifteen Benson and Hedges a day, plus the occasional cigar after dinner.

Justine repeated, 'October Revolution, Clause Four, Betty Boothroyd,' as if trying to discover the erotic charge. 'It's the easiest money I've ever made,' she said. 'He's come and gone in half an hour, and left me with me Tesco's money for the week.'

After she'd hurried off to work I pondered on the nature of our Soho village conversation. I couldn't imagine speaking of such worldly things in any of the villages in Leicestershire, apart from Frisby-on-the-Wreake where, if the rumours are true, paganism is practised on a large scale.

### **Saturday May 3<sup>rd</sup>--2 a.m.**

I have just finished work and, though the hour is late, I am far too overwrought to sleep. Savage behaved like a beast tonight. A beast with a drug, alcohol and personality-disorder problem. The nightmare began when I got to work and saw that he had Blu-Tacked a large notice in the window:

No socialists

No mobile phones

No silicone breasts

No sodomites

No face-lifts

No credit cards

No Welsh

No vegetarians

No non-smokers

No pensioners

No teetotallers

No Filofaxes

No Groucho members

No media workers

No working class

No comedians

No disabled

No lesbians

No blind dogs

No fat people

No Liverpudlians

No children

No yoghurt-eaters

No designer handbags

No Christians

No Belgians

No poncy wankers asking for risotto

No redheads

No ex-wives

An angry crowd had gathered outside the restaurant. A fat woman carrying a handbag with a bamboo handle was saying in a lilting Welsh accent, 'I was born in Liverpool and my partner is a lesbian comedian. It's disgraceful.'

Savage could be seen inside smoking a fag, toasting the crowd in champagne. I let myself in and passed through the restaurant on my way to the kitchen.

'The provincial returns,' he bellowed. 'How is dear old Leicester?'

'My family live in Ashby-de-la-Zouch now,' I replied, coldly.

'You're such a/—pedant,' spat out Savage.

'Better a pedant than a bigot,' I replied. 'That notice disqualifies most of your regular customers. You'll be bankrupt in a month and we'll all be on the street.'

'That's the idea,' he slurred. 'If I'm bankrupt, I can't pay Kim her allowance, can I?'

I took advantage of his drunkenness to continue. 'It's your fault that Kim is financially dependent on you. You refused to let her work during your marriage, didn't you?'

'Work!' shouted Savage. 'You call arranging a few fucking twigs in a bucket work?'

'She was a society florist,' I reminded him, 'with three shops and a contract with Conran.'

Savage laughed his horrible, almost silent laugh, as I went upstairs to the 'flat' above the restaurant. I use ironic quote marks around 'flat' because it is actually a storeroom. I share my quarters with catering packs of gravy mix and huge tins of vegetables. Two gigantic freezers full of offal and cheap cuts of meat crowd my 'living room'. However, there is just room for a small MFI desk 'n' chair set (in black ash) and a two-seater sofa covered in a sunflower-print throw. (I feel an affinity with Van Gogh: both of us were rejected in our lifetimes by the metropolitan elite.) I changed into my chef's whites, fed my goldfish, then went down to the kitchen and began to prepare for the few customers who would pass Savage's exacting entrance stipulations. Saturday's menu is always:

Prawn cocktail Ox liver, bacon, onions

Boiled potatoes

Ringed carrots

Peas--Birds Eye

Oxo gravy

Co-op jam roly-poly

Lumpy Bird's custard (skin PS10 extra, due to weekend supplement)

Nescafe After Eight Mint

I was annoyed to find that no one had remembered to defrost the ox liver, so I had to put the frozen lumps into the oven on a low heat. The vegetables had been prepared, so I made up five litres of gravy. While that was boiling, I mixed the Bird's custard powder, milk and sugar together in a large bowl, being careful not to blend the mixture too carefully as this destroys the lumps when the hot milk is added.

Luigi came in and took off his coat, hat, shoes and socks. 'I gotta wash my feet inna sink,' he said, climbing on to the draining-board. 'I gotta that bleddy whatchewmacallit?' he said, placing his feet under the running cold tap. 'Athlete's feet!' He plucked the phrase triumphantly from the air of the doctor's surgery where he'd first heard it spoken. 'It's itching me like crazy,' he said, scratching between his toes.

I glanced at the notice on the staff toilet door 'Please wash your hands,' it said. There was no mention of feet. Savage lurched into the kitchen and staggered into the toilet. He didn't bother closing the door and a sound like the Zambezi in spate was clearly heard.

I rushed down the passageway, and slammed the door shut. I came back to see Malcolm, the washer-upper, unzipping his blouson jacket. He was visibly upset. I asked him what was wrong.

'Tha's out of order,' he said, nodding towards Luigi's feet in the sink. 'Tha's my territory, that sink, an' whadif the 'ealth inspect us, eh?'

Luigi screamed, 'I been working in restaurants for twenty-seven year. I served Princess Margaret and Tony, an' Cassius Clay an' Tommy Steele. These are personal friends of mine. Sophia Loren came to see me whenever she was in London, and once she said to me, 'Luigi, I gotta word of advice for you. Always look after your feet.' Luigi swung his feet out of the sink and dried them on a couple of clean tea towels.

Malcolm said, 'As if!' and wrapped himself in his grease-stained apron.

I busied myself with defrosting the ox liver. I don't involve myself with the constant kitchen rows. I am called Head Chef but this means nothing: I am low down in the pecking order at Hoi Polloi. I am employed solely for my pure English genes, and my authentic working-class food background.

Savage emerged from the lavatory after ten minutes, looking bright-eyed and happy. I pointed out to him that he'd got talcum powder on the end of his nose. He laughed and said, 'Missed a bit, eh?' and went into the restaurant to unlock the front door. The waiters, Kenneth and Sean, were half an hour late, and where were my assistant cooks, Sasha and Aziz?

It was fifteen minutes to 'dishing-up time' when Jimmy the Greek came into the kitchen from the taverna next door. He said that the Greek community in Britain voted Labour because of a promise made by Neil Kinnock twelve years ago that the Elgin marbles would be returned to the Parthenon as soon as the Labour Party gained power. Jimmy had come round in the hope of seeing a famous Labour Party face...one that he could petition.

As I turned the spitting slices of ox liver in the roasting tin, I said, 'I didn't know you were interested in historical artefacts, Jimmy.'

'We was stitched up by Lord Elgin and the Turks,' said Jimmy, flicking cigarette ash into the sink. 'I want justice for my country. I would die for Greece!' he added, melodramatically.

'I wouldn't die for England,' said Malcolm. 'It's never done me no favours.'

'Well, thanks to Nato and the nuclear deterrent, neither of you will be asked to lay down your lives,' I said. 'Now, if you don't mind, I've got sixty-two people waiting to be fed, and no staff!' I threw a fish-slice across the kitchen. I occasionally indulge in fits of bad temper. People expect it of a Head Chef, and it reduces my stress levels, according to my ex-stress counsellor, Sky Lupin.

Malcolm said, 'I'll help you out with the waitering, but I ain't doin' it for three quid an hour.'

I said, 'Malcolm, look at yourself. You are seriously unkempt. You were born to live behind the scenes.'

To my amazement his eyes filled with tears. 'Yeah, well, that's what you think, Moley. Tony Blair's gonna look after me from now on. I'm workin' class, an' Labour 'as always looked after the workin' class.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'but they're not going to provide free grooming and elocution lessons for you, are they?'

'No, but I'll get an education, won't I?' he said. 'Tony promised, he said it three times.' He spoke of Mr Blair as though he were a personal friend.

'You'll have to learn to read before you get an education,' I said. I regretted these words the moment they were out of my mouth.

Malcolm said, 'That's the education I'm talkin' about. Tone's gonna teach me to read.'

I began to slop chilled prawn cocktail from a catering pack into sixty fruit sundae bowls (two of the diners were allergic to shellfish). Savage came into the kitchen shouting, 'Where's the f--starter? I've got Michael Jackson waiting for his f--dinner out there, on table twelve.'

Luigi said, 'Why's crazy Michael come to Hoi Polloi? I heard he only eats mung beans and bean-sprouts in a oxygen tent with a trained nurse standing by an' a helicopter hovering.'

Malcolm said, 'As 'e got Bubbles, 'is monkey, with 'im?'

As soon as Savage had gone back into the dining room, there was a stampede to the swing door and we all jostled to get a look at the singer and plastic-surgery victim. However, table twelve was devoid of a man with a plastic nose or a monkey. Four men in Armani suits were deep in conversation.

Luigi looked in the reservations book. One of the men was Michael Jackson, the newly appointed head of Channel Four. I sent Malcolm upstairs to the fiat to bring down the synopsis of my twelve-part comedy-drama series, The White Van, which is about a man, Godfrey Hetherington, who by day is a BBC accountant but by night is a serial killer. Godfrey drives around the Home Counties in a white Bedford van, murdering women.

The BBC turned it down in February.

THE WHITE VAN--A SYNOPSIS

The White Van is a television comedy drama in twelve half-hours.

The hero is Godfrey Hetherington (Harry Enfield), who by day is a BBC accountant and by night is a serial killer who drives around the Home Counties in a white van, murdering women.

The comedy arises from the fact that Godfrey's wife Gloria (Pauline Quirke) knows nothing of her husband's nocturnal activities. She thinks he's on a charity soup-run for the homeless.

The laughs come thick and fast as a blundering police inspector (David Jason) comes close to catching Godfrey, only to see him make his escape yet again.

There will be twelve glamorous victims who perish by twelve ingenious methods. The British public enjoy a good laugh, and also (perversely some might say) are fascinated by serial killers. The White Van is an ingenious fusion of the two.

To be shot at BBC White City and various Home Counties locations.

The White Van is a parable of our times.

A.A. Mole

(Note: the above actors have yet to be approached.)

END

Kenneth and Sean turned up just in time to help garnish the prawn cocktails with sprigs of not-so-fresh parsley. They claimed they were late because they'd been stuck at Mornington Crescent on the Northern Line for an hour and a half in the dark. I asked the reason for the delay. Sean said, 'Rats had chewed through the electrical cables and stopped the train.' I asked him how he knew. He said, 'I looked out of the carriage window and there was this rat, as big as a dog, it was, staring back at me, and, I swear on my mother's life, it had a piece of cable hanging there in its fat chops.'

Kenneth said, 'You lying Irish toe-rag. I saw no rat, no, it was a suicide. It always takes an hour and a half to scrape the body off the line. You could set your watch to it.'

'Probably somebody what voted Conservative,' said Malcolm, attempting and failing to make a joke.

We discussed possible reasons for the no-show of Sasha and Aziz. The consensus was that they'd been rounded up by the immigration authorities, which is a constant hazard in the catering industry. It makes long-term planning impossible, and certainly screws up holiday rotas, etc.

Malcolm formally asked to be promoted to kitchen assistant. I said I would talk to Savage when he was sober (never). Malcolm then started banging on about a minimum wage, and rights and conditions. I warned him against such dangerous talk in the kitchen, though I said it kindly, to show him that I was sympathetic, in principle, to improving our terrible working practices at Hoi Polloi.

Without Sasha and Aziz, Savage was forced to help me out as I plated up the sixty-two ox-liver dinners. Malcolm was given a wooden spoon and entrusted with warming up the gravy in the cauldron on the stove.

At 10 a.m. Kenneth and Liam reported that the diners were becoming tired of waiting for their main course, and several had complained about the withered condition of the parsley garnish.

Savage roared, 'Tell the f-rs to go to one of the Conran joints if it's freshness they want.'

Eventually, when all the diners were chewing on their ox liver (it had emerged from the oven slightly tougher than I had intended), I stood at the



interconnecting door and scanned the dining room for famous faces. Mr Mandelson had his usual table in the far corner: he likes to have his back to the wall. Harry Enfield was eating with Edward, his father, and also at the table was Richard Ingrams, who is the editor of the Oldie, the magazine for old people. I have been a subscriber for a year. My subscription was a thirtieth-birthday present to myself. Some people scoffed at the time. (My wife Jo Jo is convinced I am the reincarnation of an ancient African woman, and indeed my grandmother used frequently to say to me, 'Adrian, you were born old.' It's true that we used to share many of the same enthusiasms: Radio Four, Jif Lemon, Yorkshire pudding, correct punctuation, etc., etc.)

Savage was dining a deux with a slim blonde woman, who was pushing pieces of liver around her plate with a look of disgust.

Kim Savage entered via the kitchen entrance. She joined me at the door to the restaurant; her perfume almost made me swoon. 'What's your scent called?' I asked.

'Poison,' she said, narrowing her eyes as she watched Savage clinking glasses with the blonde woman.

Kim tossed back her mane of black hair. In 1987 she was voted Miss Flower by readers of Floristry Today.

I examined Savage's companion. 'Who is she?' I asked.

'Bridget Jones,' spat out Kim. 'Her diaries have been in the bestseller list for months.'

'Her diaries?' I checked. 'But she's not famous, is she?'

'No,' said Kim, 'although she might be if Savage makes her his fifth wife.'

But, as I watched, Bridget Jones got up from the table and left the restaurant abruptly.

Savage shouted after her, 'Yes, your bum does look big in those bloody trousers.'

Kim said, 'Tell that fat bastard he owes me three months' maintenance.' And left.

Savage saw me at the door and shouted, 'Get back to the f--kitchen, Mole.'

Mr Ingrams looked at me sympathetically before I turned back to my lowly duties.

I dished up the jam roly-poly, and was angered when I realized that Malcolm had pureed all the lumps in the custard and thrown the skin away! There it lay in the pig bin, like a large withered yellow balloon. Luigi scooped up the skin between two fishslices and washed it under the hot tap, saying, 'Nobody ain't gonna know it's been in the bin.'

I watched in shocked silence as he divided the custard skin into four pieces and took them out to table twelve: a special request, apparently, to celebrate Mr Jackson's new, exalted position.

In the lull between the pudding and the Nescafe-and-After-Eight course, I phoned Wisteria Walk. My mother answered. 'Your dad's got something wrong with his scalp,' she said.

'He's always had chronic dandruff,' I reminded her.

'No, this is something else,' she quavered. 'He saw the back of his head in the bedroom mirror and went hysterical. I had to call the doctor out.'

'What's wrong with him, then?' I said. 'Apart from the fact that he's being cuckolded.'

She ignored my mumbled reference to her probable infidelity.

'His scalp's gone black,' she said. 'It's especially bad on his bald spot. Dr Chaudri's baffled. It looks like gangrene,' she added.

'Gangrene!' I shouted. Malcolm and Luigi looked up from distributing the After Eights on the coffee saucers. 'If it's gangrene he'll have to have his head amputated,' I said.

My mother didn't laugh, but Malcolm and Luigi did. They laughed themselves stupid. They were still laughing when Savage announced that the politically incorrect notice in the window had been torn down by a delegation of journalists from the Daily Telegraph. Another sign that the formerly right-wing paper is slowly but surely moving towards left of centre.

### **Saturday May 3<sub>rd</sub>**

My father's gangrenous bonce is better, according to the latest medical reports.

After a restless night, he was persuaded to lie in a warm bath that had been infused with an essential oil (marigold). He massaged his scalp with seaweed and conditioned the little hair left on his head with a puree manufactured from an Irish bog plant. When he emerged from the bathroom, his scalp, according to my mother, was 'it's usual nice pink'.

My mother sees this episode as a glorious victory for the powers of plant therapy. I hope she never finds out about the felt-tip pen. She has been disillusioned too many times in her life.

Kim came round this morning with two beefy blokes, and removed five crates of champagne from the cellar. 'Tell Savage it's part payment for the money he owes me,' she said.

I couldn't work out why she had aged so dramatically overnight. Then I realized: it was the first time I had seen her in the cruel light of a Soho day.

### **Sunday May 4<sub>th</sub>**

After cooking lunch--

Scrag end of lamb

Roast potatoes

Turnip chunks

Boiled cauliflower

Damp Yorkshire pudding

Plum Duff Tinned Carnation milk

Nescafe After Eight Mint

--I left Malcolm toiling over the tins in the sink, and went upstairs to the flat. I worked all afternoon on my television series, *The White Van*. I made good progress on Part Three. I really feel that I have found my 'voice'. What a joy it is to hone my craft, and lose myself in the world that my characters inhabit. I got up and looked moodily out of the window. I expect that from the street below I looked like a character (a writer perhaps) in a French film. I was dreading the next day. I always hated Mondays. Tripe day. I have begged Savage to take it off the menu, but to no avail.

## **Monday May 5<sup>th</sup>**

*Bank Holiday, UK and Republic of Ireland*

I saw Will Self today. Talk about street cred. The man has everything. Height, looks, dress sense and the biggest vocabulary in London, if not the country. Also, he has written a ground-breaking book where a tramp has sex with a dead dog, or a dog has sex with a dead tramp, I forget which.

## **Tuesday May 6<sup>th</sup>**

The staff toilet floor was sprinkled with talcum powder when I went in tonight. Savage was the last occupant before me. What does he do in there that necessitates the use of talcum powder? I shudder to think.

## **Wednesday May 7<sup>th</sup>**

*Muslim New Year*

Pandora and her fellow Blair's Babes were photographed with Tony outside Parliament. Pandora showed the most teeth, cleavage and leg, and managed to position herself next to Mr Blair. In one photograph she has an arm draped casually around his shoulder, as though they were equals.

After work tonight I went to the exclusive opening of Large Alan's new drinking-club venture, *The 165*, which is named after the remaining Tory MPs. It's in a basement in Brewer Street.

Justine was there in the role of Alan's hostess. She seemed to know most of the MPs by name.

If pinstripes were water, I would have died of drowning.

Nicki Hasnun, designer of *The 165*, was there. He was banging on about his influences--which apparently include Pugin and what he called dictator kitsch! He is a friend of somebody called Mobutu.

If forced to describe the decor, I would have to say, 'Gothic classicism with animal prints, or St Pancras station meets Whipsnade Zoo.' The effect was horribly unsettling. I asked Large Alan how he managed to get the builders in and out in only five days. He looked down at me from his great height and said what sounded like 'kneecaps'. Though I may have misheard him--there was a high level of decibels in the cramped space.

Some of the noise was caused by a loud argument being conducted by a knot of Tory MPs, about the appointment of their new leader. Half favoured Michael Howard (the Extra Virgin of Smarm) and the others fancied William Hague (whom privately I believe to be Margaret Thatcher's Love Child).

## **Thursday May 8<sup>th</sup>**

*World Red Cross Day--Ascension Day*

Let's examine the facts that inform my Thatcher mother/Hague son theory.

1. Hague was christened William. Presumably after William Pitt, one of MT's heroes.
2. Hague's so-called 'parents' manufacture and deliver fizzy drinks and cordials.
3. Margaret Thatcher's father sold fizzy drinks and cordials in his shop.
4. During the last four months before William Hague's birth on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1961, Margaret Thatcher was mysteriously out of the country in Switzerland. An obstetric centre of excellence.
5. When William Hague addressed the Conservative Party conference, aged sixteen, Margaret Thatcher listened to him with rapt maternal pride. I know, I've checked the video. Hers was the face of an adoring mother.
6. They have the same hair colour.
7. The same colour eyes.
8. They are both going bald.
9. They both read Hansard for pleasure, in bed.
10. There was another important fact, but I've forgotten it.

## **Friday May 9<sup>th</sup>**

Zippo Montefiori, the managing director of Pie Crust Productions, was thirty years old today, and he chose to celebrate this landmark by taking over the whole of Hoi Polloi for a private party.

The good-luck fairy must have spent longer over his crib than she did over mine. He is what I heard one woman describe as 'devilishly good-looking', with black floppy hair and eyes like a Labrador. He is never seen without his black Armani overcoat--yet he never sweats. He speaks slowly with a voice as smooth as a conker, and he looks into your eyes as though searching for your soul.

There is reputed to be a waiting list of women wanting to go out with him.

He is a great fan of institutional food—he went to Harrow. The menu included some of his offal favourites. I also threw a few plastic caterpillars in the salad for public-school authenticity. At the end of the evening Zippo came into the kitchen to thank the staff. 'Fab scoff,' he said, 'and the caterpillars were a hoot.' After a bit of a chat about where I had 'sourced' the caterpillars (a joke shop in Leicester), he asked me if I'd ever thought about appearing on television!

'As what?' I asked.

'As a cook,' he said. 'You could do some of your offal specialities.'

I explained that I was something of an intellectual, and didn't watch or own a television. He said that he would send one round and have it installed free of charge so that I could watch the cookery programmes that Pie Crust Productions made!

I found it hard to sleep, partly because of a loud brawl downstairs involving Savage and Kim, but mainly due to the terror I felt at the thought of appearing on TV as a chef. The truth is, I can't cook.

**Saturday May 10<sub>th</sub>**

The television arrived today. Also a video.

Savage is in St Thomas's Hospital having his broken jaw wired together. His ex-wife has been arrested for GBH. It's Savage's fault. He confessed (boasted) to her that during their marriage he had faked most of his orgasms.

**Sunday May 11<sub>th</sub>**

*Sunday after Ascension Day*

Zippo rang me at 8.30 a.m. and asked me to watch one of Pie Crust's programmes, The Fry-Up, which was on at 9 a.m. He is certainly enthusiastic. I have made up my mind not to appear on TV. However, I did manage to video The Fry-Up, after phoning Dixons for instructions.

I phoned home and spoke to my father; only he and William were in. Rosie hadn't come home from the night before, and my mother has started taking the New Dog for long walks early every morning. 'The dog's knackered by the time it gets back,' said my father.

I was immediately suspicious and asked him about the average duration and exact route of these 'walks'. As I suspected, she usually goes down the bridlepath that runs at the back of the Braithwaites' house, and then into the woods. I happen to know that there is a gate in the wall that connects the Braithwaites' garden to the bridlepath. I also happen to know that Mrs Braithwaite leaves the house at 8.30 a.m. to go to her job, teaching Women's Studies at De Montfort University. I also happen to know another fact: Ian Braithwaite works from home—in the garden, in a centrally heated wooden chalet with a Tyrolean-style sun-deck. I have been inside this chalet. It is well equipped; there is a desk, a modem, a swivel chair, mains drainage, a kettle, a cafetiere, and a chaise longue. I, sadly, rest my case.

I must get hold of Pandora's phone numbers and warn her of the calamitous situation that has united the House of Mole and the House of Braithwaite.

**Monday May 12<sub>th</sub>**

Savage is out of hospital. He can't eat solid food yet, but he seems happy enough sucking his rum and black through a drinking straw. Lunch today was:

- Fried eggs (two)\*
- Fat chips—cooked in lard
- Marrowfat peas
- Two slices of sliced white buttered bread HP sauce or Heinz ketchup
- Kit-Kat or Wagon Wheel
- Nescafe After Eight Mint

\* Please be assured: all our eggs are laid by battery hens.

I got a delivery of videos of The Fry-Up. They were presented by a man with side-whiskers and a Cockney accent. It was a farrago from start to finish. The bewhiskered Cockney is, he tells us, in his tiresome rhyming slang, the owner of a Sylvia Plath (a workman's caff!). This Cockney person's name is Alfie Caine. I watched all six of his half-hour shows.

- Sausages: Thick or Thin?
- Eggs: The Membrane Factor
- Bacon: How to Reduce Pan Curl
- Tomatoes: Fresh or Tinned?
- Fried Bread: Guaranteed Success
- Beans, Mushrooms, Black Pudding: Do They Belong?

I transcribed a few sentences of this man's hideous patter from the Fried Bread show: 'So, you good steeple out there, wanna snow how to book dyed head, do you? Smell, whatcha gotta November is to keep your hat snot in the man.'

I have met many Cockneys since I moved to London eight years ago, including a man who was born in the very nave of Bow Bells, and none of them have ever used 'snot' for not, or 'November' for remember. Alfie Caine is a total fraud.

When Zippo rang I gave him my honest opinion of The Fry Up, and said that I couldn't be associated with such a tawdry enterprise. Zippo laughed and said that The Fry Up was a heavily ironic post-modernist deconstruction of the cookery show as naff entertainment. 'Didn't you get the Sylvia Plath clue?' he asked.

'So, it was meant to be funny,' I said.

'Of course,' he said.

'But it didn't make me laugh,' I said.

Zippo sighed. 'Laughter is kind of not where it's at with Pie Crust Productions. Our target audience are students who have failed to do any revision or any essays, and expect to fail their exams. It's a show for losers.'

I was dumbfounded and asked how many viewers watched the Pie Crust shows. 'Seven hundred and fifty-three thousand people tuned in to Tomatoes: Fresh or Tinned?,' said Zippo. 'We're getting a lot of interest from the advertisers.'

'Which products do failed students buy?' I asked.

'Catfood mainly,' he said, 'followed by Cadbury's Creme Eggs, Strongbow Cider and Pot Noodles.'

'So how much does Alfie Caine get paid per show?' I asked.

'Alfie's got an agent, so that bumps it up a bit,' he said.

'So how much does he get?' I pressed.

'I couldn't possibly divulge that, it would be terribly unprofessional of me, but let's say it's in the region of the price of a package holiday to Tenerife.'

'High or low season?' I asked.

'Oh, high,' he said. 'We're talking August here.'

'A one- or two-week holiday?' I asked.

'Two,' he said, 'half-board, balcony with a sea view.'

I didn't like the way he was assuming I would know the price of a package holiday to Tenerife in August, but I let it pass. 'And this Tenerife package, that's per show, is it?' I checked.

'Of course it's per show,' he said.

I said I would ring him back in half an hour. I rang Thomas Cook on Regent Street, then rang Zippo back and said I would do it.

*4 a.m.*

Can't sleep, can't cook.

*5 a.m.*

Read the Leicester Mercury, which my mother posts to me because it isn't available in London.

I was shocked to see that my old school, Neil Armstrong Comprehensive, has been deemed one of the 297 failing schools. A hit squad is due to stage a coup within days. In my time, when it was ruled by the headmaster 'Pop-Eye' Scruton, it had a good reputation. Its football team did well, and it regularly won the Midlands Inter-County Schools Chess Club Trophy. It also had a renowned school magazine, The Voice of Youth, edited by me. Then Roger Patience took over as headmaster. I expect he's sorry now that he asked the pupils to call him Roger, and told them to throw away their school uniforms.

**Tuesday May 13<sup>th</sup>**

I wrote a letter to Delia Smith.

Dear Ms Smith,

Forgive me for addressing you as 'Ms' if you are in fact a married woman. I am writing to you in the strictest confidence. I am absolutely certain that you will respect my wishes in this matter as I have read somewhere that you are a Christian woman. I, too, live by the tenets of the Christian philosophy. Though I have not been blessed, as you have, in that God has not visited me yet and assured me that He, or indeed She, exists. However, this letter is not about our respective positions on whether God exists or not. It is about cooking.

Perhaps you have heard of me. I am currently the Head Chef of Hoi Polloi.

My problem, Ms Smith, is that my position at Hoi Polloi does not require that I have any culinary skills. I simply defrost, boil, fry or warm up pre-cooked food. I literally cannot, satisfactorily, boil an egg.

I have searched the bookshops in vain for an absolutely basic cookery book. But in vain. Please help me. I have been asked to go on Cable TV's Millennium Channel to demonstrate my art, but there is no art. Please save me from utter humiliation.

I remain, Madam, your most humble and obedient servant.

A.A. Mole

**Wednesday May 14<sup>th</sup>**

I rang Pandora at the House of Commons this morning. A polite man on the switchboard said, 'Ah, Dr Braithwaite, the member for Ashby-de-la-Zouch. She hasn't been allocated an office yet, sir, but if you'd like to leave a message, I'll make sure her secretary gets back to you.'

I asked for the name of her 'secretary' and was mildly amused to be told that it was Edna Kent--the same name as Barry Kent's mother! A strange coincidence.

I have been reading Bridget Jones's diary in the Independent. The woman is obsessed with herself! She writes as though she were the only person in the world to have problems. I'm sure that it is quite brave to share your sad life with perfect strangers, even if they are Independent readers, and therefore composed largely of caring professionals.

I drafted a letter to Ms Jones.

Dear Bridget Jones,

I have been reading your entries in the Independent, and we also have another tenuous connection. I am Peter Savage's Head Chef at Hoi Polloi. I will cut to the chase: I have kept a diary since I was 13 or thereabouts, and believe it may be of interest to the general reader, and also to Sociologists and future Historians.

How did you get your Diaries published?

I would be grateful if you would write back to me--or alternatively ring me at the Hoi Polloi and we can arrange to meet somewhere over a coffee (or a glass of white wine).

Yours, A.A. Mole

PS. I am a non-smoker.

I've decided to record my own personal daily fluctuations.

Opal Fruits--2 pkts

Alcohol--nil

Cigarettes--nil

Weight--10 stone, 8 pounds

Bowels--sluggish

Potential bald spot--stable

Pains--throbbing in big toe (left foot)

Spots--one, on chin

Penis function--3/10

Drugs--Prozac, Nurofen

**Thursday May 15<sup>th</sup>**

Zippo lunched on braised brains at Hoi Polloi today. He wants me to make a 'pilot' on this coming Sunday afternoon. The working title is to be Offally Good!. He thinks that offal is the coming thing in food fashion. 'Offal is the new black,' he said.

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I nodded politely. I haven't told anybody (apart from Delia Smith) about the making of the pilot.

I promised to go to Leicester this Sunday to see William, but I'll have to find an excuse. My mother must not find out. I could not bear her disappointment if Pie Crust Productions decide not to go ahead with a series. Also, she will only tell Tout Le Monde of Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Listened to a discussion about the Queen's Speech in the kitchen. Malcolm was happy about the proposed Minimum Wage Bill, though Savage said if it becomes law he will sack us all and employ illegal immigrants from Somalia.

**Friday May 16<sup>th</sup>**

Opal Fruits--3 pkts

Alcohol--six double vodkas, 2 tonics

Cigarettes--nil

Drugs--4 Nurofen, 1 Jazz Fag (shared with Malcolm)

Bowels--no movement

Weight--10 stone 7 pounds

Thinning patch--stable

Spots--1 on chin (growing)

Penis function--listless

Edna Kent rang me at lunchtime today. Savage is still answering the telephone, though his jaw is wired together (no wonder bookings are down), so there was an initial confusion about who she was, and to whom she wanted to speak. It took a couple of minutes before I could fully take in the astonishing fact that Edna Kent, council tenant, widow of a milkman, eleven-plus failure, secondary-school drop-out, aged fifty-five, is indeed working in the House of Commons as the secretary of the cleverest woman in Britain.

I asked how she had made the dramatic change from lavatory cleaner to her present prestigious position. She laughed. 'Education, education,

education,' she said, sounding like Malcolm. 'I used to clean lawvies at the university, and to be quite honest with you, Aidy, I've never heard such bleddy rubbish what them professors and lecturers talked in there. So I enrolled on one of them Access courses.' (I longed to interrupt her and say, 'Not them Access courses, Edna, it's those Access courses,' but, of course, I couldn't, I couldn't. I was talking to a graduate for Christ's sake. A double graduate.)

'My first degree's in Family Law,' she said. She had a head start on this one: the amount of times her children have been up before the courts. 'And my second is in Business Studies. Our Barry reckoned I ought to be up to date with the new technology, e-mail, and the web and suchlike.'

I could hardly speak. I felt a paroxysm of jealous rage. I managed to croak out, 'Well, congratulations, Mrs Kent. I had no idea you'd changed careers.'

'I kept it quiet,' she said. 'You know how jealous folk get round our way if you try to better yourself. Our Barry found that out when he had all that success.'

'Well-deserved success,' I said, hypocritically. I think Barry Kent is a talentless fraud who has forged a career out of pandering to his fellow yobs. It kills me. Kills me to know that his Dork's Diary has been described as a modern classic, and that eight years on it is still to be found in a prominent position in most good bookshops. Whenever I see its gaudy cover (a cat wearing a football shirt and football boots), I take great delight in hiding all copies behind the books of Charles Dickens, who is at least a competent writer of the English language.

Mrs Kent said, 'Anyroad up, Aidy, what was it you wanted? Only I've got a lot to do. Pan's working on her maiden speech and I'm trying to get to grips with me new laptop.'

Through gritted teeth I said, 'It's a personal matter, Mrs Kent. Ask her to phone me on my mobile, will you?'

I gave her the number and she said, 'You must come and see us at the House, Aidy. We can have tea on the terrace.'

After I'd put the phone down I thought of the last time I'd had tea with Mrs Kent. We'd been surrounded by the unruly Kent children, the teapot was cracked, the kitchen stank because of an overflowing cat-litter tray, and Mrs Kent was dressed in a wraparound pinafore, her lank hair tied back in an elastic band. At no time did she ever display the intelligence needed to study for two degrees. Whereas I, with my knowledge of world literature and extensive vocabulary, struggled mightily to get two A levels (each on the third attempt). Why? Why? Why?

## **Saturday May 17<sub>th</sub>**

I rang my mother this morning and told her the lie that I had gone down with gastroenteritis, was dehydrated, never off the toilet, etc. While on the phone I asked her why she hadn't told me about Edna Kent's educational achievements. She went very quiet for a long time, and then said, 'Because I didn't know.'

## **Sunday May 18<sub>th</sub>**

Pentecost

A truly terrible day. I arrived at the Brent Cross shopping-centre car park, to find that my car had been towed away five days ago and was in a police compound. A PS25 cab ride took me to somewhere in Archway, whereupon I found that I was required to stump up PS239. I did not have enough cash on me, and I had left my credit cards in my second-best jacket. I took another cab ride back to Dean Street (PS8.50), where I found my mother, father and William ensconced in my flat/storeroom. Savage had let them in, having managed to convey, through wired jaws, that I had lied to them about the gastroenteritis.

I found my Access card and persuaded my father to drive me to Purley, whereupon I managed to retrieve my car. Though it probably took a year off my life, so enraged was I. In fact, I could feel a stroke coming on as I signed the receipt and the credit slip. It didn't help when William decided to have one of his Vesuvius-like tantrums because I wouldn't stop the car and buy him a kid's meal at McDonald's. My mother insisted on coming to Pie Crust's production offices in Shoreditch, saying, 'This is something I have to see.' Her face fell when she saw that she would have to climb up six flights of fire escape.

Zippo and the others in the production team were very laid back about the fact that I had brought my family along, but I could tell that they were 'terribly amused'.

Zippo kissed my mother's hand, and complimented her on the shirt she was wearing. 'Is it Vivienne Westwood?' he murmured.

'No,' she murmured back. 'It's Bhs.'

'You clever thing,' he crooned.

He charmed my father by telling him an obscene joke about Prince Edward, and won William over by telling him that he drove a Ferrari in town, and a Cadillac pick-up truck in the country.

Because we were late there was no proper rehearsal time. After I'd changed into my chef's whites, a plump, middle-aged production assistant called Cath showed me quickly around the sink and stove. She opened the fridge and nodded towards a tray of assorted offal and several bowls of chopped-up vegetables. She pointed to the stock cubes, tapped on the saucepans, indicated the knife rack and pushed a jug full of wooden spoons towards me, all without speaking a word.

'Cath, who's the salt of the earth, will be helping out in the background,' said Zippo. 'Don't speak to her in front of the camera, whatever you do.'

'Is she a deaf mute?' I inquired.

'No,' said Zippo. 'We have to pay her Equity rates if she speaks.'

Somebody powdered my face and dabbed something on my lips. My mother spat on her forefinger and smoothed my eyebrows flat. The lights came on. Somebody else clipped a tiny microphone to my jacket.

Zippo shouted, 'OK, let's do it, people.' He pointed what he called a Steadicam towards me, the autocue started to roll, then his mobile went and he answered it, saying, 'Harvey, you old bugger! Yeah, it's called Young Love. We've got Goldie and Burt on board. It's 80 per cent financed. You

will! You will! That's magnifique! Listen, Harvey, I'm in the middle of something tres, tres ordinaire, but can I call you back? Where are you? New York. Great! Great! Great! Great! Absolutely!

My mother listened to this conversation with her lips parted and her tired eyes shining.

Zippo shouted to his PA, Belinda, 'We've got the green light for Young Love.' He turned back to me and said, 'Sorry about that, Adrian, but it's my first feature. OK, let's go through this as quickly as possible. Eh?'

It's not easy to read from an autocue while chopping offal at the same time, but here's what I said:

'Hi there, offal lovers or lovers of offal. It has to be said that offal has had a bad press. Jack the Ripper did this delicacy immeasurable harm and offal's image has never quite recovered. However, I hope to persuade you, our friends and viewers at home, that offal is the new black. So, if you've fed the cat, chomped on your Creme Egg and poured boiling water on to your Pot Noodles, all that remains is for you to grab a can of cider from the fridge. Push that essay to one side--you know you're never going to finish it. So, settle down and watch. I'm going to teach you how to make that pathetic student grant stretch. You can feed yourself really well for the price of a sheep's head and a few vegetables.'

William screamed when I produced a sheep's head from underneath the worktop, and he had to be taken out by my father when I cleavered the sheep's head in half. Unfortunately, 'Baa Baa Black Sheep' is his favourite nursery rhyme.

I looked into the camera lens and imagined 700,000 students watching. Some of them were bound to be studying French or French literature, so I threw in a few bons mots. As I scooped out the brains from the sheep's head I said, 'These are brains. Eating them won't necessarily make you clever, but who wants to be clever? As Flaubert said, 'If you want to be happy, it is necessary not to be too intelligent.'" I put the pieces of sheep's head in a stockpot full of water, with two lamb Oxo cubes and a sprinkling of dried rosemary. As it came to the boil, I lifted the scum off the top and said, 'This is scum. You'll be familiar with it if you frequent student-union bars.'

Zippo shouted, 'OK, that's it, it's a wrap.' There was applause, led by my mother. 'You're a natural, Aid,' he said. 'You pitched it perfectly. Liked the Flaubert, nice touch.' I didn't tell him that I'd been inspired by the Sylvia Plath rhyming slang.

Zippo had to rush off to Heathrow. He was going to LA to try and persuade Kim Basinger to make a trailer for his shows. For saying, 'Yum, if it's Pie Crust, it's gotta be good!' he's offering PS50,000. Belinda (small, white face, red, red, full lips, Titian ringlets, DKNY sportswear and trainers) said that they'd be in touch to 'finalize a deal'.

As my mother and I trooped down the fire escape, she said, 'They'll stitch you up good and proper unless you get somebody who knows what's what.'

When we got to the car, she repeated this witch's warning in front of my father. He concurred with her, saying, 'Yeah, they're all sharks, these public-school boys,' and then he offered himself as my manager! A man whose only jobs have been in potato wholesale, storage-heater sales, spice-rack construction and canal-bank renovation. I politely turned down his offer. The atmosphere in the car was tense. Even William kept his mouth shut for once.

When we got back to the flat my mother took me aside and hissed, 'Thank you very much for destroying your father's confidence. It took a full hour to persuade him to get out of bed and drive me down here because of your severe gastroenteritis, which was so bad yesterday morning that you said you might have to go into hospital, on a drip.'

William gave me a get-well card that he'd made out of painted eggshells. I wish now that I had not told such a black lie: a grey one would have done perfectly well, and ensured that they'd all have stayed in Leicester. They left at 7 a.m.

My mother said she had to get back in time to walk the dog. She tried to kiss me, but I turned my cheek away from her adulterous lips.

## **Monday May 19<sup>th</sup>**

Pandora finally phoned me back at eight-thirty this morning. She said she'd already been to the gym and was now at her temporary desk in her temporary rooms in the Commons. I told her my suspicions about her father and my mother. She said, 'I know. They're in love--pathetic, isn't it?'

I asked her how she knew for sure, and she told me that she'd found a fax from my mother addressed to her father. It was a verse of a John Betjeman poem. I was amazed on two counts:

(a) I didn't know that my mother had access to and knew how to use a fax machine.

(b) I didn't know that my mother liked the poetry of Sir John Betjeman, though I suppose he is still England's favourite modern poet. Just in front of Barry Kent (whom I wish were dead), Pam Ayres and Ted Hughes.

I asked her to fax the verse to me. She said she'd get Edna to do it. I asked her if our parents' affair could damage her politically. She said, 'I'm already under attack for wearing Chanel on election night. Some dreary little Labour Party Millbank apparatchik clad in a burgundy trouser suit from Principles said I must be seen to support the British fashion industry.'

I said, 'You're the Princess Di of the Commons, Pandora. You should set an example as she does.'

I heard the click of her lighter.

'Listen,' she said tersely, 'Princess Di may have been forced into wearing Catherine-bloody-Walker, but her handbags are still Hermes.'

I had no idea what she was talking about (I feel increasingly as though people are speaking in a sort of code, one to which I have been denied the key). I asked her what we ought to do about our parents. She laughed and said, 'We could encourage the other two, my mother and your father, to fall in love. They've both had mental health problems.'

'And they both dress badly.' I laughed. I asked Pandora if I could visit her in the House of Commons.

She said, 'I'm busy writing my maiden speech.'

I asked her what she proposed speaking about.

She said, 'You wouldn't be interested, Adrian.'

I said, 'Try me.'

She said, 'The recapitalization of defunct manufacturing industries.'

She was right. I wasn't interested.

### **Wednesday May 21<sup>st</sup>**

Kim Savage turned up at the restaurant just as lunch was about to be served to a full dining room. She overturned the bubble-and-squeak trolley and threw several bottles of HP sauce at the bar (only narrowly missing Nigel Dempster's head). The police were called, but she'd gone by the time they arrived, shrieking, 'That's what I think to your f--injunction!'

Savage went around the tables growling, 'See what you get when you marry into the lower classes.' He seemed uncaring of the fact that several members of the government and a high-ranking union official were in the room.

### **Thursday May 22<sup>nd</sup>**

Hoi Polloi was thronging with reporters from the tabloids and one from the Peterborough column in the Telegraph today. They were hoping, no doubt, for a report of yesterday's Kim Savage attack, which made most of the gossip columns in this morning's papers:

#### **SAVAGE ATTACK**

Kim Savage, estranged fourth wife of Peter Savage (restaurateur and second son of the Earl of Boswell), astonished lunchers in Savage's fashionable Soho eatery, Hoi Polloi, yesterday, when she ran somewhat amok in the dining room, breaking a court injunction to stay away from the upmarket caff. Mrs Savage shouted at her cowering husband, 'And I know all about you and Ivana Trump, you dirty little s--.'

Mrs Savage, formerly society florist Kim Didcott, left the restaurant sobbing, comforted by a member of staff who commented, 'As Tolstoy said, each family is unhappy in its own way.'

Savage lined us all up tonight and demanded to know the name of the member of staff who comforted 'that mad bitch'.

Nobody said a word, but everyone in the kitchen knows that I am a quarter of the way through War and Peace.

No word from Belinda of Pie Crust

No reply from Ms Smith

Alcohol--nil Cigarettes--nil

Opal Fruits--4 pkts

Drugs--1 paracetamol

Bowels--large release of gas

Thin patch--no change

Penis activity--5/10

### **Friday May 23<sup>rd</sup>**

Another snippet from the Daily Mail gossip column.

Yesterday's erudite spokesman on the sad business of the Savage marriage break-up has been revealed as Adrian Turd' Mole, Head Chef at Hoi Polloi. An insider said, 'He's been seen reading the Russian classics in lulls between courses.'

However, a little bird chirrups in my ear that Adrian may not be working at Hoi Polloi for much longer. He has been approached by Zippo Montefiori's company, Pie Crust Productions, and is set to join the ever-growing ranks of TV cooks.

### **Saturday May 24<sup>th</sup>**

I came down this morning to find Savage slumped on a stool at the preparation table. He told me he'd been there since we closed at 3 a.m. and that he still loved his Kim. I asked him what had initially caused the marriage to break down, and he brushed away a tear. 'I paid for a ten-week course of elocution lessons for her,' he said. 'I couldn't bear that Essex accent on my pillow every morning.' He shuddered at the memory, as though his wife's accent was a physical thing: a loathsome insect crawling on his bedlinen. 'She ripped me off, Adrian,' he said. 'She didn't go to a single elocution lesson. She got her mate Joanna Lumley to give her a few pointers.'

'What did she spend the money on?' I asked.

He broke down completely, and sobbed like a small child. I patted his heaving shoulders. 'I gave her a thousand quid for those lessons,' he gulped, 'a thousand f--quid. And d'you know what she blew it on?'

'Shoes?' I ventured.

He shook his head.

'A lover?'

'No, no.'

'Cocaine?'

'No!' he roared. 'Worse than that!' He lowered his head and his voice and whispered, 'She donated it to the f--Labour Party!'



Was ever a man deceived?

It explains why Joanna Lumley is barred from Hoi Polloi for life.

## Sunday May 25<sub>n</sub>

### *Trinity Sunday*

I took advantage of Savage's deep unhappiness to ask for a day off today. He said, 'Yeah. Going to see your son, the half-caste kid?'

I said, 'No, I'm just going to see my son.'

'I didn't know you had two,' he said.

I was determined to press the point home to him. 'I don't call him 'my son the half-caste kid',' I said. 'His name is William.'

Savage could benefit from going on a racial-awareness course. I might suggest it to him. I find his prejudices most offensive. He is like all aristocratic people. They are all inbred, deranged sexual deviants who should be put up against the drystone walls of their country estates and, if not actually shot, then at least...made to feel very uncomfortable indeed.

## Monday May 26<sub>n</sub>

I rang last night to tell my mother that I would be coming to Wisteria Walk and bringing a piece of illegal beef on the bone with me. Rosie answered the phone in her usual ungracious manner, which entails using the least possible vocal power without resorting to complete silence.

'Is Dad there?'

'Yuh.'

There was a long pause, though I could hear snotty breathing. 'Rosie?' I said.

'Yuh.'

'Can I speak to Dad?' I shouted.

'He's in bed,' she shouted back, and then she actually volunteered the information that he'd been in bed for a week with severe depression, brought about by the stress of his driving in London last Sunday. I asked where William was and she told me that he was sitting in an empty Kellogg's cornflakes box in front of the television, watching a Jeremy Clarkson video. This bleak image brought a lump to my throat, and I couldn't wait to get to Ashby-de-la-Zouch and hold the boy in my arms.

### *Later*

Apart from seeing William my visit was a waste of valuable time. Nobody would eat the beef on the bone. My mother was out most of the afternoon, 'walking the dog', my father was in bed with the curtains drawn, and Rosie left the house with a hideous-looking youth called Aaron Michelwaite, whose face is deformed with lip, eyebrow, nose, eyelid, ear and tongue rings. Rosie saw me gawping and said, 'You should see his Prince Albert.' Once again I didn't get the reference.

I could barely be civil to the youth. He is extremely well spoken, but he is far too old for Rosie (he is nineteen), and I hinted to him that my sister is a virgin and I would prefer it if she stayed in that condition for as long as possible. I said, 'Rosie may look like Baby Spice, but she's an innocent, do you understand, Aaron?'

'Innocent.' He snorted. 'I've had more than cider with Rosie, mate.' At the time I took his punning remark to mean that they shared a taste for strong alcohol--vodka, perhaps. But as I drove back to London I pondered on his oblique reference to Laurie Lee's classic, and I am now convinced that they are in fact having a full-blown sexual relationship.

Saw thirteen Eddie Stobarts. Nine waved, four didn't.

Bowels--blocked

Penis--unresponsive to stimuli

## Saturday May 31<sub>st</sub>

Belinda from Pie Crust Productions rang, but I was in the middle of a tricky stage with some lambs' testicles, so I couldn't take the call.

Luigi tells me that a Prince Albert is a ring-chain device worn on the penis. I have written to Rosie. I feel that I am in loco parentis.

'My dear Rosie...that' is as far as I got. I was so outraged by the thought of Aaron Michelwaite's Prince Albert that I threw down my pen in disgust.

## Friday May 30<sub>n</sub>

Malcolm took a message from Belinda at Pie Crust, begging me to ring her back. Malcolm said, 'She sounded as if she was gagging for it.' I led him to believe that Belinda's interest in me was sexual.

Edna rang, cancelling my appointment with Pandora. She has to wait in--she's having a futon delivered. I pointed out to Edna that I could go round to Pandora's flat, which I've never seen, and wait in with her, but apparently she wants to wait for her futon alone.

Belinda strode into the restaurant kitchen today and said, 'OK, I'm not proud. I've come to you to beg you to do it.'

Malcolm, Luigi and the temporary kitchen assistants, Sven and Boris, goggled at her Lycra-clad breasts and bum in her cycling shorts-vest combo. I steered her outside into the yard where all the fire extinguishers are kept until the fire officer rings to tell us he's coming round to do an inspection.

'I've changed my mind,' I said. 'I can't cook,' I admitted.

Ever since Savage spilled his guts to me (if only he had literally spilled them, I would have gladly cooked them up with a bit of garlic salt and enjoyed eating them)—about his undying love for Kim, he has totally ignored me. I asked him this morning if he had ordered the tinned carrots, saying, 'We are dangerously low.' But he looked straight through me. I am always aware when we are low on carrots because I use the stacked tins as my bedside tables.

# Summer

## Sunday June 1<sup>st</sup>

I spent the day alone, with the Observer. There was a cat in the kitchen yard today that looked amazingly like Humphrey, the cat who once resided at Ndeg10 Downing Street before Cherie Blair begged her husband to dispose of it, 'by foul means or fair'--this is according to a high-ranking member of the RSPCA, who told Luigi, who told Malcolm, who told me.

The cat I saw this morning was undoubtedly Humphrey: thinner, scaggier, flea-ridden and lacking any formal identification, but it was he, of that I have no doubt. Stories of him 'going to a good home, somewhere in Streatham' are false. No doubt the truth will come out one day when Cabinet papers are released under the thirty-year rule. I will be sixty-plus by then, but I will have the quiet satisfaction of knowing that I fed several cod's heads to the Prime Minister's spurned cat, thus helping it to survive in the mean streets of Soho.

## Monday June 2<sup>nd</sup>

Humphrey was at the kitchen door mewing pathetically this morning. Malcolm wanted to take him home, but I pointed out that a dormitory in a hostel was a home in name only. I think he saw my point. But he went out after his duties at lunchtime and bought Humphrey an engraved cat collar. Unfortunately Malcolm was 'taught' by the phonetic method of spelling, so the cat is now called 'Humfri'.

## Tuesday June 3<sup>rd</sup>

Humfri now has two bowls, a bed, a basket, a scratching post, a puffer bottle of flea powder, worm tablets, a ball/bell combination, a grooming brush, and is registered at a veterinary surgeon's in Beauchamp Place.

Malcolm has showered the animal with his savings and his love. Yet the cat does not show the least sign of gratitude.

Zippo came into the restaurant tonight and said, 'OK, Adrian, you win. You held out for nine-fifty a show, and that's what we're offering. And we'll throw in a limo there and back, plus a set of pans.'

To test him I drawled, 'A thousand five hundred, plus residuals.' Plus residuals is a term I have heard many times in Hoi Polloi. I'm not exactly sure what it means, but television people have the phrase continually on their negotiating lips. But at that moment his mobile trilled.

He shouted into it, 'OK, five hundred thou' for Burt's hairpiece, but that's my final offer.' He snapped the mobile shut, turned to me and said, 'We'll go for six shows in two days, terribly knackerin', I'll supply the bennies.' More code speak--I feel alone in a parallel universe.

## Wednesday June 4<sup>th</sup>

I rang Edna Kent this morning and asked her for the name and phone number of Barry's agent. She gave me his name, but said his phone number was ex-directory. Then she divulged it anyway. There is a solidarity among us Ashby-de-la-Zouchians.

His agent is an American called Brick Eagleburger. I rang Mr Eagleburger and was immediately put on hold after a harsh-voiced American woman (a recording) said, 'Hi, I'm Brick's assistant, Boston. Neither of us is available right now, but if you'll hold a moment we'll be right with you.' I was then played an excerpt from Porgy and Bess. I was singing along to 'Bess, You Is My Woman Now', when the same harsh-voiced woman broke in, 'Hi, Boston Goldman here, how may I help you?'

I managed to stammer out that I was one of Barry Kent's oldest friends, and that I required advice as I was possibly about to embark on a TV career. Boston said, 'Sounds kinda exciting but Brick's had closure on his client list since January 1<sup>st</sup>.'

I wasn't sure what she meant and asked her to rephrase her words.

'Since January 1<sup>st</sup>,' she said, slowly, as though speaking to an idiot, or a foreigner, 'Brick has had closure on his client list.'

'So, he's not taking on any more clients?' I checked.

Boston sounded less friendly. 'Congratulations! As your own talented Sir Cliff Richard would say,' she joked, though with little humour, I thought.

## Thursday June 5<sup>th</sup>

I rang Edna again and reported yesterday's conversation. She told me that Boston was a failed stand-up comedienne. It explains a lot. Edna told me to persist until I got to speak to Brick himself. Savage has found out about Humfri's tenure in the kitchen, and has ordered us to get rid of him. Large Alan has tipped him off that the health inspectors are planning midnight raids in the Soho area. Malcolm is distraught, he said tonight. 'No 'uman ever wants to get near to me, an' I never get to touch another 'uman. But Humfri, 'e can't wait to sit on my knee.' Humfri is only interested in him because of the food Malcolm feeds him, on an hourly basis. I almost pointed this out to him, but I drew back from the brink.

## Friday June 6<sup>th</sup>

Humfri now has another possession: a litter tray. In my flat.

## Saturday June 7<sup>th</sup>

Phoned Brick, got Boston. To try to get into her good books I asked her if she had been christened Boston. She flew into a rage. 'You're assuming I'm a Christian, are you? British boy! That my mom and pop stood at the font in some f--Midwest tight-assed Protestant church and christened me into the Christian community, eh? Is that kosher with you?'

I said that I was sorry if I had offended her. Though to be honest, dear Diary, I didn't know what I was apologizing for.

I asked, once again, to speak to Brick; she once again put me on hold. I now know all the words to most of the songs from Porgy and Bess. I could give a recital.

### **Sunday June 8<sub>th</sub>**

William rang me today. He wanted to know when I was coming up to see him. I said I wasn't sure (which is true: I need to be in London for the Pie Crust negotiations). The kid droned on about somebody or something called Barney, then put the phone down abruptly before I could say a proper goodbye. I felt guilty for at least half an hour after his call. Apparently Savage and Kim are reconciled. I only know this from reading the Taki column in the Sunday Times today. I'm personally very pleased: Kim is the only person who understands the stock-control data on the computer. Perhaps I'll get those carrots I asked for days ago.

### **Wednesday June 11<sub>th</sub>**

A bad day. At 2300 hours we were raided by the public health. It couldn't have come at a worse time. Malcolm had brought the cat down from the flat and was cradling him in his arms, next to the dried goods store. Luigi, curse him, was on the draining board, sitting cooling his feet in the sink.

Savage and Kim were totally drunk and seemed to be under the impression that the public health inspectors, a Mr Voss (thin, pale) and a Ms Sykes (thin, tanned), were a showbiz double act.

A fine-tooth comb would have been a blunt instrument compared to the meticulous scrutiny that kitchen underwent during Voss and Sykes' inspection. They left, eventually, at 2.30 a.m. after finding one hundred and twenty violations of the Public Health Act. Including traces of foot fungus in the sink.

The restaurant was closed down until all the work stipulated in the order had been completed.

Thank God I have another string to my bow with Pie Crust Productions.

### **Thursday June 12<sub>th</sub>**

There is a new notice in the window of Hoi Polloi.

Closed by MI5 on the orders of Commissar Blair--due to the fact that Hoi Polloi is a libertarian stronghold. Signed--Hon. P. Savage

### **Friday June 13<sub>th</sub>**

Large Alan has offered Malcolm a job sweeping up sequins and feathers from the dressing room at the lap-dancing club. Free meals, PS5 an hour, minicab home. Malcolm said he is going to think about it. Why?

Luigi is riddled with guilt as well he may be. His feet alone accounted for seventeen public-health violations.

I record the first three shows on Monday.

### **Saturday June 14<sub>th</sub>**

My auntie Susan has been honoured with the prestigious Prison Officer of the Year award. It was presented to her by Jack Straw. She told my mother that Mr Straw said he intends to conduct an inquiry into lesbianism in prisons. 'Among the staff or the prisoners?' asked my aunt. She reported that Mr Straw blushed at the question, and turned the conversation to a safer subject: the menace of garden slugs.

Nigel called and asked if he could sleep on my settee over the weekend. He says that he is coming to London to be counselled by a group called Outings. They specialize in advising gay men and women on how to tell their parents they are gay. (Not that the parents are gay, of course. Presumably if the parents were gay they would know already. Though I suppose it is possible to be gay and not know. In that case, am I gay? I've been an admirer of Judy Garland for years.) I said I would allow him to sleep on the sofa (or settee, as he calls it) and I warned him about the storeroom decorative motif. He said he didn't care so long as there was a spare shelf for his exfoliation skincare products.

### **Sunday June 15<sub>th</sub>**

Nigel will be out all day, being advised by Outings. I told him that my aunt Susan, see above, told my grandma and grandad she was gay by saying, 'I'm a lesbian, like it or lump it'. 'It was all over in five seconds, bar the shouting,' I said.

Nigel shuddered and said, 'Without an anaesthetic, how brave,' as though Aunt Susan were an amputee.

I am surrounded night and day by the sex industry of Soho and by people whose lives are ruled by sex. Yet I am myself as chaste as a sea-horse. I think Justine has made a few 'moves' in my direction. I bumped into her at the Cafe Italia yesterday, and she spoon-fed me the froth off her cappuccino. She said she has heard a rumour that Savage and Kim are selling Hoi Polloi and setting up an oxygen bar, which sells fresh air to health freaks. Savage will blow the place up within days. He leaves burning cigarettes on every surface.

Nigel cut my hair, ready for the camera tomorrow. He said, 'I won't allow you to hit the screens looking like Princess Diana on testosterone.'

A moment after he'd started, I heard him take a sharp intake of breath and knew he'd spotted my thin/bald patch. I asked him to measure it, using the device on my Swiss Army knife.

He told me that the bald patch has a circumference of one inch. However, we worked out that if I use a strong hairspray and comb my hair in a southwesterly direction, my secret will remain safe.

Nigel has gone back to Leicester to tell his parents and Next about his lover, Norbert. Savage has given me notice to quit the flat. I will take him to the highest court in the land before I do so. Though I have to admit that a move back to Leicester seems more and more attractive.

### **Monday June 16<sub>th</sub>**

Up at five, fed fish, changed cat litter, shaved, dressed, caught the tube to Shoreditch. An hour early, Pie Crust closed. Nowhere to buy a cup of tea. Streets full of mad men and women. Walked about. Felt conspicuous in three-piece and overcoat. Hoped wouldn't be knocked over as had pig's head in Next nylon tote-bag.

Belinda, Zippo and a hair-and-make-up artist called Zo, arrived together at 7 a.m. in black cab. Looked surprised to see me. 'Have sent limo to pick you up,' said Belinda. She very annoyed. She rings driver of limo on mobile. 'Yeah, I know, the dick-head's here,' I heard her say.

*Later*

Zo looks at hair. 'Who did hair last?' she asks. 'Club-fingered friend with blunt scissors?' Say yes. Ask how did she know. She rolls eyes and restyles hair so I look '1940s, like Hitler'. Say I don't like Hitler hairstyle. Zo says, 'Zippo, how 1940s d'you want him?' Zippo and Belinda and Zo confer over my head. Apparently hairstyle has to reflect offal theme. War years, etc.

I'm sick of writing in Bridget Jones telegraphese, so will revert to my natural free-flowing prose style.

'Which is why I went for the Hitler,' says Zo, who, it transpires, knows very little about twentieth-century political history. I pointed out to her that Hitler was a monster, responsible for starting the Second World War. 'I didn't do the history module,' she says, defensively. 'I dropped it for environmental studies.'

To Zo, and many of her generation, Hitler is merely the Old Brown.

We settled on a Dambusters concept for my TV hairstyle, 'a sort of short back and sides with attitude', as Zo called it. She warned me that I was going thin on top and recommended an American spray called Falshair, which settles on the scalp and gives the appearance of real hair. It is available on Cable TV's shopping channel. She said it comes in seven colours, 'including your colour--mouse with a hint of grey'. I remarked (quite coolly, given that my heart had almost stopped), 'Going grey already, hey?' Which made me sound like Jerry Seinfeld.

Zo said, 'It's only at a 2Y2 per cent ratio, but if you want to cover it up, there's a product called...'

I didn't take it in, dear Diary. It was one of those moments. I felt acutely aware of my own mortality. The swift slide towards the death of follicles, the breakdown of tissue, the hardening of some arteries, the narrowing of others. The piping voicebox of adolescence would return.

I have reached my prime without noticing it or enjoying it. I am only a few short decades away from being unable to cut my own toenails. Can I trust Mr Blair? Will the future National Health Service provide adult Pampers on prescription, should I need them? These thoughts flashed through my mind in a nanosecond. I was brought back to the present world by Zo asking me to close my mouth while she applied a heavy-duty foundation to my 'acne-scarred' face. Meanwhile, the lights and camera were being adjusted in the mock kitchen in a corner of the studio. I was introduced to my on-air 'co-presenter', an Indian man called Dev Singh. He had thick glossy hair, large brown eyes, eyelashes like black palm trees. The teeth! The lips! He said, 'I haven't closed my eyes for two nights. I'm so, so scared.'

I admitted that I was also a little apprehensive. 'Oh, thank you, thank you for sharing that with me,' he said. He then confessed to me that he was a strict vegetarian and that even the thought of handling offal made him retch. Belinda broke in and said, 'Dev, you're only here to look pretty. We don't expect you to touch the filthy stuff.'

I asked Belinda what Dev's exact role was to be, and pointed out that no mention had been made about me needing a co-presenter. 'Yeah, well, we looked at your pilot tape again, and thought we needed to sex it up a bit,' she said.

Thankfully I still had Cath. She had already prepared the ingredients and placed them in little bowls. She'd even cleaved halfway through the pig's head for me. I changed into my whites, and Dev changed into a red silk shirt, and a pair of tight white Levi's, and we staggered through a rehearsal, miming the cooking as we went. At the end Zippo said, 'Cath, find us some raunchy-looking vegetables and fruit, there's a love.' She came back five minutes later with a bag full of carrots, cucumbers and melons, and dumped it on the worktop. 'See what you can do with those, Dev,' said Zippo. 'Five minutes' rehearsal, then we go.'

Dev moved among the suggestive fruit and veg like a magician practising a trick, then he looked up from his work and said, 'Well, I'm ready, as you can see from the state of my trousers.'

Everyone in the studio laughed, apart from me, Cath, and Zippo, who was on the phone to LA arguing about the cost of Burt Reynolds' just-woken-up wig.

I've had worse moments in my life--sitting in Casualty aged fifteen with a model aeroplane Super-glued to my nose was unforgettably awful--but being upstaged by Dev and his double entendres came quite near. As I was limo'd home, I was visited by a feeling of self-disgust. I have not written a single creative or poetic word for weeks. I have sold my soul for a mess of pottage.

## **Thursday June 19<sub>th</sub>**

Justine asked me this evening if I was gay! I blame Pandora. I have been passionately in love with her since I was thirteen and three-quarters, and I am unable to give myself emotionally (or sexually) to any other woman.

## **Friday June 20<sub>th</sub>**

Zippo rang me to say that they have edited the first three shows. Dev Singh's contribution has been kept to an absolute minimum. That grotesque business with the cucumber and the pig's ears has been edited out totally.

Zippo confided in me that they 'are thinking of letting Dev go'. I said I thought that would be a wise decision. He asked me to fax him a list of ingredients needed for Monday's recordings. I faxed him three recipes: Giblet Pie, Baked Bullock's Heart and Economical Soup for the Poor. I was about to ask him if he would be interested in producing The White Van, but he said, 'Got to go. Goldie's agent is on line two. She's asking for wig parity.'

## **Monday June 23<sub>rd</sub>**

Pandora rang, and said, 'If the News of the World ring you, say, 'No comment'.' She wouldn't elaborate. It sounds ominous. We talked for a while about our parents' romance, using a code: A was my mother, B was her father. Pandora said that C (her mother) had rung her up in tears, saying that she had found a Kit-Kat wrapper in B's anorak pocket.

'God!' I said. 'A eats two Kit-Kats a day. But why is C so suspicious? Why shouldn't B eat a Kit-Kat?'

'He's boycotted Rowntree's products since 1989,' said Pandora. 'Something about the working conditions of the cocoa-workers.'

'They're getting careless,' I said. We agreed to review the ABC situation next week.

I went back to bed, still exhausted from yesterday's recordings. I never want to see, smell or even touch offal ever again.

Dev Singh had not been 'let go', far from it. If anything he had been let loose! Everyone in the studio was convulsed with laughter at his tiresome antics--apart from me and Cath.

When he juggled with the chicken gizzards and caught them in the wok I almost walked out of the studio. However, I pride myself on my professionalism, so I called on my inner resources and managed to maintain my composure. Plus I threw in some literary aphorisms in an attempt to raise the intellectual tone. While demonstrating how to darken gravy, by the use of PG Tips, I quoted the following bon mot 'A woman is like a tea-bag--only in hot water do you realize how strong she is.' Nancy Reagan said it first. As a mot it's not that bon, but it impressed Zippo. I think.

In between shows, Zippo speed-dialled LA, sometimes switching to the conference phone so we were all party to his manic conversations about the (surely doomed) True Love film. Nathan Stag, the director of Love as they call it, screamed at one point, 'Listen up, Zippo, there ain't a wigmaker in the business who can make Burt Reynolds pass for thirty-five years of age. It's a mother f--no-no.'

Offally Good! is offally bad. I will be a laughing stock.

## **Tuesday June 24<sub>th</sub>**

Lay awake until 4 a.m., listening to the rain and worrying about the News of the World. I could worry for the Olympics and win a medal. Gold.

William rang me at 5.30 a.m. to remind me that it's his birthday on July 1<sup>st</sup>. How do I tell an almost-three-year-old not to ring me before nine o'clock in the morning? I love the kid, but I wish BT had never invented automatic dial.

Humfri not seen for two days.

## **Wednesday June 25<sub>th</sub>**

Read about President Clinton and the sex allegations. Everybody is having sex, apart from me. Even Malcolm is enjoying a carnal relationship, with Annette, a woman who sells the Evening Standard on the Strand. I went to observe her today, from the opposite pavement. She makes Ann Widdecombe look like Kate Moss. Her legging-clad thighs look like those redwood trees that Americans drive their cars through. However, she's got a pretty face, and with a decent haircut would look OK.

I can always tell when Malcolm's had a good mauling from her the night before. His face, neck and chest are covered in newsprint the next morning. Malcolm is convinced that 'the Chinks' have kidnapped Humfri and turned him into beef with black bean and ginger sauce. He claims that he once found a name-tag, 'Fluffy', inside a carton of takeaway chicken chop suey, in Wolverhampton in 1993. He went to the public health with the Fluffy tag, but the officials didn't take him seriously. 'I was on the Woodpecker at the time,' he conceded, when I inquired about his general demeanour in the public-health office. 'The stuck-up git called the filth, who chucked me out.' It was obvious from his bitter tone that Malcolm still bears a grudge against the authorities.

Rosie rang me at 2 a.m. begging me to rescue her from the Glastonbury rock festival. She thinks she's got trench foot. The ground is a quagmire. She has lost her shoes and has queued for two hours to use the phone. I am her only hope. I said I had no petrol in the car and advised her to put her faith in her own caring, sharing generation.

## **Saturday June 28<sub>th</sub>**

Luigi rang me today and told me that several rich investors have come forward to 'save' Hoi Polloi. There is to be a complete refurbishment and the cellars are to be turned into an oxygen bar (!). The present restaurant is to be refitted in a 1950<sub>s</sub> working-class kitchen style, using Utility furniture, and the upstairs (including my flat) is to become a Members Only club for smokers.

Luigi said that smokers applying to join will have to provide a doctor's letter to prove that they are serious and not opportunistic clean-lunged wannabes.

Michael Caine is rumoured to be one of the investors. Not many people know that, and I am sworn to secrecy. None of the present staff have been retained. Luigi is helping his brother-in-law with his window-cleaning round in Cadogan Gardens. I have started looking for somewhere else to live in London. I don't want to move back to Wisteria Walk: I have outgrown the provinces.

## **Sunday June 29<sub>th</sub>**

The Savoy Hotel has been invaded by a small plague of mice. They are offering a free drink to any guest who spots one. I sat in the American Bar, nursing a glass of sparkling water, for an hour and a half tonight. I paid particular attention to the skirtings and floor, but saw no vermin of any kind. This is just my luck.

## **Monday June 30<sub>th</sub>**

I am lonely. The only person I spoke to at any length today was a Japanese tourist, who stopped me outside Tesco's in Covent Garden (where I was bulk-buying Opal Fruits). She asked me how to get to Torquay. I was pleased to be able to direct her to Paddington station where she would be able to buy a ticket to Devon. I offered to accompany her in a black cab, but she declined.

I fantasized in bed about her on the beach at Torquay, wearing a black Lycra bikini, but nothing came of it. Even my penis has gone off me. Have I inherited flaccidity from my father, together with hair loss? Perhaps it's time I visited Dr Ng again. If I ring today I might get an appointment three weeks hence.

*7 a.m.*

I am seeing Dr Ng on July 17<sub>th</sub> at 10.10 a.m. It's a good job that of my multifarious ailments none is immediately life-threatening.

Chris Patten and Prince Charles gave Hong Kong back to Communist China today. I predict that, by tomorrow night, Hong Kong will be attacked by the pillaging Chinese, desperate for Levi's and Sony Walkmen. Hong Kong will be aflame. Question: Why didn't Chris Patten wear a uniform for such a solemn occasion? There must have been something (a cocked hat) he could have borrowed. You can't hand back our Empire in a lounge suit--it's simply not appropriate.

## **Tuesday July 1<sub>s</sub>**

I was waiting outside Hamleys at 9 a.m. As soon as the doors opened I escalated myself up to the dressing-up clothes department, where I asked about a Jeremy Clarkson outfit. The personage in charge, Kevin, sneered at my inquiry, saying, 'We only do fictional characters.'

I immediately pointed out to him a garish Robin Hood outfit (ages four and a half to eight years), which came complete with a feathered hat, and bow and suctioned arrow. Kevin said that Robin Hood 'was a fictional character', and went on to say that his dissertation, 'Men and Myths in Sixteenth-century Nottinghamshire', which gained him an MA from Nottingham University, explored society's need for heroes.

I asked Kevin why he was flogging kids' dressing-up clothes when he was in receipt of a Master's degree. He said, 'To pay for my PhD.' He's already mapped out his subject: 'Coffee: Its Introduction and Effect on English Literary Life, from Dr Johnson to Martin Amis'.

My heart was beating fast with jealous rage. I asked him how such a subject would help him find a fulfilling and well-paid job. He fiddled with the Sleeping Beauty boxes and said, 'Well, Nescafe might take me on.' I bought the Robin Hood outfit. William must learn to be proud of his East Midlands heritage.

## **Wednesday July 2<sub>nd</sub>**

### *Ashby-de-la-Zouch--William's Third Birthday*

My father got out of bed for the blowing-out-of-the-candles-on-the-cake ceremony, which is such an important part of our English culture. William tried hard, but couldn't blow the candles out in one go. It took five of his little puffs and a little surreptitious help from me before he extinguished the tiny flames. It's my mother's fault. He's tied too tightly to her apron strings. He needs to toughen up. It's a hard world out there.

Jo Jo sent him some traditional silken garments, as worn by the Yoruba people. He preferred these to the Robin Hood outfit, and refused to take them off when it was time for bed. My mother told me that she is thinking of suing Imperial Tobacco for one million pounds. She blames them for her nicotine addiction, persistent smoker's cough and wrinkles.

## **Thursday July 3<sub>d</sub>**

It was in the paper today that a Japanese woman had been found wandering around Torquay 'in a state of distress'. Apparently she had wanted to go to Turkey and had been misdirected to the Devon resort by a Londoner unable to understand her heavily accented English. Coincidence!

## **Friday July 4<sub>th</sub>**

### *At the Bar Italia*

Two Americans are celebrating Independence Day by ordering straight coffee, rather than decaff. But now that the cups are put in front of them I notice that they are sipping the coffee as though it were liquid nitroglycerine.

## **Saturday July 5<sub>th</sub>**

Savage used his key to let himself into the flat today. He was accompanied by an architect, who was wearing what appeared to be a round-collared dentist's overall, though I suppose it was a shirt. They walked in and out of my bedroom as if the room were empty whereas, in fact, I was there in bed. My slight depression worsened into misery. I almost wept when they'd gone.

It rains unendingly.

## **Sunday July 6<sub>th</sub>**

I must get out of bed and find somewhere to live. Savage brought three builders round today for quotes. They didn't have a noble or honest facial feature between them. Rain continues.

## **Monday July 7<sub>th</sub>**

Nigel rang to say that his mother had taken the news badly that he was gay. She was still 'in denial' about Rock Hudson, and was convinced that Nigel would turn heterosexual as soon as he met the right girl. His father had muttered something about 'horseplay in the showers at Catterick' then gone out to his shed.

## **Wednesday July 9<sub>th</sub>**

Malcolm came round to see if Humfri had returned. I was forced to tell him that the cat had not been seen for days. I quipped, 'It's probably drowned in all the rain!' To my horror, Malcolm burst into tears.

I know that we late-nineties men are allowed to cry in public, and to show our emotions now, but it still doesn't feel right to me. I had to resist the urge to tell him to pull himself together. I gave him PS20 and told him to buy a Tamagotchi computer pet.

2 a.m. I've just remembered that Malcolm won't be able to read the instructions on how to care for his Tamagotchi. It's probably already dead.

## **Thursday July 10<sub>th</sub>**

Pandora has been attacked in the press for 'crimes against the environment'! She admitted in an interview with Chat magazine to wearing Chanel Ndeg5, and the Green Party were down on her like a felled oak. It seems that Chanel Ndeg5 contains an oil which is extracted from a rare and exotic tree found in endangered Brazilian forests. I rang Edna to commiserate, and she told me that Alastair Campbell has ordered Pandora to go to her constituency and plant some trees. English oaks, preferably. There is a press call outside the KP nut factory in Ashby-de-la-Zouch on Sunday at 10.30 a.m. I might be there, I need to talk to Pandora in person.

I bought an electronic organizer today on the Tottenham Court Road. I spent all night typing my personal data into it. It's time I streamlined my affairs and became cutting-edge. The thing is amazing in what it can do, yet it's small enough to fit in my pyjama pocket.

## **Friday July 11<sub>th</sub>**

Harriet Harman, the Social Security secretary, has been on radio and television trying to explain about the government's 'Welfare to Work' scheme. Several times she called it a 'crusade'. It has to be said that Mrs Harman has the look of the zealot about her, as well as a constant air of irritation. She should let her fringe grow out, stop wearing smocks and buy an uplift bra. Also, she should stop complaining about sexism in politics. It's most annoying.

## Sunday July 13<sup>th</sup>

I was outside the KP nut factory by 10 a.m. with a reporter and photographer from the Leicester Mercury, and a photographer bloke from the Independent, who told me that Pandora was the thinking man's Princess Di.

A small crowd of constituents were watched by eight policemen, who sat in two patrol cars.

A helicopter appeared in the sky over the soap works, hovered about a bit, then landed in the grounds of the nut factory. Pandora jumped out, wearing Rohan-labelled clothes in khaki. She was carrying a gleaming stainless-steel spade. She is the only woman I've ever seen who looked good in outdoor-pursuits wear.

Pandora's entourage emerged from the helicopter with a scruffy man, in a stained jacket and crumpled trousers, called Charlie Whelan. He lit a fag and said, 'Where's the rest of the f--press?'

The photographer from the Independent said, 'They're staking out Kensington Palace. Princess Diana's got a new squeeze, an Arab bloke.'

Pandora said, 'Charlie, where are the trees I've got to plant?'

Charlie slapped his nicotine-finger to his rumpled forehead and said, 'I've left the bleeders at the heliport.'

At this point I took off my baseball cap and dark glasses and made myself known to Pandora. She didn't look thrilled to see me. She said, 'Adrian! Again! Are you stalking me?'

I assured her that I was just passing, on the way to see my son William. I invited her and her entourage to Sunday lunch at my mother's house. Charlie said, 'I wouldn't mind a beef and Yorkshire pudding job.' They agreed to come, providing I helped them locate some trees. I drove them to Bob Perkins Garden Centre Ltd.

The press followed, and Pandora and the eponymous Bob Perkins were photographed pretending to admire some mildewed saplings, which were leaning up against an industrial greenhouse.

The Leicester Mercury quizzed Pandora about her green credentials: she was all for recycling, clean air and Leicestershire County Council's plans to plant a New Forest, and she was very much against air pollution, poisoned rivers and 'profligate use of electricity and gas'.

As the interview continued, I went into a greenhouse full of hanging baskets and mobiled my mother, who didn't yet know I was in the area. When I told her that I had invited myself and three guests to Sunday lunch, she screamed down the phone. She didn't say anything at first, she just screamed. Eventually she shouted, 'I've got a scraggy breast of lamb, which will just about stretch to feed me, your dad, Rosie and William, I'm out of Oxos and my Yorkshire-pudding tin is badly buckled. You'll have to take them to a restaurant.'

I said, 'If this was Arabia you would give your own eyeballs to such honoured guests.'

My mother pointed out, quite unnecessarily, that this wasn't Arabia, it was Ashby-de-la-Zouch--and, anyway, why wasn't Pandora going to visit her parents, who only lived round the corner from Bob Perkins Ltd? She said, 'I know they're in because I bumped into Ivan this morning while I was taking the New Dog for a walk.'

I gave a hollow laugh and put the phone down. It was socially embarrassing to have to snatch back the invitation to Sunday dinner.

Charlie Whelan moaned, 'I've got the idea of Yorkshire pudding in my head now. My mouth's watering for it.'

When I asked Pandora if her parents would be up to cooking a traditional English roast at short notice, she laughed and said, 'A and C haven't touched meat for years. On Sundays their main meal is scrambled eggs on toast while watching The Antiques Road Show.'

Bob Perkins suggested *C. leylandii* trees for the KP nut roundabout. So, after Pandora had been photographed planting them, we retired to a McDonalds on the bypass. It was mainly full of access-day fathers, trying desperately to control their children.

Pandora was constantly pestered by constituents. Her Filet o' Fish remained untouched.

An old man in a golfing sweater complained that a streetlight outside his bedroom window flickered and kept him awake. An Indian bloke said he had nowhere to park his car. And a mad-looking woman said she was disgusted that Pandora had not paid public tribute to James Stewart, the actor, who had apparently died on July 2<sup>nd</sup>.

As we were leaving, a bloke in a beige car coat with a walking-stick limped up to Pandora and gave her a sob story about his evil next-door neighbour, who had planted *C. leylandii* trees along their boundary fence, five years ago. 'They're fifteen feet tall now,' he said, 'and they're blocking my daylight.'

Pandora tapped his name and address into her electronic organizer and said she would see what she could do.

There was a little crowd of schoolchildren on bikes waiting to see the helicopter take off; there was a ratio of one policeman for every two kids. I watched until the chopper was a tiny dot in the darkening sky, then I sat in my car for a long time before driving to Wisteria Walk to see my son.

## Monday July 14<sup>th</sup>

Bought an Independent today. Pandora's photograph was on the front. If you look very carefully you can just make out the tip of my nose in the background. I've decided to delay deciding about decision-making until I feel decidedly better. My mental state is fragile.

The manuscript of my novel, *Lo! The Flat Hills of My Homeland*, was returned today from a publisher in Osaka, Japan. He wrote that it was 'derivative' but didn't say of what. Perhaps I should change the title to something punchier, in the Trainspotting mode. After a lot of thought I have settled on *Birdwatching*.



## **Tuesday July 15<sub>n</sub>**

I had to leave the flat to shop for Opal Fruits this morning. Then I hurried home and parcelled up Birdwatching- I think I might send it off to Iceland, where I understand they are enjoying a cultural renaissance. I rang a publisher in Reykjavik using the restaurant phone. A woman answered in a language entirely foreign to my ear: Icelandic, I presume. I put the phone down. Until they adopt the English language I fear they will remain totally isolated from the rest of the world.

## **Wednesday July 16<sub>n</sub>**

What am I going to do with the rest of my life? Where will I live? How will I make a living when my work with Pie Crust comes to an end? Am I now formally separated from my wife? How long can a person go without a bowel movement? How much have I got in the bank? Will Savage offer me a job in one of his new enterprises? How long have I got before I am entirely bald? Which reminds me--will the Dome at Greenwich be finished on time? How does Mr Mandelson live with the worry?

## **Thursday July 17<sub>n</sub>**

Dr Ng said that anxiety and insecurity are entirely sane responses to a mad world. He advised me to start a pension plan. So, the National Health has come to this.

I struggled for an hour and a half to evacuate my bowels. Somebody rang on the doorbell of the flat, but whoever it was left no note. In future I will make sure that there is always a book in the lavatory. An hour and a half with my own thoughts was unbearable. A.A. Gill's 'turds' review was a particularly painful memory.

Belinda rang to say the Millennium Channel have finally given us a slot. It is 10.30 a.m. Wednesday mornings. I was bitterly disappointed and reminded her that we would be up against Richard and Judy. She said, 'Believe you me, Adrian, if it comes to a ratings war, they'll wonder what hit them.'

## **Friday July 18<sub>n</sub>**

I searched fruitlessly through my fail-safe electronic filing system today, trying to discover the balance of my various accounts. For some reason it wouldn't divulge the information. I went out and bought a new battery from the electrical shop on Old Compton Street. The helpful bloke in there said his electronic organizer had refused to give him his Christmas-card list last year. He went on to tell me about the family row that ensued, but I wasn't listening properly. I spotted Justine coming out of Patisserie Valerie opposite, so I paid the helpful bloke and ran outside to catch up with her. She took my arm as we walked towards Wardour Street. Was she signalling that she wanted to have sex with me? Or was it because she needed support? (She was wearing five-inch platforms.) You can never tell with women, these days.

A colleague of Justine's is giving Malcolm literacy lessons between shows. We arranged to meet on Tuesday and go for a Japanese meal.

## **Saturday July 19<sub>n</sub>**

My mystery caller on Thursday was Malcolm. He was desperate for news of Humfri. I asked him why he hadn't put a note through the door. 'I can only write 'The cat sat on the lap!'' he said.

## **Sunday July 20<sub>n</sub>**

I spent most of the day poring over Loot, looking for reasonable accommodation in the Soho area. Some joker is asking PS500 a week for a converted linen cupboard (plus access to fire escape), in Poland Street, main services not included. I need to get an update on my financial situation.

I rang my telephone bank and gave my code numbers, 9999, and my password, Yarmouth. The bank official, a pleasant-sounding woman who told me that she was called Marilyn, was horrified that I had disclosed the full password to her. She had been about to ask me what the second letter of the word was. And, had I answered 'A', she would have been able to give me the balance of my Instant Access High Interest Account. 'As it is,' she said, 'you'll need to open a new account. As from now all of your codes are null and void.'

I begged and pleaded with Marilyn to let me into the secrets of my own account, but she said, 'The computer has now closed this account. I'll put another application in the post.'

I said to her, 'Where exactly is my money, Marilyn? Is it in an actual place, like a vault?'

Marilyn said, 'Your money doesn't exist, as such.' She went on, 'Your money, Mr Mole, is an abstraction wafting in the air between financial institutions, at the mercy of inflation and interest rates, dependent on the health of the global economy.' She recovered herself and apologized for showing her human face. It was a kamikaze speech.

Marilyn had already told me that our conversation was being recorded. (I tried to extend the conversation, but Marilyn, who admitted to being forty-four, dark-haired, the mother of three and married, said, 'Other customers are waiting, Mr Mole.')

## **Monday July 21<sub>s</sub>**

I can't remember the last time I felt the warmth of a naked body.

*3 a.m.* I remember now, it was last Sunday. The New Dog sat across my lap when I read Grimms' Fairy Tales to William.

*4 a.m.* Can't sleep for worrying that Justine will turn up for our Japanese meal looking like a cheap tart. I know she wears expensive clothes, but she wears them in such a way that they look like News of the World catalogue wear.

## **Tuesday July 22<sub>nd</sub>**

It was as I feared. I couldn't relax in the restaurant. We were hopelessly mismatched. Justine was wearing skimpy red Versace, in honour of his memory, and I was wearing substantial grey Next. I knew my way around the sushi and the tempura and the chopsticks; she shuddered at the raw fish and asked the stern waiter for a knife and fork. She is an intelligent girl, but she hasn't read a book since leaving school. We talked about

Cherie Blair, who had spent PS2,000 flying her hairdresser, Andre Luard, out to last month's summit meeting in Denver. We agreed that this was a very American thing to do. 'It's a bit like Elvis flying his favourite cheeseburgers from Memphis to Las Vegas, isn't it?' said Justine.

I replied, 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.'

Justine said, 'You're so clever, Adrian. Just being with you is an education.'

### **Wednesday July 23<sub>a</sub>**

Received another application from my telephone bank, Money Direct. I chose 1111 as my number code, and Cromer as my letter code.

Why did I withdraw all my money from the building society in 1995? All I had to do then to check my balance was to ring old Mr Lewisham and he would tell me immediately, and he would even ask after the progress of Lol. It must have broken his heart when I withdrew my PS2,709.26 from the Market Harborough.

### **Friday July 25<sub>m</sub>**

Princess Diana's cleaning bill must be enormous. She is always wearing white clothes lately, giving her the appearance of a virgin or a saint. If I were the boss of Sketchley's I would offer to sponsor her charitable work. She has promised to buy an artificial leg for a bloke called Mohammed.

### **Saturday July 26<sub>m</sub>**

I rang Money Direct this morning to check the balance of my account. A non-human voice answered the phone and asked me to wait as 'The lines are busy.' I listened to four minutes of Vivaldi's Four Seasons, before hanging up in disgust.

Rang Front-line Insurance to request a claim form--some bastard has stolen William's tricycle while he and my mother were in the newsagent's. A robot answered and asked me to hold. It then told me that my call was 'enormously important' to Front-line Insurance. Next it informed me that I was number thirteen in the phone queue. Throughout, Chris de Burgh sang, 'Lady In Red': a song I have always hated. When Rod Stewart started warbling 'Sailing' I slammed the phone down. What has happened to England's telephonists? Has there been a cull? How long have the robots been in charge?

### **Monday July 28<sub>m</sub>**

Justine rang and asked why I have not called her. I could hardly tell her the truth--that I would prefer her to wear something sensible from Marks & Spencer when we are out in public. I told her instead that I was hard at work on my TV series, The White Van. She asked me for a part if it gets commissioned. She's got an Equity card apparently, though how Equity can give out one of its precious cards to a girl who wrestles erotically with a boa constrictor is a total mystery to me. What about the plain-faced, flat-chested drama-school graduate who longs to play Ibsen?

### **Tuesday July 29<sub>m</sub>**

Savage burst into my bedroom at 7 a.m. this morning and ordered me out. I said, 'When?'

He said, 'You've got an hour!'

I said, 'Peter, I've worked for you, on and off, for eight years. I've got nowhere to go. Have mercy.'

He said, 'The builders will be here at eight o'clock, so get the f--out!'

### **Friday August 1<sub>a</sub>**

#### *Justine's Flat--Poland Street*

Many men would envy me staying here in a penthouse flat in the heart of London with a girl whose name is written in flashing neon lights outside a 'theatre'--so why aren't I happy?

After we'd finished shopping for food in Marks & Spencer, I steered Justine towards the ladies' clothing department. I suggested she try on a nice ecru twinset, in machine-washable wool, together with a pair of easy-fit jeans. She looked at me with horror in her eyes.

### **Sunday August 3<sub>a</sub>**

Justine's friend, who works on the handbag counter in Harrods, reports that Princess Diana is getting engaged to Dodi Fayed, the son of Mohammed Al-Fayed, the multi-millionaire owner of the Queen's favourite store!

I scoured the press for confirmation of this ridiculous story, and found nothing. I told Justine to stop circulating the rumour.

### **Monday August 4<sub>m</sub>**

Large Alan dropped in today. He didn't look very keen to see me sitting at Justine's kitchen table eating a meal she'd just cooked (angel-hair spaghetti and pesto sauce). He said, 'Justine, you didn't inform me that you'd got a flatmate.'

Justine said, 'It's only Adrian,' as though I were an insentient eunuch. 'We're on separate futons.'

I left the room in some upset, but not before hearing Large Alan say, 'Justine, what do you see in him?'

She replied, 'I like intellectual men. There's more to life than sex, Al.'

Large Alan said, 'Is there?' He sounded genuinely surprised.

### **Tuesday August 5<sub>m</sub>**

I have decided to become celibate. Sex is very overrated in my opinion. It's all over in a few minutes and is certainly not worth all the fuss and anguish that goes before.

Dear Stephen Fry,

My name is Adrian Mole. I once had the honour of cooking you a dish of tripe, which you pronounced 'unforgettable' (Hoi Polloi, Sept. 15<sup>th</sup>, 1996). You didn't pay us a second visit, to lunch or to dine, but no matter, I still admire your erudition and wit.

I have recently decided to become celibate, and will shordy be turning into a celebrity, and I wondered if you, as a celebrity celibate, have any tips on how to cope with both of these conditions. I expect you are busy but I'm sure you won't mind taking some time out of your schedule to advise someone who is practically your doppelganger. I too am a bit of an intellectual.

Cheers, Steve,

Yours, Adrian Mole

PS. I would appreciate an early reply.

### **Wednesday August 6<sup>th</sup>**

An invitation card in the post, redirected from Hoi Polloi. Against a background of photographic offal was written:

Pie Crust invites Adrian Mole and Guest to the wrap of Offally Good! Attractions include posh nosh, champagne and Dev Singh.

Justine read it and said, 'I thought you were the star, Adrian.'

I said, 'I am. There has obviously been a mistake at the printer's.'

Justine asked if she could come as my guest. She wasn't my first choice, but after ringing Pandora four times and getting no reply, I informed her that she could come with me on Friday.

She was pleased but said she had nothing to wear.

I seized the opportunity and nipped out to Marks & Spencer last night and bought a very attractive, loose-fitting, full-length dress in sludge-green viscose. I presented it to her when she came home from work at 3 a.m. I said, 'Please wear it tomorrow, at the wrap party.'

She looked at it with amusement and said, 'It's the sort of thing your mother would wear.'

It just goes to show- she has never met my mother.

### **Friday August 8<sup>th</sup>**

It was a mistake to take Justine to the Pie Crust studios. She was the focus of attention from the moment she stepped off the fire escape in her pink Versace slip dress and her cerise sling-back Manolos. Everyone in the studio looked at me with a new respect. Zippo said to me under his breath, 'I knew that the idiot-provincial persona you project was an act, Adrian. Christ, she's a wanker's dream! She's a dislocated wrist! She's duvet heaven!'

I abhorred his crude language, and told him so. Later, he confessed to me, standing at the urinals, that he had fallen in love with Justine at first sight. I know this is possible because I loved Pandora as soon as I clapped eyes on her.

Zippo said, 'Introduce me to her. Please, Adrian.'

In his excitement he splashed urine on his pale suede Gucci loafers. I kept this knowledge to myself. Why spoil the party for him?

We joined a throng of Justine's new admirers, who were listening in some amazement to her tips on caring for the domestic python.

We pushed through and I introduced Zippo to Justine. He held on to her hand for longer than etiquette demanded.

Eventually she said, 'Can I have my hand back? I'm getting cramp.'

Zippo grabbed two glasses of champagne from Cath's tray and gave one to Justine saying, 'I've waited all my life to meet you. We must celebrate this momentous occasion.'

Justine was instantly sucked into the vortex of Zippo's smarmy talk. He did his Labrador retriever trick with his eyes, and she did her Marilyn Monroe thing with her mouth.

I asked Zippo if he thought we would get a second series, but he ignored me and asked Justine if she could cook. 'Not really,' she said. 'I just warm up ready-made meals in the micro.'

'Warm Up with Justine!' shouted Zippo.

I pointed out that it sounded like an exercise video. I suggested calling it A Guide to Push-button Cookery.

Zippo and a few Pie Crust people got very excited at this but they were all on skunk weed so none of them will remember.

Zippo took Justine aside and I heard them swapping birth signs: Scorpio him, Aries her (a disastrous conjunction, in my opinion).

Dev Singh turned up late, accompanied by a Sikh bodyguard in a turban. He was soon surrounded by a small crowd of sycophants, who hung on to his every suggestive word.

Pie Crust Productions have applied to the Lottery Fund for the money to make a documentary about Dev--called, in post-modernistic style, Making a Documentary About Dev. Secretly, Diary, I am still crushed by this news. How much lower can dumbing down go? It's already in the basement.

The party moved on to a restaurant in Shoreditch called Shock's. The place was full of installation artists and examples of their art. Everything seemed to be black, including the food: squid in black ink, cheap caviar, blackberry coulis, finishing with espresso coffee.

Zippo prised himself away from Justine and made a speech about filming Offally Good!. He mentioned me in passing, but heaped praise on Dev 'for his glorious humour, so reminiscent of that comic genius, Norman Wisdom'.

Whoops and hollers greeted this tribute—even the installation artists joined in. Wisdom is obviously big in Shoreditch, as well as Albania.

Zippo asked if I wanted to say anything. My mind went blank. Then I found myself on my feet apologizing for my performance on programme four when I had stumbled over the word 'disestablishmentarian-ism' eighteen times. Zippo said, 'Eighteen retakes is nothing.' He'd heard on the grapevine that Fergie, Duchess of York, held up the filming of her cranberry-juice advertisement in America 103 times because of her inability to articulate 'I like it' with conviction.

I felt vindicated by this piece of information.

Dev got up and thanked Pie Crust and me for giving him his big break. He said, 'I couldn't have done it without Adrian. He's a brilliant stooge.'

I took this compliment graciously, I hope—but my ego shrivelled up and ran out into the dark Shoreditch night. It hasn't been seen since.

I was sitting between silent Cath and the rumour-monger Belinda, who said she knew somebody who knew somebody who'd worked on Chariots of Fire, partly produced by Dodi Fayed. This person said that Dodi had no conversation. His only hobby was collecting baseball caps. Belinda said there was a story doing the rounds that Dodi and Diana were planning to co-produce a film about an elephant who steps on a landmine.

I nearly made a fool of myself when I mistook a piece of installation art for the men's toilet. Luckily I didn't pull my zip all the way down before realizing my mistake.

**Sunday August 10<sub>™</sub>**

*Leicester*

I was shocked to my marrow to see the front page of the Sunday Mirror today. The headline said, 'THE KISS'. Underneath was a blurred photograph of Princess Diana and the baseball-cap collector, Dodi Fayed. They were embracing while wearing very little clothing indeed. Prince Charles must have choked on his organic toast.

My mother and Rosie pored over the photographs, then ordered me to drive to the BP garage and buy all the scandal rags I could lay my hands on. I took William and the New Dog in the car with me. I bumped into Archie Tait, the one-legged pensioner, inside the garage shop. He was buying a Ginster's Cornish pasty for his Sunday dinner. He saw that I was buying the News of the World and the People and raised his eyebrows. I explained that they were for my mother and sister, and he said, 'Ah, the insatiable appetite that women have for trivia and gossip.' I agreed. He invited me and William for afternoon tea. I didn't want to go—in fact, it was the very last thing in the world I wanted to do—but before I could think of an excuse William had accepted for both of us. The kid doesn't get out much.

By the time our visit was over my brain hurt. Archie's conversation was very intense, and he was constantly asking me to provide the evidence for my opinions. He asked me what I was doing in London now that Hoi Polloi had been closed by the public health. (He is very well informed for a provincial.) I told him about the TV series Offally Good! and he took out his W.H. Smith's tartan-covered diary and wrote 'Adrian TV 10.30 a.m.' under September 10<sub>™</sub>. He doesn't have Cable, but he knows somebody who does.

When I got back from Ashby-de-la-Zouch Zippo was lolling on Justine's futon. She was heating up moules mariniere in the microwave for him. They were laughing at a Norman Wisdom film. Their chrome mobile phones were side by side on the perspex Conran coffee table. Wallpaper was open at a feature about galvanized buckets (the new vases).

I felt out of place, as though I was wearing a cloak of provincialism. I offered to leave but Justine said, 'No, Adrian, please stay. We want somebody to witness the first full day of our love.'

I had eaten on the motorway earlier, so I turned down the moules. In between feeding Justine mussels straight from the shell, Zippo said that a focus group had been shown the first Ojally Good! programme that morning and their response was so good that the ratings for the show were predicted to be one million. I went to bed at 11.30 and left them both propped against the futon, surrounded by shells and skunk-weed equipment.

12.10 a.m. They have just consummated their love. Justine knocked on my door to tell me that Zippo was an 'incredible, caring, exciting lover'. I said I was pleased for her.

She asked if I would come into her bedroom to reassure Zippo that she and I had never been lovers. She said Zippo was madly jealous.

I put on my dressing gown and stumbled into the bedroom. The dimmer switch was turned down to three. A lava lamp bubbled by the side of the bed. The python slithered in its tank. Zippo sat up, his loins barely covered by a white sheet. He asked me if I had 'slept' with Justine. I said truthfully that we had not had sexual intercourse, due to my vow of chastity. And also to my antipathy to Justine's python. I then went back to my own bed.

It's time to get out.

**Monday August 11<sub>™</sub>**

After twenty minutes of electronic procrastination, I found out that I have got PS3,796.26 in the telephone bank. This is not enough for a deposit on a London flat. And I need living expenses until my Pie Crust money comes in in September. I'm moving back to Leicester.

My mother is not pleased, but it's my family home and I am entitled to live there. My mother said that in her opinion, at thirty, entitlement didn't come into it. I pointed out to her that, in English law, there was no statute of limitations when it comes to returning home to live. She said, 'Perhaps not, but there should be!'

**Tuesday August 12<sub>™</sub>**

As I pack I am shocked by the breaking news about Robin Cook's secret life of subterfuge with black bin-bags and parking meters, and a mistress waiting in a darkened room. All that trouble just to slake their lust! I am glad, indeed proud, to be celibate.

**Wednesday August 13<sub>™</sub>**

*Wisteria Walk, Ashby-de-la-Zouch*

Here I am again—in my old bedroom. Older, wiser, but with less hair, unfortunately. The atmosphere in this house is very bad. The dog looks

permanently exhausted. Every time the phone rings my mother snatches it up as though a kidnapper were on the line.

Rosie is complaining bitterly because she is now sharing a room with William. I pointed out to her that I am paying for my room. Yes, my own mother is charging me PS40 per week for bed and board! Once I'd moved my possessions into the bedroom I was staggered at how little I'd collected over the fourteen years of my working life. I made an inventory.

- 2 duvet covers and matching pillowslips,
- 1 black and green zigzags,
- 1 burgundy/cream swirls
- 1 high-tog-value fibre-filled duvet
- 4 bath towels
- 1 shaving mirror with magnification options
- 1 travelling clock
- 1 Anglepoise lamp + halogen bulb
- 1 MFI folding desk, in black ash
- 1 typist's chair
- 500 books (approx.)
- 1 faux Indian rug
- 2 Habitat director's chairs
- 1 Sony mini-stack sound system
- 27 compact discs (hardly used)
- CD rack
- TV/video (loaned by Zippo)
- Dualit toaster (4-slice)
- Black-ash bookcase
- Willow coffee table with magazine shelf
- Fruit bowl
- Kettle (safety)
- Ikea cutlery set
- Ikea dinner service
- Ikea cork noticeboard
- Floor cushion (burgundy)

I thought back to the sumptuously furnished flat in Battersea which I'd shared with Jo Jo for most of our marriage. Now I'm nearly thirty and a half years of age, and I haven't got a sofa to call my own. I'm sick of lolling on a floor cushion. I said so to my mother. She said, 'Anybody over twenty-five looks ridiculous on a floor cushion.'

I agree.

I gave the thing to Rosie as a peace-offering, but she threw it back at me saying, 'Burgundy sucks. It's the colour of executives' wallets.'

William rejected it, saying that it smelled of something hobbollall'.

In the end I took the cushion down to the New Dog, who appeared to appreciate the gift though it is too big for the basket, so the poor animal perches on top of the cushion somewhat precariously with a nervous look in its eyes.

I have finished arranging my things. I will have to learn to live with the Barbie doll wallpaper--but I wish Rosie hadn't disfigured them with a black felt-tip pen and given them all moustaches and underarm hair.

### **Friday August 15<sup>th</sup>**

Justine rang. She said Alan has got a vacancy for a barman at The 165 club. Was I interested? I said no. Serving drinks to Conservative Members of Parliament was my idea of pitchfork purgatory. I asked her how her true romance with Zippo was going. She said it was over. Zippo had asked her to wear something more conservative as they were dressing before leaving the flat to visit his parents at their family seat near Cheltenham. Justine had refused, saying she had to be true to herself. He had shouted, 'My father's on borrowed time as it is. If he sees you in that skirt he'll have a heart attack and die.' Versace has a lot to answer for.

### **Saturday August 16<sup>th</sup>**

Support for the Royal Family has fallen below 50 per cent for the first time. Quelle surprise! I remember seeing a photograph of Prince William on his first day at Eton. The poor kid was wearing a green sports jacket! The last time I saw a green sports jacket it was hanging on a rail in a Cancer Research charity shop.

Princess Diana flew to Athens in a Harrods Gulf-stream jet, before going cruising in the Greek Islands with her friend, Rosa Monckton. I hope that in the excitement of her new romance she has not forgotten her promise to buy an artificial leg for that bloke Mohammed.

In the afternoon I took William to visit our MP's surgery, which was being held in an office at the health centre. There was a queue of often people, mostly men. From overhearing their conversation I could tell that nearly all of them had come with trifling complaints. The majority seemed to be requesting council-house transfers because of noisy neighbours. I made sure that I was the last to go in.

I was shocked at her exhausted appearance, and said so.

'Thanks,' she said, while lighting a cigarette. 'I was up until four a.m. with Mandy.' She stifled a yawn.

'Doing the samba?' I asked. I had heard about Mr Mandelson's predilection for the rhythms of South America.

'No,' she said. 'We were writing a spoiler for Jack's disclosures in the News of the World next week. He's been threatening me with this since we split up on May 1<sup>st</sup>.'

I asked her why the split had occurred.

She said, 'Take your bloody pick. There was his one-and-a-half-bottles-of-Stolly-a-day habit. The hysterical midnight calls from his last ex-wife. His sexism: he would sulk if I asked him to pick up a loo brush.' She said she had heard from Alastair Campbell that Cavendish had been paid in excess of PS50,000 to spill the beans about her past. He's got two of his children in the Priory and one in the Betty Ford,' she said. 'The poor sod needs the money.'

'That's no excuse to betray you, Pan,' I said. I tried to hold her hand but she slid it out of my grasp and towards her cigarette packet.

She showed me the spoiler. It was a brave document.

'I WAS FREE SPIRIT' ADMITS THE PEOPLE'S PAN Pandora Braithwaite, 'the brightest star in Blair's firmament', issued an extraordinary statement last night, admitting that in sexual matters: 'I was a free spirit; I had many lovers.' Speaking from her home in her constituency of Ashby-de-la-Zouch, she said, 'Yes, it's true. At one time in the eighties I was enjoying the sexual attentions of three lovers. We were all perfectly happy with the arrangement.'

'Erotic'

Asked if she wore erotic underwear in the debating chamber of the House of Commons she said, 'Yes, I buy my undies from Agent Provocateur in Soho. This in no way affects my ability as a politician. I work tirelessly on behalf of my constituents.'

'Blair Sexy'

Asked if her leader was sexy, Pandora said, 'Clearly.'

'Chanel--Passe'

Asked about Cavendish's allegations about financial irregularity regarding election expenses, Pandora said, 'I borrowed a couple of couture suits from Karl--I've since given them back, they were terribly passe.'

We had to fight our way out through an unruly pack of press photographers who had tracked Pandora down to the health centre.

William was excited by Pandora's Mercedes coupe and made her put the hood up and down several times as we drove to our house. My mother was excited to see her, and more excited still by the press pack, who were soon camped outside our garden gate. Even my father left his bed for a look. My mother made him change into clean pyjamas, both in honour of Pandora and in case he should be photographed accidentally.

An odd-looking boy in gangsta rap clothes stood on the opposite side of the road, staring at the house and eating crisps as though he was on a day out. I asked him to move on, but he affected not to hear me.

My mother read Jack Cavendish's copy and then Pandora's spoiler with barely contained glee. At 3 a.m. Ivan and Tania Braithwaite arrived, ashen-faced.

Ivan said to my mother, 'Pauline, my darling, I've told Tania. I had to do it before the News of the World did it for me.'

My father, the poor dolt, said, 'You've told Tania what?'

My heart stopped beating.

Ivan strode, in his smart casuals, up to my pyjama'd, unshaven father and said, 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, George, but I'm in love with your wife.'

I crossed to my father and touched his shoulder. Pandora took her mother in her arms.

I watched my father's face age as the realization dawned that his wife was in love with somebody else, and that that someone else was Ivan Braithwaite, a family friend.

The New Dog slunk out of the room and went to perch on its burgundy cushion--aware, perhaps, of its role in the affair.

Tania disentangled herself from Pandora, smoothed her long, loose-fitting, floral-print frock over her hips and said, in a quavery voice, 'Ivan, I want you out of my house and garden by tonight.'

Pandora shouted, 'How could you do this to Mummy, Daddy?'

Ivan replied simply, 'Love captured us on May the first, and we have been its prisoners ever since.'

The saggy lovers exchanged a passionate glance.

I almost vomited. He should try writing for Mills and Boon.

My father sat down and lit a Rothman's. The fly on his pyjamas was open. He wasn't wearing underpants. I hastily positioned myself in front of him.

Ivan said, 'Come along with me now, my darling,' to my mother.

She picked up her make-up bag and they left.

I watched them pushing their way through the press at the gate. The boy was still there, eating from a bag of cheese and onion crisps.

## Sunday August 17<sup>th</sup>

It takes a long time to write a short paragraph. Pandora and I sat up until 5 a.m. composing the following, which Alastair Campbell approved at 6 a.m.

Pandora Braithwaite, MP for Ashby-de-la-Zouch, and Adrian Mole, Celebrity Chef, are delighted to announce that Mrs Pauline Mole and Mr Ivan Braithwaite (BA) are to marry in the spring.

Pandora (30) said, 'I'm thrilled for them,' and Adrian (30) said, 'Ivan is a lovely man, I couldn't be more pleased.'

The wedding will take place in Ashby-de-la-Zouch Castle, which is now licensed for marriage ceremonies. Neither Mrs Tania Braithwaite nor Mr George Mole was available for comment.

### **Monday August 18<sub>n</sub>**

Talk about the House of Sorrows! Dostoevsky, you should be here, in Wisteria Walk, on this day.

### **Tuesday August 19<sub>n</sub>**

My mother rang from the Post House Motel, two miles away, to say that she and Ivan were returning tonight.

### **Wednesday August 20<sub>n</sub>**

There has been an unbelievable, terrible, scandalous reversal. My mother and Ivan are living here at Wisteria Walk, and my father and Tania are living there, at The Lawns. I am absolutely furious that I was not party to these arrangements. It was done behind my back. I said to my mother, 'How could you send Dad, a sick man, to live with that gorgon Tania Braithwaite?'

She said, 'Keep your nose out of our business.' William has already accepted Ivan into the family. Ivan bribed him with an educational pop-up book. My father mustn't find out. It will kill him.

### **Thursday August 21<sub>s</sub>**

Nigel fought his way through the press pack and visited today. It was brave of him: everybody who comes to the house ends up on regional television (Midlands Today). Tony Blair has sent a (private) letter of support to Pandora.

Dear Pandora,

Cherie and I want to tell you how much we value your contribution to New Labour's success.

We are praying that your present personal and family difficulties will be resolved and that you will continue to serve your constituency of Ashby-de-la-Zouch for the duration of the present parliamentary term.

Yours, with love Tony

I will never, ever get used to seeing Ivan Braithwaite's aggressively tufted toothbrush in our bathroom. Never, not in a million years.

My father's worn-down brush still stands next to it, in its customary place in the fish mug, together with his smoker's toothpaste.

Rosie can't understand why our father doesn't beat Ivan up 'so badly that the bastard ends up with a tube up his f--nose'.

### **Friday August 22<sub>nd</sub>**

A reporter, called Gracie Ball, rapped on the front door today and asked for an interview with 'Pauline and Ivan'. I chatted at the door with her for a while about writing in general. I mentioned that I had written a novel, Birdwatching. She said she would like to see it. When I came down, she had insinuated herself into the house and was talking to my mother and Ivan at the kitchen table. The ancient lovers were holding hands and confessing their shared guilt to Gracie.

### **Saturday August 23<sub>rd</sub>**

I steeled myself, pushed through the reporters and drove round to The Lawns. There were three people waiting at the Braithwaites' rustic-style gates, smoking cigarettes. One of them, a girl, had a camera slung around her neck. As I got out of the car, the press shouted, 'Adrian! Adrian!' I ignored them and ran up the drive to the front door. I noticed that the shutters and blinds were closed. I knocked on the door, using the lion's-head brass knocker. My father shouted, 'Bugger off,' from the hall.

I lifted the letterbox and shouted, 'It's me--Adrian!' I heard bolts being drawn and locks turning. The door opened only wide enough to let me in, then slammed shut. My father and Tania Braithwaite stood in the spacious hallway, white-faced and haggard. Tania said, 'Do, please, come into the kitchen. I'll make coffee.' She was behaving as though the cataclysmic events of the last few days had never happened.

For once I was lost for words. What could I possibly say to them both? Less than a week ago they had thought themselves safely married; now their cuckold status was being broadcast to the nation. We sat down at the huge pine table in the kitchen. My father pulled a saucer full of fag ends and ash towards him. He lit a cigarette. Tania flapped her hand in front of her face.

'I thought this was a strictly non-smoking household,' I said.

Tania sighed. 'Yes, normally it is...but in the circumstances...' Her voice trailed away.

My father said, 'What does your mother see in him, Adrian?'

Tania's eyes filled with tears. 'Ivan is, was, a wonderful man,' she said.

'He betrayed you, Tania,' said my father. He sounded like somebody out of a Frederick Forsyth Cold War novel. It was obvious to me that they were both in shock. Tania got up to pour boiling water into the cafetiere. I saw my father watching in admiration as she pushed down the plunger. He has always wanted to join the middle classes.

The phone on the wall, near the Aga, rang. Tania answered it. It became obvious that Pandora was on the line. Tania said, 'I'm taking it one day at a time. George is being a tremendous help.' There was a pause, then Tania said, 'No, darling, there's nothing you can do. Adrian's here. I'm sure he'll go to Sainsbury's for us.' Tania looked at me pleadingly. What could I say but 'Yes'?

I asked my father how long he intended staying at Tania's house.

He said, 'I dunno, I've got nowhere else to go, have I?'

Tania said, 'I've got four empty bedrooms, Adrian. George is welcome to stay for as long as he likes. He understands better than anybody what I'm going through.'

'Because I'm going through the same torment,' he said.

They exchanged a glance, and I knew, I just knew, that despite their previous mutual antipathy it wouldn't be long before they discovered that they had other things in common.

Tania wrote a shopping list, which I transferred into my electronic organizer.

- 2 baguettes
- Tin anchovies
- Tin artichoke hearts
- Jar saffron strands (must be from S. America)
- Coriander (fresh)
- Sun-dried tomatoes
- Pesto
- Goat's cheese & feta
- Taramasalata
- Pitta bread
- Fromage frais
- Natural yoghurt (Greek)
- Pkt Always panty-liners
- Extra virgin olive oil (Italy)
- 260w lightbulbs
- XL gardening gloves
- 2 ripe avocados
- Filo pastry (frozen)
- Spinach Mange-touts

When Tania went out of the room my father glanced at the list and grumbled, 'I'll bleeding starve to death.' He hates foreign food, apart from chicken korma.

He gave me a PS10 note and asked me to get him forty Rothman's, a white sliced loaf and a pack of pork dripping.

However, when I got to Sainsbury's I couldn't retrieve the list from my personal organizer and had to guess instead. I didn't hang around at Copse Close to watch the groceries being unpacked. I'd forgotten my father's Rothman's and I knew there'd be trouble.

### **Sunday August 24<sup>th</sup>**

I heard the bed creaking in my mother's room in the early hours of the morning. I banged on the party wall and the creaking stopped. I heard Rosie shout, 'Thank you, Aidy.'

### **Monday August 25<sup>th</sup>**

William kept asking for his grandad, so I took him round to The Lawns this morning. My father and Tania were in the garden, in deck-chairs. Apparently he'd just mown the lawn. He was wearing one of his short-sleeved Hawaiian shirts. There was a nicotine patch on his pasty left arm. He got up and played football with William, using Pandora's old netball. A passing stranger might have observed the scene and felt a pang of jealousy that they were not part of this ideal family.

When I got home the second post had arrived. There was a letter from an Arthur Stoa, editor and managing director of Stoa Books Ltd, asking if I would be interested in writing a cookery book to be called Offally Good!--The Book!.

As I read his letter, Rosie and Ivan clashed at the fridge. He objected to her drinking straight from the milk bottle rather than using a glass. My intervention was not appreciated by either of them. I must remove William from this hellhole.

Dear Arthur Stoa,

Yes, I would be interested. Please furnish details. Forgive this terse reply, but my time is entirely taken up with family problems at present.

Yours, etc. A.A. Mole.

PS. Do you publish fiction? I have a MS called Birdwatch-ing available for publication.

### **Wednesday August 27<sup>th</sup>**

I found Rosie crying in the bathroom. She was holding Ivan's burgundy leather washbag over the toilet (the lid was up). I comforted her as best I could. She put the washbag back on to the cistern, where he keeps it. After a minute or two of silence I said, 'You look pink and pretty. What have you done to yourself?'

She said, 'I've washed my face. This is what I look like without make-up.'

'And your hair, it's sort of fluffy,' I said.



'Yeah, it's not gelled down,' she explained, frowning into the washbasin mirror. She lowered her voice and said, 'Ivan complimented me yesterday on my aggressive and provocative image.'

'So, you're changing it?' I checked.

'Yeah,' she said. 'I dunno what to go for,' she said. 'Any suggestions?'

'He was banging on about the 'iniquities of foxhunting' the other day,' I said. 'You could take to wearing the Quorn Hunt regalia, jodhpurs and a riding whip.'

'Yeah,' she laughed, 'that would f--provoke him, the b--.'

I took advantage of our mutual antipathy to Ivan the Terrible to say, 'Rosie, have you ever thought you might be suffering from Tourette's syndrome?'

'F--off,' she said. And flushed Ivan's exfoliating hand mitt down the loo.

Drink--half a bottle of vodka

Drugs--6 Nurofen, 2 skunk weed

Bowels--nil

Penis--0/10

## Thursday August 28<sub>m</sub>

The plumber has only just unblocked the toilet. The mitt damage cost PS275. I met my mother on the stairs. She was in a defiant mood. She said, 'I love Ivan, and he adores me. So try, at least, to be courteous to him, will you?'

I said, 'Has he seen you without make-up yet?' She shouted, 'Yes, he has, and he worships every wrinkle, bag and line! He loves me to bits.'

Ivan came out of the lounge. He was halfway through the Guardian crossword (the difficult one--he does the quick one while he waits for the kettle to boil). He said, 'I'm enormously aware of the trauma you're all suffering. Perhaps when things have calmed down a little we can regroup and present ourselves for family therapy, eh?'

I would sooner eat live toads than sit in a circle with him while he drones on about our family's dysfunction.

## Friday August 29<sub>m</sub>

It is true. In times of crisis the Royal Family are a great comfort. It has certainly comforted me to think that they are even more dysfunctional than we are. Neurotic Diana is racketing around with a bloke whose family's money came from associating with arms dealers. Charles is morbidly unhappy, crippled by his unnatural childhood and his Tampax-fixation. They should scrap The Archers on the radio and do a soap opera based on the Royal Family. I may write it myself.

## Saturday August 30<sub>m</sub>

Relations between Rosie and my mother have now broken down completely and she has gone to live at Aaron Michelwaite's house. My mother found out that Rosie has had a monkey tattooed on her belly. William cried himself to sleep last night (in my bed): he misses Rosie. She used to partner him when he played the boring board games he's so fond of. I am his new opponent, but I am a poor substitute. He gets fed up with me because I don't give a toss if I go up the ladders or down the snakes, and I can't be arsed to learn the rules. Quite honestly, dear Diary, I can't see the point of learning any rules. Nobody keeps to them any more.

William starts at Kidsplay Ltd nursery school on September 15<sub>m</sub>. It can't come too soon for me. I'm happy to pay someone to play with him.

Dear John Tydeman,

It is some years since I wrote to you but you may remember me. I offered you several chances to broadcast my work when you worked at the BBC. Unfortunately you rejected me then and asked me not to bother you again. However, I approach you now under entirely different circumstances.

I have written a soap opera, which will replace The Archers. I think that all thinking people recognize The Archers in its present form has had its day. The nadir for me was listening to the bedsprings when two oldie Ambridge lovers prepared for intercourse...

My soap opera cleverly includes the Royal Family.

I enclose a few pages of the opening episode. I have followed the 'Writing for Radio' rules and included many sound effects. I know it is currently fashionable to record on location, but in this case permissions may not be granted.

Anyway, Mr Tydeman, cast your eye over the pages. If you are interested perhaps we could meet up at the new Oxygen bar H2O for a sniff of clean air.

Yours,

A.A. Mole

THE WINDSORS

A soap opera based on the Royal Family. To replace The Archers.

SCENE 1. QUEEN'S LIVING ROOM

Sound: Richard and Judy show in the background; Sun newspaper being read; a female corgi barks.

PRINCE PHILIP: It's appalling, what the papers are saying about Charles, our son!

(Sound: Concorde flies over.)

QUEEN: I know who Charles is, Philip. (Sound: A helicopter lands outside.)

PHILIP: There was a time when you didn't. He spent so much time with his nanny that you passed him in the corridor once and assumed he was a jockey because he was so small.

(Sound: Feet walking on priceless Persian carpet.)

QUEEN: (breaking into violent sobs) Don't! Don't! I was a terrible mother. (Sound: A handbag is opened.)

ANDREW: Hi there, aged parents! What's new?

QUEEN: Andrew, darling, was I a terrible mother?

(Sound: A royal nose is blown into a damask linen handkerchief.)

ANDREW: Dunno. I can't remember you doing any mothering, Ma. You were sat all day stickin' stamps in a album.

(Sound: A door slams.)

CHARLES: It's an album, Andrew. Not a album. I find your grammatical errors to be quite simply er...unforgivable.

(Sound: Charles frowns; a door opens.)

ANNE: Why have you called us here, Ma? I've got an appointment with the horse doctor at eleven-thirty.

(Sound: A door slams; a nervous cough.)

EDWARD: Sorry I'm late, everybody.

QUEEN: Hello...Er...edward: Edward. My name is Edward.

QUEEN: So it is...I've called you together for a most important reason. A most important reason indeed...

(Sound: Music plays, leaving listeners in suspense.)

Copyright: Adrian Mole, August 1997

I feel in my bones that this could be a winner. Princess Diana would be the star eventually, of course. She is at present starring in her own soap opera, and the whole country wants to know what will happen to her next.

### **Sunday August 31..**

The soap opera of life has made a tragic mistake. You do not kill off your star halfway through a series. Now we will never know how the story ends.

#### *Impressions on Diana's Tragic Death*

William and Harry being driven to Crathie church, where the priest politely made no mention of the raw fact that their beloved mother had been killed only ten hours earlier.

It was a tawdry way to die. Joy-riders perish in the same way, believing themselves to be invincible against speed and a turn in the road.

Self-control on the tarmac as the Prince moved along the line, shaking the hands of those who had brought the coffin home. The woman inside it had thought that Charles would cherish a video of herself and a much smaller man, Wayne Sleep, dancing together. She didn't know how much he would hate this video. I hope she never found out.

Her only school prize was for 'Best-kept Hamster Cage'.

She once phoned Oliver Hoare, with whom she was obsessed, over twenty times in one hour. She hung up each time he answered. She was subsequently 'spoken to' by the police.

# Autumn

## Monday September 1<sup>st</sup>

This household has cried enough to fill several rivers, a canal and several lakes. My mother keeps saying, 'Those boys,' and dissolving into yet more tears. None of us have moved away from the television. I have even managed to watch Michael Cole, Mohammed Al-Fayed's spokesman, slither across the screen without leaving the room.

Rosie came back home and threw herself into my mother's arms. They cried together until I thought they would need medical rehydration.

## Tuesday September 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ivan Braithwaite, who is a republican, made a major faux pas today. He said, in front of my mother, 'I can't help feeling that this hysterical outpouring of grief is way over the top.'

She started to cry again and said, 'We're not just crying for her, we're crying for the sadness in our own lives. I'm crying for the hurt I've caused George.'

I said, to try and comfort her, 'Mum, don't worry about Dad. He and Tania are getting on amazingly well'

This made my mother cry even more. She asked Ivan if he would take her to Kensington Palace so that she could lay some flowers at the gates and then go to St James's Palace to pay her respects. Ivan said he was not prepared to queue up for eight hours to watch my mother sign her name in a book. My mother said, 'I'm doing more than sign my name. Adrian's going to write me a poem about Princess Di, aren't you, Aidy?'

What could I say? The poor woman is grief-stricken. I agreed to write the poem and accompany her to the various shrines. Rosie preferred to watch the Diana-mourning on television. She said it was 'more real'.

## Wednesday September 3<sup>rd</sup>

We Sellotaped my poem on to the trunk of a tree in Kensington Gardens this morning.

Oh Diana!

Oh Diana! Was a song, of my mother's youth. Sung by Paul Anka, who was small and white of tooth.

The refrain, Oh Diana! Beats inside Mum's head. A blank, a blank, a doo-dah that her Diana is dead.

I told my mother that I needed more time to finish the poem properly, but she refused to wait. She was afraid that we would miss the space on the tree. There was a queue of poets behind us. On the way back up the M1, my mother said, 'I'm going to make something of my life.' I advised her to drop Ivan Braith-waite. She said, 'No, Ivan's going to help me. He's already offered.'

Saw the crisp-eating boy walking past our house as I was pulling the curtains at 11 a.m. He is surely too young to be out on his own.

## Thursday September 4<sup>th</sup>

My mother is furious with the Queen for not flying the flag at half-mast over Buckingham Palace, and for not coming to London to see and comfort the huge crowds of mourners who continue to throng the parks and streets near the royal palaces. The press are being blamed for her death, and my mother is threatening to cancel Hello!.

Over dinner tonight Ivan said, 'What Diana didn't understand was that you can't invite photographers to put you on the cover of Vogue one day, then scream press intrusion the next because you're on the front of the Sun. You can't be a little bit famous.'

He could win a Bore of the Solar System contest.

However, what he said about fame worried me. I took a sip of Tizer and said, 'Yes, I myself face the same problem. I am broadcasting to the nation on September 10<sup>th</sup>.'

My mother said, 'I shouldn't think you'll have a problem with fame, Adrian. Nobody at all watches the Millennium Channel.'

I told her about the students.

She said, 'Students don't count.'

## Friday September 5<sup>th</sup>

Visited my father and Tania today. When I arrived Tania was demonstrating to my father several uses for sun-dried tomatoes. I saw my father stifle a yawn when Tania turned her back to grate some Parmesan.

She told me that she was cooking some quickly heated-through food today, so that she and my father could 'maximize their time in front of the funeral coverage'.

Father's depression seems to have lifted. He is ping to a Job Club on Monday. Apparently Tania has told him that he is a 'highly intelligent man'. She has promised to help him 'realize his potential' if he stops smoking. This shows how little she knows my father.

He will choose Rothman's over fame and fortune any day.

My mother accused me of 'heartless cynicism'. Since Ivan came to live here she has changed her vocabulary and she has now started to wear Pink Blush lipstick instead of her usual colour, Erotic Flame. The Beginner's Guide to the Internet is on her bedside table, next to Pass Your Driving Test.

## Saturday September 6<sup>th</sup>

Oh! The card on the wreath on the coffin. 'Mummy'. Oh!

We ran out of man-sized tissues very early in the day. My mother saw her friends from Groby Theatre Workshop, Alan and Abbo, walking in the procession behind the coffin. They were representing the Ashby-de-la-Zouch branch of the Terrence Higgins Trust. She said it was the first time she'd seen them without a smile on their faces.

### **Sunday September 7<sup>th</sup>**

Another mini-lecture from Ivan at breakfast about the virtues of New Labour. I said that I personally thought Tony Blair's reading in the pulpit at Westminster Abbey was a bit on the theatrical side. I couldn't help thinking that those endless pauses had been timed by Alastair Campbell with a stopwatch.

### **Monday September 8<sup>th</sup>**

I overheard a gruesome conversation in the bathroom today. Ivan said, 'Oh, God, Pauline, you're so beautiful.'

My mother sniggered, then said, 'But look at my hideous cellulite, Iv.'

'Pauline, baby,' he crooned, 'cellulite is just a thousand little dimples, and I love every one of those dimples.'

As I passed by the open bathroom door I saw him bend and kiss a patch of cellulite on her left outside thigh. Perhaps he does truly love her. Only three days to go before I am a household name.

### **Tuesday September 9<sup>th</sup>**

Archie Tait rang from a phone box to wish me good luck--it was kind of him to remember. Why, though? I haven't given him a second thought.

### **Wednesday September 10<sup>th</sup>**

Zippo rang early this morning to say that they had shown Offally Good! to a focus group of Oxford undergraduates, and they had given it the thumbs up. 'They said it was great comedy,' Zippo said. After I had put the phone down I puzzled over this remark. There was a preview from A.A. Gill in The Times. He wrote Offally Good! is offally bad. A wooden presenter, Adrian Mole, stumbles and bumbles through twenty minutes of Crossroads-quality TV. We watch with horrible fascination as he makes sheep's-head broth. (Which is not even offal, so the Tristans behind the programme are deceiving us from the start.) After twenty minutes Mole produces a pot of grey liquid, on the surface of which floats a layer of scum. Dev Singh, however, was brilliantly and genuinely funny. I sense that a star has been conceived, if not yet born.

Both sets of parents' have invited me to watch the programme with them. How can I possibly choose between them? Both have had Cable TV installed specifically to watch Offally Good!.

A compromise was reached. I watched the first half at Wisteria Walk, then got in the car during the commercial break, drove like a maniac and watched the second half at The Lawns. Both households watched in silence. The New Dog seemed to enjoy it at first, but then lost interest and went to sit on its cushion.

I overheard my mother saying to Ivan, 'I don't know if I can face showing myself in public'

### **Thursday September 11<sup>th</sup>**

I stayed in bed all day with the duvet pulled over my head. Nobody rang to congratulate me. My own family cannot look me in the eye. The next five Wednesdays are going to be torment for me.

### **Friday September 12<sup>th</sup>**

Zippo rang to say that the ratings for Offally Good! showed that Richard and Judy 'should not buy a retirement property yet'. He said that 55,000 people had switched over to Good Morning when I cleavered the sheep's head open, leaving 57,000 watching me.

I told Zippo about the proposed book deal with Stoa. He said, 'Pie Crust own 25 per cent of any exploitation.' When I protested, he said, 'Take a peek at your contract, Aid.' I did. He is right.

I was alarmed to see that I am due to deliver the manuscript to Stoa on October 15<sup>th</sup>. He is going for the Christmas market.

### **Monday September 15<sup>th</sup>**

An historic day. William embarked on the first step in an educational journey that will culminate in his attending either Oxford or Cambridge. He started at Kidsplay Ltd today, a private nursery school owned by Mrs Parvez, Liberal councillor and local entrepreneur.

I resent having to pay PS9 a day to Mrs Parvez. However I can't put up with the boy hanging on to my legs all day any longer. I have things to do, and places to go. (Though now I will have to do the things and go to places between the hours of 9.15 and 3.15.)

There was an emotional scene when William left Wisteria Walk wearing his burgundy sweatshirt (emblazoned with Kidsplay Ltd's slogan, 'Play As U Learn'), Gap cords, baseball cap and Velcro-fastened trainers.

My mother broke down and sobbed. 'Everything is three sizes too big for him.'

I pointed out to her that he would grow into his uniform eventually. I also asked her to try and control herself. She was carrying on as though she were Antigone. I said, 'He's going to nursery school, not to be ritually sacrificed on a slab.'

My father and Tania were waving outside The Lawns as William and I drove by, like spectators at a royal wedding. I hope the boy doesn't expect such a send-off every morning.

As we drove to Kidsplay Ltd, William asked me where birds 'hang out' (an expression he has picked up from Rosie). I asked him to rephrase the question.

'Where do they go when they're tired?' he asked, staring out of the car window at the sky.

I said, 'They go to sleep in their nests, of course.'

Kidsplay Ltd is in a converted church. There's a stained-glass window on the back wall showing Jesus on the Cross. When William saw it he said, 'That's the man who's on Rosie's necklace.'

There was no time to explain about the symbolism of Rosie's fashion-item crucifix.

Mrs Parvez bustled up in her green sari and showed William to his peg in the cloakroom. Each had an animal symbol hanging from the peg as an aide-memoire. William's was an anteater. I asked Mrs Parvez if this could be substituted for something more cuddly or lovable.

She said, coldly, 'I have three left, an elk, a Thompson's gazelle and a warthog.'

I settled for the anteater.

As I drove away I couldn't help but feel that I had started off on the wrong foot with Mrs Parvez.

When I picked him up, William said, 'You told me a lie, Dad. Mrs Parvez told me that birds don't sleep in their nests.'

I was furious with Mrs Parvez: she had undermined my parental authority. I said, 'So where the sodding hell do they sleep?'

'On branches,' said William.

I gave a scornful laugh. 'Oh, branches,' I scoffed. 'All night? No, son,' I said. 'Mrs Parvez has misinformed you.' I saw him puzzling over the word misinformed. 'She lied,' I explained. I went on to press my point home. 'All birds sleep in their nests, all year round.'

## **Tuesday September 16<sup>th</sup>**

William came home this afternoon with the following note.

Kidsplay Ltd

Castle Road

Ashby-de-la-Zouch

September 16, 1997

Dear Mr Mole,

William has told me that you called me a liar, and questioned my assertion that birds do not habitually sleep in their nests. I refer you to page 29 of *The Birds in Your Garden* by Roy Wren, published by Glauberman & Arthur Ltd, 1979.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Parvez

PS. If you wish William to go on a trip to Brown's Farm Park Ltd on Thursday, will you please send PS5.50 tomorrow morning.

## **Wednesday September 17<sup>th</sup>**

I rang the central reference library in Leicester. They had not heard of Mr Wren's opus. I tried to ring the RSPB but was put on hold, and made to listen to a chaffinch chaffing. It made a change from Vivaldi. A man with a gravelly voice eventually came on the line.

I asked him my nest question. 'One moment, this is Accounts. I'll put you through to Inquiries,' he said. The line went dead. Presently an owl began to hoot down the phone. Then an old woman said, 'Inquiries.'

I asked my nest question. She said, 'This is General Inquiries. I'll put you through to Bird Inquiries.' The line went dead again. Then a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square. Then a robot said, 'Welcome to Bird Inquiries. Press One for identification. Press Two for migration. Press Three for feeding suggestions. Press Four for habitat. Press Five...'

I replaced the receiver with E.M. Forster's quotation from *Howards End* ringing in my ears: 'Only connect.'

I did not watch the second episode of *Off ally Good!* (Tripe). Archie Tait rang and left a message, saying, 'Well done.' The man is practically a stranger, why does he bother? I found the following note in William's anorak pocket this evening.

Dear Mr Mole,

William has not yet brought the PS5.50 for the trip to Brown's Farm Park Ltd tomorrow. If you wish William to partake of this trip, will you please remedy the situation tomorrow morning. Failure to do so will result in William being left behind in the care of Mr Lewis, the caretaker, who is not qualified in resuscitation techniques.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Parvez

## **Thursday September 18<sup>th</sup>**

Dear Mrs Parvez,

I was most disturbed to be told by William that his packed lunch was stolen by a goat (Noreen) today, while he was at Brown's Farm Park Ltd. Apparently the beast ate not only the contents of the lunchbox, but the lunchbox itself. William said he was hungry and distressed, but he received no comfort (or replacement food!) from you. I have tried many times to contact Farmer Brown by telephone, but am told by voicemail that he is not at his desk(!).

It seems to me that Noreen is a menace and should be kept in isolation.

I hope you will give me your support in this matter.

Sincerely,

A.A. Mole

PS. According to the Internet, there are several species of birds that sleep in their nests. Some use feathers and down to make their nests more comfortable, rather like our human duvets and pillows.

### Friday September 19<sup>th</sup>

Kids play Nursery Ltd

September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1997

Dear Mr Mole,

I e-mailed FarmerBrown@Foobar.co.uksetaside--and he e-mailed me back with the following message.

*'The CCT camera next to the goat pen shows a dark-skinned lad in a red sweatshirt and brown cord trousers throwing a Postman Pat plastic lunchbox over the three-foot-high chain-linked fence towards Noreen, the goat.'*

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Parvez

### Saturday September 20<sup>th</sup>

William said he did it because Noreen looked cold and hungry. He is such a soft-hearted kid. Though he is also, it has to be said, a convincing liar. I told him the story about 'Cry Wolf. I also told him that if he didn't behave in future, a man called Jack Straw would get him and put him in prison.

The boy was outside the house today. I banged on the window and asked him to stop picking the berries off the shrub that grows on the fence. He glowered and put his hands in his pockets.

At 8.30 a.m. I sat down at my desk to begin work on Offally Good!--The Book!. At 11.37 I rose to my feet having written nothing. Not one word.

### Sunday September 21<sup>st</sup>

Pandora has weathered the political storm and has been promoted to something called PPS to somebody I've never heard of in the Ministry of Agriculture.

She rang to tell her father this morning, as if we didn't already know! She is plastered all over the media. She told me on the phone that her mother and my father's 'living arrangement' has definitely turned into a fullblown sexual affair. Apparently she rang Tania this morning, to find her mother still in bed. Pan said, 'I distinctly heard your father's voice whispering, 'I'll put the kettle on, Tan," and claimed she heard his smoker's cough as he opened the bedroom door. 'So, they're definitely playing at hide the sausage,' she said.

I asked her how she felt about our parental swap. She said, 'On the one hand I'm enchanted by the chronicity of the thing, but on the other I'm appalled and disgusted.'

It was a typical politician's reply.

Personally I am horrified by my father. He has obviously been lying about his sexual potency. I hope my mother doesn't find out that he is sexually active again. I asked Pandora if she had 'caught' OG!.

She said that Offally Good! was the talk of the Commons. She said the Federation of Master Butchers' own newspaper, MEAT, had given it a rave review. Sheep's heads have been 'selling like hot cakes'. Butcher's shops and supermarkets up and down the country have been inundated by students. There is a national shortage and emergency supplies are being flown in from New Zealand. The Society of the Deserving Poor has also praised the programme. I asked her how she knew all this, and she said, 'I surfed the Net, of course.' I was very touched. She obviously cares for me.

I asked her when she was coming up to Leicestershire. She said, 'Tonight, I'll be at The Lawns by three a.m. Please ask your mother and my father to attend.' I asked Pandora if someone from Relate should be in attendance. She said, 'Clearly not.'

### Monday September 22<sup>nd</sup>

It was a mistake to allow five bottles of wine into the summit meeting. At one point I thought I had stepped into a particularly acrimonious production of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. Pandora's conciliation skills were brushed aside while the fifty-somethings ranted and raved and came close to blows with each other. Horrible things were said. Ivan wants The Lawns to be sold and the proceeds split between them. Tania said, 'The Lawns is my life. I will never be parted from that garden.'

Ivan said, 'That's why our marriage died, Tania. You'd be out there gardening in the dark with a head torch while I was in bed, waiting for you.'

Tania screamed, 'There were slugs to kill!' with a dangerous edge of fanaticism to her voice, I thought. She then burst out with, 'How could you live with a woman whose garden is covered in bindweed, Ivan?'

Ivan strode down to the smoking half of the room (occupied by my mother, my father and Pandora) and took my mother into his arms. He turned to his wife and said, 'I love every nettle, every dandelion, every buttercup in Pauline's garden.'

My father shuffled down to the non-smoking section and put his arms around Tania's shaking shoulders. 'Don't worry, Tan,' he said, 'I'm here now, I'll help murder those bastard slugs.' It was an outright declaration of love. My mother was stung into casting aspersions on my father's sexual potency, at which point Pandora and I excused ourselves and went to sit outside on a bench under the apple trees. I trod on some rotten windfall

apples and ruined my second-best Timberlands. Pandora said that she disapproved of my mother's boasting about Ivan's potency. I confessed to Pandora that I had been disgusted at her father's refusal to observe the two minutes' silence for Diana.

Zippo rang me on my mobile. He is back in London. He said the ratings for Off ally Good! were rising 'like fish in a bucket'. He said Dev's postbag was 'amazing'. I asked if I had any fan mail, he said, 'Yeah, we'll post it on to you when there's enough to fill an A4 envelope.'

Worked all night on OGTB yet had little to show for it. I simply couldn't get the pig's trotters recipe to sound exciting.

#### **Thursday September 25<sup>th</sup>**

The lamb sweetbreads with black bean sauce episode went out yesterday morning. I watched alone: everyone else in my household was out on more important business, apparently. Am I a consummate television professional, or am I an embarrassing amateur? I don't know. There isn't a single person I know whom I can rely on to give me good, impartial advice. I need an agent. I rang Brick Eagleburger's office. Boston's voicemail answered. I said, 'Adrian Mole from Offally Good!. Ring me back, will you?' I forced myself not to say please. Assertiveness is the new manners.

Brick himself rang back fifteen minutes later. 'I lurve that show,' he boomed. 'I practically peed my pants when that sheep's testicle fell out of the wok. Adrian, you--are--so--funnee!'

Once again I was baffled. Sweetbreads are not testicles, are they?

When he stopped laughing, I explained that I was in desperate need of an agent. 'You got one!' said Brick.

I'm going to have lunch in London with him tomorrow, to plan my career, my publicity, my writing ambitions, my financial planning, my divorce, my tax. My life.

#### **Friday September 26<sup>th</sup>**

Brick looks like a gangster who has read Proust. He towered above me and nearly stopped my circulation with his handshake. I'm almost sure he wears a black wig. He chews constantly on an unlit cigar. We went to the Ivy. A.A. Gill saw me walk in and raised a hand in greeting, as though we were equals! Has he forgotten that he has twice now given me execrable reviews?

I wasn't sure what was the correct response to Gill, so I confined myself to smiling ruefully at him and raising my eyebrows. When I went into the gents' later I encored these facial expressions in front of a washbasin mirror. I looked like Coco the Clown, one person I have always loathed, Brick encouraged me to drink four White Ladies then to talk about myself for two and a half hours. He didn't look bored once--apart from when he was signing the bill. I agreed to give him 20 per cent of my income for life. Saturday September 27<sup>th</sup>

When I picked up the Guardian from the BP shop today, I was astonished to see Dev Singh's photograph at the top of the front page, alerting readers to an interview on page four of the G2 section. I sat in my car on the forecourt and read it. I was only mentioned once: 'Dev's dazzling wit and uproarious physical comedy is in glorious contrast to the dour televisual presence of Adrian Mole, a pedant from Middle England.'

When I got home I found an invitation from the Leicester Tortoise Society to open their Christmas Fayre on Saturday November 1<sup>st</sup>. My first public engagement.

#### **Sunday September 28<sup>th</sup>**

A bombshell! My mother has told me that she is no longer prepared to look after William when I go back to work! Ivan has asked her to travel the world with him. She said, 'Adrian, I've got to go, haven't I? I can't say no to the world, can I?' I suggested that they take the lad with them. It would broaden his mind. She said, 'You don't get it, do you, you selfish sod? I'm through with childcare.'

I said, 'What about Rosie?'

She said, 'Rosie's tall enough to reach the stove and the fridge and the ironing-board and, anyway, she's got her dad.'

#### **Monday September 29<sup>th</sup>**

Ivan and my mother have taken over the kitchen table with their maps, guidebooks and brochures. They told me that they intend to cycle around the world. They are obviously suffering from folie a deux: neither of them has cycled further than the local shops before today.

I received a postcard today from Arthur Stoat. On one side was a photograph of a Norwegian peasant woman riding on a pig's back. On the other side was written, 'Please send me assurance that you have started work on the book. Yours, A. Stoat. PS. New deadline, October 21<sup>st</sup>.'

11.30 a.m. Rosie came to see me in my bedroom tonight. She asked me to promise, on William's life, to keep the secret she was about to divulge. I promised. She is two months pregnant. I did all the traditional things--said, 'Oh, my God!' clapped a hand to my forehead, got up and paced the available space between my bed and the window. 'How did it happen?' I asked.

The usual way. Like, I wasn't visited by an angel or nothing,' she sneered. She then attempted to justify her condition. 'We've only done it four times,' she said.

'Minus contraception, I presume?' I asked.

'You sound like Jack Straw,' she said, accusingly.

I ignored the insult and asked her if she was sure.

'Yeah, I'm sure, I told Dad I needed money for Nike trainers, which is sixty quid, but I got a cheaper pair and bought a pregnancy test with the difference.'

I felt a pang of jealousy that she was able to con my father out of sixty quid with such apparent ease. She has always been his favourite. The news of her pregnancy could plunge him back down into the pit of depression. I said, 'He'll go mad when he finds out.'

'He won't find out,' she said, irritably. 'He doesn't know what Nike trainers look like.'

I went to bed earlier than usual and lay in the dark thinking about Rosie and the little tadpole baby she had inside her. I like to think that I am a

civilized man, but I wanted to run down to Aaron Michelwaite's house, drag him into the street and beat him up for what he'd done to my little sister. He's bigger than me, but I reckoned that an unexpected and well-timed blow to the back of his head with my hardback edition of War and Peace would knock him off his feet.

I was present in the delivery room when Rosie was born, on November nth, 1982. I hadn't planned to be there, I was only a lad, but I was trapped by ghastly circumstances and forced to watch and listen as my mother gave birth. The sights! The sounds! I tried to escape several times, but my mother wouldn't let go of my right hand (it still plays me up when the weather is cold). She kept shouting, 'Don't leave me, Adrian'

--she was estranged from my father at the time. In fact, there was gossip about Rosie's paternity, led by Edna May Mole, my grandma. She died still convinced that Rosie's dad was not George Albert Mole, the name on her birth certificate, but Mr Lucas, the man who lured my mother away to Sheffield.

As far as I know Rosie is completely unaware of the question mark surrounding her conception and birth. I saw her seconds after she left my mother's body, before she took her first breath. She was half bald and angry-looking and resembled my father. She looked nothing like Lucas, but of course she had no teeth then. It was me who held her for the first time, after she'd had the slime removed, and me who taught her to click Lego bricks together. She used to follow me around like a small shadow, until she turned twelve, then something horrible happened to her and she transmogrified into a demon.

I know I promised to keep her secret, but I can feel it growing like an abscess inside me. It is longing to burst out. Even Aaron Michelwaite is unaware that he has fathered a foetus.

I asked her tonight if she wants a baby. She said, 'I might.' This surprised me. She had never shown the slightest sign of maternalism. Her dolls were treated disgracefully. She chopped their hair and eyelashes off, scribbled on their faces with biro, and performed horrible experiments on them with the contents of my father's toolbox. She was like a torturer's apprentice. I felt it my duty to warn her that New Labour strongly disapproved of single parents, and that should she choose to tramp that particular road in life, she would find it 'stony and full of potholes'. I said, 'Tony Blair will make you go out to work, Rosie. Any dream you have of breastfeeding your baby in front of The Big Breakfast will stay just that, a dream.'

She said, 'I can't stand Denise Van Outen, and there's no way I'd breastfeed.'

I felt my temples begin to throb. I urged her to talk to a professional with a diploma about her dilemma, but she refused.

We sat in silence: I looked around her room and noted that she had turned all her Barbie dolls to face the wall.

I asked her if her school provided parenting classes. She said, 'Yeah, like, they teach us how to, like, fill a single-parent benefit form in.'

I retired for the night. How can Rosie have a baby? She is a baby herself.

## **Tuesday September 30<sup>th</sup>**

I was driving William to his nursery when I heard a woman on a local radio station talking about teenage pregnancy. I turned the volume up in time to hear her say, '...and these dolls are extremely lifelike, they weigh eight and a half pounds. They are programmed to cry and they must be fed and changed regularly. The teenager either has to take it everywhere with them or find a babysitter.'

After I'd dropped William off I rang the radio station's helpline and obtained the fax number of the supplier of the faux babies. I'm hiring one for two weeks. The rubber kid should be here by ten o'clock tomorrow if Parcel Force keeps its promise.

Rosie said today that if she decides to have the baby she wants me to lend her the money to have the tattoo lasered off her belly. She said, 'By the time I get to the labour ward my little monkey will have stretched to look like King Kong.'

## **Wednesday October 1<sup>st</sup>**

Everybody wanted to know what was in the parcel. I was forced to lie and said I'd started my Christmas shopping. My mother rolled her eyes and exchanged an amused glance with Ivan. I saw her lips form the word 'anal'.

When William was at Kidsplay Ltd, and Ivan and my mother were out training for their circumnavigation of the world, I called Rosie into my bedroom and we unpacked the baby doll. It was unsettlingly realistic--it looked like a prettier William Hague. It was wearing a yellow Babygro, and had a label around its neck, which said:

Hello, I'm five weeks old, I weigh eleven pounds and I need to be 'fed' every four hours around the clock. I have been programmed to cry at antisocial times. If I am roughly handled an ear-splitting alarm will be activated, which may disturb your neighbours.

Warning! Do not attempt to tamper with my solar-powered batteries. Do not bathe me. Do not ingest my eyeballs.

### **Contents**

Doll

Electronic bottle

Transportation sling

Bottle-cleansing solution

Six diapers

1 comforter

I unfastened the Babygro. The doll was of indeterminate sex. Rosie was disappointed, she had been hoping for a girl.

It took me over an hour last night to persuade her to look after the doll for a fortnight. In the end I had to bribe her with the promise that I would pay for her to have hair extensions fitted at Toni and Guy.



Rosie redressed the doll and said, 'I'm gonna call her Ashby.'

She put Ashby in the sling and went to school. We have decided to tell our mother that Rosie is participating in a research project. We haven't bothered with a cover story for the school. They have been preparing for an Ofsted inspection and so are unlikely to notice.

My mother and Ivan didn't get home until after dark. It had taken them most of the day to get to Coalville and back, a distance of seven miles on mostly flat terrain. They were tres shocked to find Ashby lying face down on the draining-board, where Rosie had dumped her while she fed the New Dog. I had a quiet word with Rosie later. I stressed that unless she kept to the rules I was not going to fork out for the hair extensions. I watched the video of the third Offally Good! (Belgian Faggots), with my family and Ivan. Unfortunately, Ashby bawled throughout. I was most annoyed, though not as annoyed as Rosie, who eventually left the room muttering, 'She's doin' my ead in.'

William behaved atrociously at bedtime. He flounced around his bedroom like Little Lord Fauntleroy. I was forced to shout at him. My mother poked her head round the bedroom door and said, 'Don't be too hard on him, he's bound to be jealous of the new baby.'

I heard Rosie get up twice in the night to see to Ashby.

#### **Thursday October 2<sub>nd</sub>**

The household (and the neighbourhood) were woken at 6.15 this morning by what sounded like the klaxon used for summoning the Lowestoft lifeboat crew. It was Ashby. Rosie denied that she had handled the doll roughly, but I knew otherwise. I had heard her snarling at Ashby through the plasterboard wall that separates her bedroom from mine. The klaxon noise only stopped when I took the baby in my arms, and walked her up and down the landing. William stood at the door of his bedroom watching us; his face was suffused with jealous rage.

#### **Friday October 3<sub>rd</sub>**

Zippo rang. Pie Crust have been inundated with complaints from various Belgian gay organizations about this week's episode of Offally Good!.

I phoned Mr 20-per-cent-for-life and asked his voicemail for advice. He rang me back in person, but I was feeding Ashby so I had to ask him to call back. Unless you get the electronic bottle into her mouth at the precise angle, she refuses to 'feed'.

Brick advised me to go for what they call in the PR trade 'The Full Grovel'. He drafted the following press release.

Adrian Mole is sincerely sorry if he gave offence to any person of any nationality, colour, creed, or sexual orientation. He would like to point out that his best friend, Nigel, is gay.

Belgian Faggots are a traditional dish and the recipe is adapted from A Plain Cookery Book for the Working Classes by Charles Elme Francatelli, Chief Cook to Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

#### **BELGIAN FAGGOTS**

These may be prepared with sheep's pluck (intestines) or even with bullock's liver, but a pig's pluck would be the personal preference of most top chefs.

Chop up the heart, liver, lights and kidneys; season well and divide into balls the size of a small apple. Traditionally these should each be secured in shape with a piece of pig's caul, fastened with a wooden twig then baked for about half an hour in a brisk oven. If watching your cholesterol levels, pour half the grease from the faggots into the waste-bin before ensuing. If using a twig as a fastening device, check for splinters before inserting the faggot into the mouth. If you live in a flat and twigs are not easily available, wooden skewers can be purchased at most Greek supermarkets.

#### **Friday October 10<sub>th</sub>**

Rosie asked me to babysit Ashby today. She wanted to go to the multiplex to see Leonardo DiCaprio in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. I refused. None of the grandparents were available. They were having yet another of their interminable meetings about divorce, remarriage and finance. Rosie stayed at home and looked after her baby.

Nigel rang. He was furious at being 'outed' by me. He said his grandmother was terminally ill and that I had 'probably put the lid on her coffin'.

#### **Saturday October 11<sub>th</sub>**

I found Ashby in the back garden this morning. She was wet and cold and had a dent in her head. Rosie admitted throwing the baby out of the window last night. 'It's ruining my life,' she said. 'I'm gonna go mad if I don't get some sleep.'

#### *The afternoon*

I was in the garden hosing the New Dog down (don't ask, just don't ask, Diary), when Rosie came out to join me. She had her arms wrapped round herself in the way women do when they venture outside. She watched the hosing operation for a while and said, 'I've decided not to have it.'

I turned off the hose and the New Dog shook itself dry before escaping through a hole in the fence. I said, 'I think we'd better tell Mum, then.'

We both looked down the garden to the kitchen window where my mother was to be seen washing up. Ivan was standing behind her with a tea towel and they were both laughing. Only that morning they had received official permission from the Mongolian government to cycle across part of the Gobi desert.

Rosie said, 'No, don't let's.'

She has been told by the NHS that she can have the operation on Wednesday 15<sub>th</sub>. The day before the cyclists are due to start their world tour.

#### **Monday October 13<sub>th</sub>**

I couldn't bear to mention it before today, dear Diary, but Barry Kent's fifth novel, Blind, has been nominated for the 1997 Bookworm Prize. I pray with every fibre, every molecule, every strand of DNA in my body that Blind does not win. I forced myself to read Ivan's copy last night. It's about a working-class boy, Ron Angel, who is blinded in the trenches of the First World War, and goes on to have a sexual romance with his eye-surgeon,

Cedric Palmer-Tomkinson.

Blind is the favourite at Ladbrokes. Melvyn Bragg called it 'haunting', Hanif Kureishi said it was 'cool', Kathy Lette that it was a 'hoot'. I quote Dr E.E. G. Head, writing in the Literary Review: 'Kent's book is a sustained metaphorical tour de force.' I faxed Arthur Stoot a recipe for my book. I hope it will pacify him.

## **Tuesday October 14<sup>th</sup>**

The living-room floor is littered with lightweight camping equipment. Ivan has repacked his panniers five times. He has been ruthless with my mother and has forbidden her to take her hair-dryer or travelling iron.

I asked Ivan how they were getting to Dover.

He said, 'We're cycling, of course.'

My mother said, 'Couldn't we put the bikes in the guard's van and go by train?'

Ivan threw the tent poles on to the carpet and said, 'If you're having second thoughts, Pauline, now is the time to express them.'

My mother ran up to him and put her arms around his chest. She was wearing Lycra cycling shorts; her bum looked like two balloons fighting in a black bin-bag.

I left them to it and went to find Rosie. She was upstairs in her room. Ashby was dressed in a pair of William's old Baby Gap dungarees, and Rosie was cleaning the doll's ears with a cotton bud. I said, 'Rosie, I've got to send Ashby back today--the hire time is up.'

She put Ashby into the box herself and watched while I Sellotaped it shut. Then she asked me to reopen the box so that she could say goodbye properly. When the postmistress, Mrs Porlock, put the parcel on the scales at the post office, Ashby's mechanism started to cry. It was very disconcerting. The colour drained from Mrs Porlock's face. She insisted on me unpacking the parcel. I said, 'Do you seriously think that I would consider sending a live baby via Parcel Force?'

## **Wednesday October 15<sup>th</sup>**

It's my fault that the whole family knows that Rosie had a termination today. Before we set out in the car I phoned the clinic for directions. Apparently, as soon as we left the house my mother's insatiable curiosity prompted her to dial 1471; when she pressed Redial a receptionist answered at the clinic in Leamington spa. My mother badgered the woman for information but, to her fury, the receptionist refused to disclose any details 'pertaining to clients'.

My mobile was ringing constantly all the way to Leamington Spa. Rosie begged me not to answer and I respected her wishes.

I went inside with her and held her hand, but Rosie whispered, 'Aidy, you're showing me up.' I looked around and quailed at the rows of female faces, all waiting to be 'processed' and all staring at me with varying degrees of contempt. It wasn't a good place to be a man. I went outside, sat in the car and listened to Radio Four.

I then went for a walk in the grounds. There were some very expensive cars in the staff car park.

On the way back to Ashby-de-la-Zouch I pulled into the BP garage and bought Rosie a Magnum ice cream in an attempt to cheer her up.

We arrived home to a storm of accusations and recriminations. We opened the front door to hear my mother yelling, 'How can I set off on a world tour tomorrow when my little girl needs me?'

Ivan muttered, 'Pandora had a termination during her lunch break once. There was none of this bloody hysteria.'

My mother sobbed, hysterical, 'It's not hysteria, Ivan, it's called emotion--something you and your tight-arsed family know nothing about.' The decibel level rose when the New Dog joined in, barking loudly. The only person not making a noise was William. My heart stopped. In the chaos, no one had remembered to collect him from Kidsplay. I dashed to the car and drove to the nursery, exceeding the speed limit several times.

Mrs Parvez was sitting with her coat on by the entrance. William was asleep on her lap. The nursery was silent; all the little chairs had been turned upside down and placed on the child-sized tables. When she saw me rushing in she glared, then said, 'He cried himself to sleep. He thought you'd gone away, like his mum.'

## **Thursday October 16<sup>th</sup>**

I have made remarkable progress on my radio soap opera script.

### **THE ROYAL ARCHERS**

Agricultural bagpipe music plays.

QUEEN: Phil, was that the vet's van I saw driving away, with Eddie Grundy trapped amusingly between the back wheels?

PHIL (deep sigh): Yes, it was, and I'm afraid it's bad news Liz. The corgis have gone down with scab foot.

QUEEN: The whole herd?

PHIL: 'Fraid so. I'll have to shoot them all.

QUEEN: Then this is the end for us, Phil. We'll have to sell the farm.

SHULA: Hello, Mum, I've just dropped into your farmhouse kitchen to sigh and stand by the Aga, and tell you that I'm having an affair with my best friend's husband, the village doctor.

QUEEN: Does Andrew Morton know, Shula? (Pause) Does he? (Pause) Tell me, tell me now.

(Agricultural bagpipe music plays.)

**Friday October 17<sup>th</sup>**

Arthur Stoa rang me in person today to ask for clarification on the pigs' trotters recipe I faxed to him on Monday 13<sup>th</sup>. He said, 'Are the actual trotters—the bits that make contact with the shit in the pigsty—left on during cooking, or are they filleted out before, and thrown away?'

I informed him that the trotters were a vital ingredient of the dish, and that if he tried to edit them out I would remove my name from the book.

He said, 'Keep your hair on.' (Has he heard about my incipient baldness?) 'All I wanted was a yes or a no. As it stands your recipe is open to ambiguity.'

I didn't like the sound of him. I asked him if he came from Cardiff; I pride myself on my ability to spot a regional accent. He said, 'No,' he originated from South Africa, but conceded that he listened to a lot of Welsh-hill-farmer plays on the BBC World Service. He said, 'Do I take it that you will not be delivering your completed manuscript within the next few days?'

I said that I'd had a lot of family business occupying my mind lately.

He said, 'So you'll be missing your deadline, will you?'

I admitted that I was highly unlikely to be able to write the book in a week.

My new deadline is November 1<sup>st</sup>; Stoa is determined to have the tome in the bookshops in time for Christmas. He reckons he can 'turn a book round' in three weeks. He said, 'I did it with Diana at My Fingertips, by her personal manicurist, and I'll do it for Offally.'

If I work non-stop and cease all sleeping and eating and non-essential activities, I should be able to do it.

**Saturday October 18<sup>th</sup>**

Aaron Michelwaite has finished with Rosie. He told her that he was not ready for a 'long-term commit-ment' because he wants to study marine engineering at Plymouth University. I was outraged at the callous timing of his announcement and said so. Rosie is lolling about the house in her Knickerbox satin pyjamas. She refuses to get dressed because she doesn't intend going outside 'ever again'.

A recorded message at the Michelwaite residence informs callers that 'The family have gone to Devon with the caravan, to recharge our batteries.' This is a timely move on their part, because my father, subsequent to the news of Rosie's termination, is still threatening to punch Aaron's lights out. If he does, they'll need their batteries.

William came into my bed last night. Rosie woke him up crying for Ashby.

**Sunday October 19<sup>th</sup>**

A researcher from Kilroy rang this morning to ask me if I would appear on the show tomorrow morning to talk about the theme 'mixed marriages'. I pointed out to her that my African wife was divorcing me. 'Due to racial intolerance?' she asked, sounding excited.

'No,' I replied. 'Due to her intolerance of my personal habits.'

She said they were doing a show in November called, 'My Partner's Habits are Driving Me Mad'. Would I be interested?

I said, 'No.'

The researcher then asked to speak to my mother, saying she had read in the press about her colourful private life. I handed the phone over with more than a few misgivings. An hour later, when she came off the phone, I warned my mother about the dangers of TV exposure, but I could tell that my warning fell on deaf ears. She is talking of booking herself a six-week course of non-surgical face-lifts at the place where she gets her hair done.

**Monday October 20<sup>th</sup>**

I shall not be making any more entries in my diary until my book is finished. I must keep the deadline or risk losing all credibility. I have written to the Tortoise Society to say that I am unable to open their Christmas Fayre 'due to pressure of work'.

**Friday October 31<sup>st</sup>**

A horrible thing happened today. I was unable to control myself when William found and scoffed my last packet of Opal Fruits. I went berserk, shouted at him and told him that he would end up in prison if he carried on stealing other people's property. He fled in tears to my mother.

Later, Ivan came into my room, sat down on my bed in a caring way, and said, 'Adrian, do you think you may be sort of getting dependent on Opal Fruits?'

I pushed his hairy wrist off my shoulder, drove to the cash-and-carry warehouse and bought a multi-pack of OFs. I have hidden them under my bed. I have fitted a bolt to my door. I have not finished or even started the book, despite sitting at my desk for sixteen hours a day.

FAX MESSAGE

To: Boston Goldperson—Brick Eagleburger Associates

From: Adrian Mole

Date: 31.10.97

Dear Boston,

First may I say how much I admire your decision to change your surname from Goldman to Goldperson. In these times when so many women are renouncing their feminist principles, it is heartening to know that you still carry the flame.

Now for the bad news. It has become apparent to me that I will be unable to meet my latest deadline of November 1<sup>st</sup> for the delivery of Offally Good!--The Book!. Family matters have occupied my time and attention to the detriment of my creative impulse.

In your role as agent's assistant will you please break the news to Arthur Stoat of Stoat Books Ltd. I will, of course, return my advance of PS250, though I will need to give one month's notice to my bank or risk losing the accumulated interest. I hope to see you when I am next in London. I am slightly concerned that Birdwatching and The White Van remain unsold despite their obvious mass-market appeal.

Yours, A. Mole

## Saturday November 1<sup>st</sup>

### FAX MESSAGE

From:

Boston Goldperson

To:

Adrian Mole

Listen, kiddo, The f--offal book has been sold already. W.H. Smith have made it their Book of the Week). The cover has been sent to The Bookseller] Stoat Books have had advance orders for 25,000 copies in hardback! This book is a f--bestseller! It has to be written! Stoat is threatening to sue this agency for every cent we have if you don't deliver. So write the mother!

Boston

## Sunday November 2<sup>nd</sup>

William seems to have forgiven me for the Opal Fruits incident, though my mother is unrelenting and has not laid a place at the table for me for three days.

Ivan is negotiating with Tania over his Tyrolean-style garden shed. He wants to take it down and reassemble it here, in the back garden of Wisteria Walk. I objected, saying that it would take up nearly all of the lawn. 'Where will William play?' I asked my mother.

'In your garden?' she said.

'I haven't got a garden,' I pointed out.

'Then get a garden,' she said.

I think this is a hint that she wants me and William to move out.

## Monday November 3<sup>rd</sup>

I went to see my father and Tania today. I took William with me. My father was on the back lawn digging a hole for Tania's Koi carp pool. A black Labrador puppy called Henry was watching him. 'Our baby,' said Tania.

I asked if we could move into the Tyrolean shed until I found something permanent. Neither of them looked very keen. Unfortunately, at that moment, William had a spectacular tantrum because I refused to sing the Teletubbies song, there and then. After five minutes of watching him scream, drum his heels and roll around on the grass, Tania said, 'Should we call an ambulance?'

My father said, 'No, Adrian was just the same when he was three. You had to do 'Incy Wincy Spider' fifty times a day.'

Eventually Tania said, 'I don't think it would work out, Adrian, not with the dog and the carp. Your father and I have a domestic routine that suits us and, anyway, we're not insured for small children.'

This was patently ridiculous, but I let it pass. William, now recovered from his tantrum, asked for Coco Pops. My father, who used to eat three bowls a day himself, said, 'Coco Pops are full of additives and E numbers, William. How about a nice glass of carrot juice?'

We went into the kitchen where my father demon-strated the juicer machine to an indifferent William. Henry, however, watched my father's every move with rapt attention.

Tania asked me how the book was progressing.

Perhaps if I stay awake for three days and nights on the trot I will be able to write it. Noel Coward wrote Private Lives over a long weekend with the aid of stimulants. I rang Nigel for help on how to track down some Pro-plus, but he was out at his grandma's funeral, Started on the introduction at midnight, when the household was relatively quiet.

Hello Offal lovers,

Man has lived on offal since time began: petrified offal has been found in ancient caves in France, proving that offal was once the staple diet of French cavemen. This legacy can still be seen today in the world-famous French cuisine, to which flock gourmets from throughout the world.

There is something about the last sentence that is not quite right. The syntax? The grammar? After spending an hour staring down at it, I went to bed, exhausted.

## Wednesday November 5<sup>th</sup>

Ivan has put a veto on a bonfire or fireworks in the garden, saying, 'They're primitive, barbaric and dangerous. It's time that Guy Fawkes Night was abolished.' The government seem to agree with him. The population of Britain are being urged to attend organized events with paramedics in attendance. I bought William some sparklers and he waved them about a bit on the patio. The New Dog watched through the patio doors. Worked on the introduction until 3 a.m.

The gourmets today still flock from their homes throughout the world to partake of the legacy which is offal!

It's still not quite right.

Thursday November 6<sup>th</sup>

William had a mega-tantrum in Clarks. He wanted a pair of mini Doc Martens in red patent leather with twelve lace-holes. I wanted him to have a pair of black-leather Velcro-fastening 'school shoes'. He sank on to Clark's carpet and screamed. At the manager's request, I dragged him out of the shop. I ended up buying him some Bugs Bunny slip-on plimsolls from Woolworths. They are totally unsuitable for winter, but if he wears thick socks with them his feet should be warm enough.

When we got home my mother said, 'I thought you went out to buy winter shoes. He'll catch his death in those.' She looked down at the plimsolls disdainfully. I felt my parental confidence seep out of the house.

Friday November 7<sup>th</sup>

I now have no income. I am eating into my capital. Rang the bank call centre in a panic, but forgot code word. I told the woman on the line that it was the name of a seaside resort on the east coast, but she simply repeated, 'I am afraid I must ask you for the fifth letter of your password, sir.'

I pleaded with her for my balance, but to no avail.

Have our financial services been colonized by extraterrestrials? Is it all a plot to send us mad and take over the world? I am not given to paranoid fancies normally, dear Diary, but I confide in you that I am seriously thinking of withdrawing all my money and placing it in a box under my bed. I've worked hard for that money and no Martian is going to get its slimy green hands (tentacles?) on it.

Sent the introduction and one further offal recipe to Arthur Stoa**t**. A sense of achievement.

Saturday November 8<sup>th</sup>

What was I thinking of, dear Diary? I wouldn't dream of keeping my money under my bed. I shall hide it in several faux baked-bean tins, and keep them on the top shelf of the pantry.

Sunday November 9<sup>th</sup>

*Poppy Day*

I dropped a pound coin in a collecting tin by mistake today. I'd meant to give 20<sup>p</sup>. The old man shaking the tin was quite rude. He almost slammed the 80<sup>p</sup> change into my hand.

Monday November 10<sup>th</sup>

Brick rang at 3 p.m., he said he'd had a fax from Arthur Stoa**t**.

FAX MESSAGE

To:  
Mr Brick Eagleburger

From:  
Arthur Stoa**t**

Date:  
10.11.97

Dear Mr Eagleburger,

Your client Mr Adrian Mole has reneged on his agreement with Stoa**t** Books Ltd, to deliver the completed manuscript of Off ally Good!--The Book! by 1<sup>st</sup> November.

I seriously doubt that Mr Mole is capable of writing this book and suggest that you and Mr Mole find a ghost-writer with the ability to complete the task. He will, of course, be expected to meet any expenses incurred.

Given the somewhat 'hand-to-mouth' nature of Stoa**t** Books' finances and the fact that we have missed a crucial opportunity to capitalize on the Christmas market, Mr Mole's failure to deliver means that the staff of Stoa**t** Books will not now be enjoying their end-of-year bonus. This is especially disappointing as research conducted by Stoa**t** Books Ltd has shown that one in ten male student viewers intended buying the book for their mother or stepmother.

I have moved the delivery date to the third week of December and hope to publish on January 14<sup>th</sup> to coincide with the first transmission of Ping with Singh.

Yours sincerely,

A.N. Stoa**t**  
Managing Director--Stoa**t** Books Ltd

What is this Ping with Singh? It's the first I've heard of it.

Tuesday November 11<sup>th</sup>

I was in Safeway for the one-minute silence. The cash registers were turned off. An assistant on the cheese counter giggled nervously after thirty seconds.

Apparently Dev Singh has written a book on microwave cookery. Serialization rights have been bought by Good Housekeeping and there is already talk of a stage adaptation to be directed by Ned Sherrin.

### **Wednesday November 12<sup>th</sup>**

Ivan asked me in the kitchen this morning to get my own phone/fax line installed. He said that he is starting up a new business as a website designer and needs to use his line exclusively. I pointed out to him that the line did in fact belong to my mother, who was my blood relation; therefore I had more authorization over the line than he did.

He spluttered, 'That's patent nonsense. Your mother and I are life partners, and what's more / paid the last bloody phone bill, and fitted a new fax roll.'

When I reminded him that I paid PS40 a week to live in this house he said, 'We heavily subsidize you and William, who's constantly leaving the lights on and wasting food.'

Rosie came in, looking upset. She wiped the bread-knife on the corner of her pyjama jacket and said to Ivan, 'If you don't like it here, why don't you go home to your wife?'

Ivan said, 'I happen to be in love with your mother, and she happens to be in love with me, check?'

He went outside to sort his recycling bags before the dustbin men came. Rosie watched him from the window as she waited for her toast to cook. She said, 'Which do you hate most about him? His Birken-stocks, his hairy wrists, or the cap he wears when it rains?'

I said, 'The way he says, 'Enjoy,' before every meal.'

### **Thursday November 13<sup>th</sup>**

After taking William to school I went to the Housefinder centre and informed them that I urgently required a three-bedroomed detached house with a garden to rent for no more than PS60 per week. I stipulated that it must be in a superior area where there were no rough people. It must have trees and the garden should face south. The person behind the desk, a moustachioed youth wearing a too-big suit, said, 'We don't cover the Highlands of Scotland.' I gave him my card, but as I was passing the window I saw him drop it into the wastebin.

When I picked William up from Kidsplay Ltd, he said, 'Your breath smells like poo, Dad.'

This was only half an hour after I had rigorously brushed my teeth. For how long has my breath smelled like poo?

I mobiled for an appointment and drove to the surgery, where Mr Chang the dentist broke the news to me that I have got a gum disease called pyorrhoea. Unless I have PS1,000 worth of treatment immediately I could be toothless in a year.

Mr Chang used to be NHS but he no longer caters for the poor: 'They bring tooth decay on themselves,' he said. 'They are always eating the confectionery.' So, Opal Fruits have brought me to this.

Mrs Wellingborough, Chang's receptionist, whispered to me that it might be worth getting a second opinion. Apparently Chang is up in front of the dentists' self-regulatory council next week for overcharging a woman for a clean and polish. Mrs Wellingborough recommended Jeffrey Atkins. 'He's the crime de la creme,' she said. I am seeing Atkins next Tuesday.

Rosie has found a fiendish method of causing Ivan pain. During a discussion at the dinner table about our lack of outings as children, Rosie said to my mother, 'You never took us nowhere.' She saw Ivan wince and whisper, 'Double negative,' to himself.

She has been torturing him grammatically ever since.

### **Saturday November 15<sup>th</sup>**

I took William to Twycross Zoo today. It was a terrible mistake. When he saw that the lions were in cages, he wept and pleaded, 'Let them out, Dad, please, let them out.' He seemed to be under the impression that they were cartoon creatures, rather than live beasts capable of tearing his head from his shoulders.

### **Sunday November 16<sup>th</sup>**

It has been revealed that a millionaire with a fringe and aviator glasses--Bernie Ecclestone--has donated PS1,000,000 to the Labour Party's funds. The tiny formula One boss is anxious to keep tobacco sponsorship for his noisy sport. Tony Blair is baffled and hurt by public criticism and charges of corruption. 'I'm a pretty straight kinda guy,' he said. I have been pondering this statement. Break the sentence down and much is possibly revealed.

Bowels--blocked

Mood--black

Prospects--hopeless

Breath--foul

### **Monday November 17<sup>th</sup>**

People have been flinching away from me all day. My gums have turned me into a social pariah.

### **Tuesday November 18<sup>th</sup>**

Jeffrey Atkins was shocked at the shoddy state of my mouth and Chang's fillings. He examined me and said that my bad breath is the result of 'impacted food in one tooth only'.

As he probed my mouth he held forth on the state of the arts in Leicester. It was, of course, a one-sided conversation though I hope my eye-rolling was eloquent). I stumbled into the reception area where I asked Hazel the receptionist if it was possible to give Jeffrey a tip. She said, no, dental etiquette forbids tipping.

## Friday November 21<sup>st</sup>

Michael Hutchence of INXS is dead, choked by his own belt, which was tied to a hotel doorknob. My mother said she couldn't understand why men choke themselves in order to achieve heightened sexual satisfaction. She said, 'He made love to some of the most beautiful women in the world, so why would he want to hang off a door?'

Ivan said, 'Because it's less complicated than having a relationship with a woman. One doesn't have to tell a door twenty times a day that one loves it.'

Well! Well! Well! Is Ivan tiring of my mother's emotional neediness?

## Saturday November 22<sup>nd</sup>

Pandora graced Wisteria Walk with her presence after her surgery at the health centre. She was tired and irritable and complained about the long hours she was working. She hates her constituents. Their incessant complaints about council-house transfers and on-in-the-day street lights are driving her crazy. She said, 'If it wasn't for Mandy and our Grand Plan I would go back to Oxford.'

Naturally I asked her what the 'Grand Plan' was. She said, 'I'm to be the first woman Prime Minister in Britain.'

I said, 'And Mrs Thatcher? She never existed?'

'Mrs Thatcher is a man in drag, everybody knows that,' she said contemptuously.

I reeled back at this revelation. 'What's her/his real name?' I asked, agog.

'Leonard Roberts,' she said. 'His parents disliked boys, so he was rechristened Margaret by a crooked vicar in Grantham and re-registered in the next district by a registrar who forged a new birth certificate. Leonard was dressed like a girl and treated like a girl.'

'And his genitalia?' I questioned.

'Abnormally small,' she said.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask. Did Denis know his wife was really a man?

And how did Thatcher give birth to the twins, Carole and Mark? I told Pandora about my 'William Hague is Thatcher love-child theory'. She said, 'No, William Hague is the result of a cloning experiment conducted in the sixties. The sperm was taken from Churchill and the eggs were donated by Thora Hird.'

She then went into the kitchen to have a 'girly' talk with Rosie and my mother. They laughed solidly more or less for an hour and a half, only stopping when I went in to complain about the cigarette smoke pouring out from under the door.

## Sunday November 23<sup>rd</sup>

To The Lawns to set fire to William's Christmas list in their open fireplace. This method of sending the list to Santa is a Mole tradition that I am determined to keep up. I won't easily forgive my parents for boarding up our own fireplace and putting a storage heater in the gap between the plywood and the fender. William wants:

1. Po
2. Tinky Winky
3. Laa-Laa
4. Dipsy
5. And the other one whose name always escapes me.

My father said, 'You do realize, don't you, that there's none to be had?' He pronounced the aitch in 'had'. He pronounced 'that' as thet. He was wearing Timberland deck-shoes, and stroking Henry's glossy head. He is Eliza Doolittle to Tania's Henry Higgins.

## Monday November 24<sup>th</sup>

Took the New Dog to the vet's to get its nails cut. It keeps skidding across the kitchen lino like Torville or Dean, whichever is the hairiest.

An envelope containing my fan mail came today. A man in Wolverhampton, Edwin Log, wrote to tell me that he has eaten offal every day of his life for forty-five years and 'enjoys perfect health'. A woman in Battersea said I was encouraging the 'mass murder of the innocents'. She said she would like to see me hung by my intestines from Blackfriars Bridge.

## Tuesday November 25<sup>th</sup>

William asked me why I don't go to work like other daddies do'.

I told him that I am a published author and a TV presenter--a personality in fact. I pointed to the five fan letters on my desk/dressing-table and said, 'People out there love me.'

William went to the window and looked down on the street. 'There's nobody out there,' he said.

## Thursday November 27<sup>th</sup>

3.30 a.m. I am at William's hospital bedside. He is being kept in overnight for observation after placing a coffee bean in his left ear 'to see if it would rattle'.

It has been removed, but they had to give him a general anaesthetic. It has been the most harrowing night of my life, it took me, my mother and two nurses to hold him down while a tiny woman doctor, called Surinder, examined his ear with an illuminated probe. The casualty department at the

Leicester Royal Infirmary was rented with his screams. When the decision was made to operate I turned on my mother in my anguish saying, 'I hold Ivan Braithwaite responsible. It was he who introduced the coffee bean to Wisteria Walk.'

She didn't respond in the way I expected. Instead she said, 'I hear what you're saying, I hear your anger.'

I was in the recovery room with William when he came round from the operation. He cried for my mother. A nurse saw that I was upset by this and said, 'He doesn't know what he's saying.' But I think he did know. I now realize that I'm not the most important person in his life, as he is in mine.

## Friday November 28<sub>th</sub>

William is a lovely boy--especially when slightly sedated by prescription drugs. I am writing this in the hospital restaurant--Nightingales. I am alone in the seventy-seat non-smoking section. Whereas the small smoking section is crammed full of doctors and nurses. Why don't they see the light and give up? Had an All-Day Breakfast, was annoyed when they forgot my black pudding. Went to counter to complain, was told it was either mushrooms or black pudding. I offered to pay extra for the black pudding, but was told the computerized till wouldn't allow this. Raised voice to fat girl with pretty face behind counter.

She said, 'It's not my fault.'

I said, 'Nobody accepts responsibility for anything any more. Nobody apologizes, nobody resigns.'

She looked mystified.

Went back to non-smoking section to find smokers goggling and All-Day Breakfast congealed on the plate.

3 a.m. Still here, at bedside. Nurses in love with William. He has told them that he is having all four Teletubbies for Christmas. A very nice staff nurse called Lucy came up to me and said, 'If you've got a source, I'm desperate for a Po.'

I confessed that I had no Teletubby 'insider knowledge'. This is quite worrying: perhaps I should start a search.

I asked why William had not been discharged yet. Staff Nurse Lucy (blonde, slim, fair hairy arms, breasts 5/10) said, 'Dr Fong is slightly concerned about the bruising on his lower back.' I explained that William had fallen off the arm of the sofa while pretending to take a corner as Jeremy Clarkson. Lucy, who has a three-year-old daughter, said, 'They're mad at that age, aren't they?' and laughed. However, Dr Fong had never heard of Jeremy Clarkson, and obviously didn't believe my explanation.

## Saturday November 29<sub>th</sub>

### *Royal Infirmary--Nightingales*

Still here. William's body and mind are under investigation. I have pleaded with him to stop saying, 'No, Dad, no,' etc., but he has turned into a fiend. I left him surrounded by his adoring grandparents and step-grandparents, who are showering him with toys and sweets and pop-up books. No wonder he doesn't want to come out.

Lucy is a single parent like me. Her daughter is called Lucinda. Staff Nurse Lucy said that Lucinda can also be a fiend, and once shouted, 'Are you going to lock me in the cupboard when we get home, Mummy?' in the queue at Homebase. Lucy's relationship with a policeman has just broken up because of his deception when on a late shift. She said, 'I really enjoy talking to you, Mr Mole, or can I call you Adrian?'

Ten reasons why I am not attracted enough to Staff Nurse Lucy to ask her out.

1. Hairy arms--blonde hairs but far too many of them.
2. Has seen Sir Cliff Richard in Wuthering Heights, eleven times.
3. Thought Tolstoy wrote Love in a Cold Climate.
4. Lucinda.
5. Prefers normal to lemon Jif.
6. Thinks it's exciting that Chris Evans has bought a radio station from Richard Branson for eight million pounds. She thinks they are 'two fun guys'.
7. Likes Princess Anne because she is 'hard-working'.
8. Failed the Auberger Waugh test.
9. Unwittingly let on that she has a neon sign in her lounge window, which flashes 'Merry Yuletide' every three seconds.
10. Claims never to have even heard of the Independent, let alone read it.

My father was there. He said, sounding like his old self, 'If you don't shut your trap, lad, I'll shut the bleeder for you.'

William shut his trap and allowed me to dress him in his outdoor clothes. He was escorted out of the hospital by his entourage, consisting of me, Rosie, my father, my mother, Ivan and Tania.

He held my hand in the car and refused to let it go. It was a bit awkward changing gear, but I didn't mind.

## Monday December 1<sub>st</sub>

Phoned bank successfully! I have got PS7,961.54 in a high-interest account. I know it's correct because a robot called Jade told me.

My mother has written a poem called, 'A Weeping Womb'. She is sending it to the Daily Express, to a bloke called Harry Eyres. I told her that it stood no chance of being published. Harsh, I know, but I can't bear her to be disappointed.

## Sunday November 30<sub>th</sub>

Dr Fong has allowed William to go home, even though William shouted, 'Please, Dad, please, I want to stay with Staff Nurse Lucy.'

The Weeping Womb by Pauline Mole Hush! Is that weeping? Listen awhile--'Tis something within me--Not distant (a mile) Quiet! Is that sobbing?



From whence does it come? My pelvis is throbbing Quite near to my bum, Hark to the crying! Pay heed to the pain My womb--it is dying! Ne'er fertile again!

She slipped this under my door last night.

When I saw her at breakfast I made no reference to it. What could I possibly say? Ivan is behind all this: he believes that 'Everybody has a talent, it's just that our society cannot encompass...' etc., etc., etc., blah, blah, blah.

## **Tuesday December 2<sub>nd</sub>**

Jesus Christ almighty! God save me from this biblical-like curse which has fallen on me!

A letter from Sharon Bott, with whom I once had a frenzied sexual relationship.

Dear Aidy,

This must come as a bit of a downer. I belong in the past, I know, but it weren't me who wanted to send this letter. It is my son Glenn. He is a big lad of 12 now and he wants to know who his father is. And the thing is, Aidy, I don't know. As you found out I was having relations with you and Barry Kent at the same time. I have written to Barry the same as you. Glenn says that you and Barry should take a DNA test to find out who is his dad. He is a good lad at home, never no trouble. I don't know why the teachers are against him at school. I'm sorry to bother you with this only I had to do it for Glenn. Can you give me a ring? I work shifts at Parker's Poultry, but I'm home at ten. Me and Glenn have seen you on Cable. You were quite good. Did you see that Barry has won a prize for writing a book about a blind man? It was in the Mercury last night.

Yours faithfully,

Sharon L. Bott

No way! No way! No way is she forcing me to accept Glenn 'The Teachers Are Against Him' Bott as my son. I've got one son. Another is surplus to requirements.

I showed the letter to Rosie, who said, 'I know Glenn Bott. He's a psycho, but he has got your nose. He helps out on a stall at Leicester market on Fridays after school. The one opposite Walker's, the pork butcher's.'

I phoned the Bott house. A little kid told me that 'Mam's gone to work.'

## **Wednesday December 3<sub>rd</sub>**

William returned to Kidsplay today. He was greeted like a returning hero by the other children, though the teachers were distinctly cool. There have been several copy-cat incidents of children placing foreign objects in their ears (lentils, beads). Mrs Parvez is away with a stress-related illness.

Phoned Sharon late tonight. It was hard to concentrate due to the old sexual frisson and the background noise of television and yelling of children. It was an awkward conversation. I kept getting flashbacks of the two of us engaging in sexual intercourse on the pink velour sofa in my parents' house on Thursday nights while they were out having marriage guidance.

I told Sharon that I was unlikely to be Glenn's father due to an abnormally low sperm count, but she asked if I would take the test 'for Glenn'. What could I say but yes? She put the phone down, saying, 'Doggie's just come in.'

## **Thursday December 4<sub>th</sub>**

At four o'clock I drove to Leicester, parked in the Shires car park and walked through the Christmas shoppers to the market place. I stood outside Walker's, the pork butcher's, and watched the fruit stall opposite.

It didn't come as a complete shock to find that Glenn is the same boy who's been hanging about outside our house for the last few months. He's tall for his age, and if he had a decent haircut and stopped glowering he'd be quite a handsome lad. He was dressed as though he lived on the streets of Hell's Kitchen, New York, in ludicrously baggy trousers and a Puffa jacket. When he came round to the front, to tidy the fruit, I saw that he was wearing trainers the size and shape of small bulldozers.

The owner of the stall, a weasel-faced man, with earrings and a grey ponytail, seemed content to let Glenn do most of the work, apart from handling the money. I presumed this was Doggie, apparently Sharon's live-in partner.

As I watched Glenn I tried to get in touch with my emotions. What exactly did I feel?

Diary, I felt nothing.

I could tell even from a distance that the boy didn't have a single strand of intellectual DNA in his body.

Sharon lives on the dreaded Thatcher Estate. I parked outside 19 Geoffrey Howe Road and decided to activate the car alarm and fit the steering lock on the Montego. The battered wooden gate scraped on the concrete path as I pushed it open. There was a picture of a large Devil Dog saying, 'Go Ahead, Make My Day,' propped against the front-room window.

Sharon opened the door before I could knock. She looked like Moby Dick with a perm. I could barely discern the Sharon I once knew from the flesh mountain she had become. The cigarette between her podgy fingers looked tiny, like the ones made of confectionery I used to 'smoke' as a boy.

She led me into the front room where two shaven-headed little boys were sitting on a sofa, watching a video. The TV screen showed a maniac with a hedge-trimmer pursuing a girl with large breasts down the steps of a dark cellar. The smallest boy picked up a cushion and hid his face behind it.

I was not introduced to them and, after a swift glance at me, they turned their attention back to the screen. Sharon indicated that I was to sit in one of the two matching armchairs. The carpet felt sticky beneath my feet.

She stubbed out her cigarette in a saucer. It was inconceivable to me that I had ever had carnal knowledge of this woman. A loud atonal

aphoned me. I was talking to Sharon if we could talk in the kitchen, though once we'd arrived there, I wished we'd stayed where we were.

I've not 'ad time to wash up yet,' she said, looking around at the spectacular chaos.

I looked through the grimy window into the garden. A sodden mattress lay in the long grass. Glenn's bike was out there, padlocked to the concrete post of the washing-line. The spillage of light from the kitchen window showed that the bike was well maintained: the chrome trims and the spokes sparkled. I was pleased to see that the boy had fitted a padlock and chain to one wheel, and a cycle lock to the other.

Sharon handed me a piece of paper, which told me where and when to go for a blood test: 10.30 Monday December 8<sup>th</sup> at the clinic in Prosper Road. 'Barry's solicitor 'as arranged it all,' she said. She kept glancing nervously at the narrow, gold-coloured watch which lay between the folds of fat around her wrist.

I said, 'Has Glenn shown any preference as to who his natural father is?'

Sharon was rinsing a mug under the cold tap. 'He's not,' she said. 'But it might be better for me if it's Barry, maintenance wise.'

'And certainly better for me, if it's Barry, maintenance wise,' I said.

She offered me tea, but I declined. She told me that I would receive a copy of the results from a laboratory, and then we could 'take it from there'.

When I got home I asked my mother if she could locate any photographs of me at the age of twelve. She sorted through a few shoeboxes and brought out a school photo. On the back was written 'Adrian, aged eleven and a half in my father's anal handwriting. When I turned it over I was shocked to see a picture of Glenn Bott looking up at me. My mother wanted to know why I wanted a photograph of myself at that age. I could not answer her.

### **Sunday December 7<sup>th</sup>**

Staff Nurse Lucy rang to say that I'd left A.N. Wilson's biography of Tolstoy in William's bedside locker. She was passing our house; she lives in Clematis Close—should she drop it in? I said I didn't think it would squeeze through the letterbox. 'If Tolstoy had died at thirty-five you might have stood a chance,' I joked. She asked how old Tolstoy was when he died. 'In his nineties,' I said. I waited for her to say that she was busy on the ward, but she seemed to have plenty of time to talk. She said that after work she would walk round to Wisteria Walk with Lucinda. I begged her not to. I wanted to sit and read the Observer in peace—but she insisted.

Rosie and my mother got themselves into a lather of excitement, and Ivan went upstairs and came down in a shirt and toning tie. I told them all not to waste so much nervous energy. I am not in the least attracted to Staff Nurse Lucy.

I tried to keep her and Lucinda on the doorstep, but William pulled Lucinda inside to play with his farmyard, which is stocked with dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals, so I reluctantly showed Staff Nurse Lucy into the kitchen, where I found a Sainsbury's chocolate gateau thawing in her honour. In the subsequent conversation it emerged that her favourite poet is Barry Kent, her favourite singer Liam Gallagher. I had to get up and leave the table. She stayed two long hours. She pronounced the gateau 'yummy'. Just before she left, she went upstairs with me and my mother to watch William and Lucinda putting the dinosaurs to bed in the farmhouse.

'Ah, bless,' said Lucy. 'They get on so well, don't they?'

I looked at my mother's face and saw that, in her mind's eye, she had me and William installed in Clematis Close with Lucy and Lucinda. When they'd gone I disabused her of this idea, citing the hairy blonde wrists. My mother said, 'A tube of Nair would sort that problem out.'

An air of heavy disappointment hangs over the house.

As I was putting him to bed William asked when Lucinda was coming to play again.

I replied, 'Never.'

### **Monday December 8<sup>th</sup>**

I needn't have changed my underwear. I wasn't asked to remove my clothes, just roll my sleeve up. I felt rather weak when I spotted the syringe and I looked away while a fat bloke in a white coat took my blood. To distract myself I muttered the words of the Lord's Prayer. The blood-taker said, 'Pardon?'

I opened my eyes and saw him syringing my dark red blood into a little plastic bottle. 'I didn't speak,' I said.

'You did,' he said. 'You said, 'Amen.' Have you, too, found the Lord?'

As I was fastening my cuff, he took a leaflet from the drawer in his desk and placed it in front of me. He belongs to a sect called Godhead. They believe that the world is going to end a second after the stroke of midnight on January 1<sup>st</sup> in the year 2000. I put my coat on and stood by the door, but he wouldn't let me go until he'd explained that the Dome at Greenwich was to be the site of 'Satan's Last Stand'. According to him, Mr Peter Mandelson is the Prince of Devils, and the entire Cabinet is made up of demons. He said that Jack Cunningham has cloven hoofs and has to have his shoes made bespoke. I thanked him for the information and he thanked me for listening, saying, 'A lot of people think we're cranks.'

I was glad when he handed me my blood and asked me to give it to the clinic receptionist, ready for collection. I didn't like the thought of him tinkering with it after I'd gone.

When I got home my mother reported gleefully that Arthur Stoot had rung, demanding the name and telephone number of my ghost-writer. She said, 'I don't understand why you can't write the bloody thing yourself. It's only a few recipes. It wouldn't take you more than a week if you got stuck in.'

I said, 'You non-writers don't understand. There's the question of tone and tense and clarity. And which word to put in front of another, and when to use a semicolon and how to know when only a colon will do!'

The DNA results will be sent to me by registered letter on Friday. Barry Kent has paid for the express service.

### **Tuesday December 9<sup>th</sup>**

I went to Toys 'R' Us this afternoon in my thankless quest for a Teletubby. I asked a boy (who inexplicably wore a badge saying 'Gary Heppenstall, Assistant Manager') where the Teletubbies were to be found. He smirked and said, 'In China, sir, where they make 'em.' He said they'd had a few La-Las on Monday, but they'd gone within minutes. I asked him why they couldn't manufacture the Teletubbies in this country. He smiled pityingly at me and said, 'They'll work all week for a bowl of rice in China, sir. We can't compete.'

Trawled to town for Teletubbies. There are none to be had. I am now on the waiting list of seven shops and have my mobile everywhere with me at all times should a consignment arrive in the middle of the night. Nigel is also on the case.

2 *a.m.* Is there no end to the suffering of Paula Yates? The latest tragedy to befall her is that DNA testing has proved she is the daughter of the dead right-wing aviationist and sinister quizmaster Hughie Green. Personally, I curse the day DNA was discovered. Weren't we all happier in our ignorance?

In the evening Ivan went round to The Lawns to start dismantling his hardware and software. He is going to set up a home office in an alcove in our dining room.

Tania is insisting on keeping the chalet as part of the divorce settlement. While he was out we decorated the house with paper chains and balloons, and I held the ladder while my mother climbed into the loft to retrieve the Christmas tree and the box of decorations. The fairy-lights fused after only half an hour but, as I said to my mother, 'It is traditional in our culture.'

### **Wednesday December 10<sup>th</sup>**

There's been a big row about the Christmas tree. Ivan said, 'I've got to be frank with you, Paulie, I think it's far too early to put a tree up and I can't bear that kitsch stuff you've thrown on it. The effect is nauseating.'

My mother rounded on him with a knife in her hand (she was peeling potatoes at the sink), and said, 'Who the hell do you think you are? Sir Terence bleeding Conran?'

He said, 'Pauline, please don't swear, it demeans you.'

She said, 'Then don't criticize my baubles, Ivan.'

The tree row led to the who-will-be-where-and-with-whom-at-Christmas row. I took charge and asked each person what their ideal Christmas would be. My mother said, 'Ideally, I want to watch William open his presents on Christmas morning and then go abroad, somewhere hot, with Ivan.'

Ivan said ideally he wanted to invite his ninety-two-year-old mother, who is in a residential home in Rutland, to spend Christmas week at Wisteria Walk. 'It could be her last Christmas,' he said.

Rosie said, 'Ideally I want to stay in bed eating tortilla chips all day and watch my Christmas present: a new portable colour television.'

William said he didn't care what he did, so long as he did it with a full set of Teletubbies.

I phoned my father to canvass his opinion. He said, 'Ideally we'd like to watch William open his presents with us at The Lawns on Christmas morning and then spend the rest of the day quietly with Henry.' He said that they had received a press release from Pandora which said that she would be visiting Leicester Royal Infirmary on Christmas Day and was planning to carve a turkey for the tragic youngsters on the children's ward.

The Sugdens, my mother's parents, said they would ideally like to drive up from Norfolk on Christmas morning and spend 'a quiet two days at Wisteria Walk, eating and drinking in moderation'.

I said, 'In an ideal world I would like to take William to a hotel with a log fire for the duration.'

Ivan, who had been inputting all the 'ideal Christ-mases' on his computer, looked up from the screen and said, 'The computations are beyond it.' However, he did find a week self-catering in Tenerife, which left on December 24<sup>th</sup> from Stansted at 3 a.m. My mother asked me if I was prepared to break with Mole tradition and let William open his presents on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning.

I said, 'No.'

### **Thursday December 11<sup>th</sup>**

My mother sent me round to The Lawns to cut some greenery for the holly wreath she is making as per the instructions in the Christmas supplement of Good Housekeeping. I asked Tania if I could borrow some gardening gloves and secateurs, but she said, 'I'm afraid I can't have a non-gardener just slashing at my conifers and evergreens willy-nilly.'

My father looked up sheepishly from the marble slab where he was cutting out gingerbread men, eventually to be varnished and hung on the tree that Tania had so sensibly reserved at a specialist nursery.

I said, 'I'll go elsewhere for my greenery, then.'

My father said, 'Don't go, son...'

But Tania said, 'Don't you see, George? This is just Pauline's way of tormenting me.'

I left them to it and headed for Sainsbury's car park, where I used my Swiss Army knife and filled two carrier-bags with their green prickly stuff.

While I was out my mother had made the skeleton of a wreath by twisting three coat-hangers together. We managed to fashion the green stuff and holly into a roundish shape and hung it all on the door with a red ribbon. Ivan said it had an 'anarchic spirit' to it. I could see my mother was unsure whether this was a compliment or not.

### **Friday December 12<sup>th</sup>**

I was woken at dawn this morning by an urgent ringing on the doorbell. Thinking it to be the registered letter, I stumbled downstairs dressed only in my boxers, to find the milkman on the doorstep clutching a handkerchief to his left eye. Two broken bottles of milk lay on the doorstep. 'I've been poked in the bleddy eye by a piece off--holly,' he said.

As we watched, a piece of recalcitrant holly fell from the wreath and landed among the shards of glass in a little white lake. I had no choice but to give him a lift to Eye Casualty at the Royal Infirmary in Leicester. When I got home I found my mother anxiously reading the household-insurance policy. There was nothing in it about cover for third-party holly-wreath accidents. She has cancelled the milk 'until further notice' and removed the wreath from the front door.

I waited for the postman with a thumping heart and a dry mouth, praying that Barry Kent would be the one to stump up the maintenance, but the only thing that came was a Christmas letter from George 'n' Tania circulated to their 'many friends and family members around the world'.

Dear Loved Ones,

1997 has been a turbulent year for us both. Most of you have been informed about the breakdown of Tania and Ivan's marriage, due to his love affair with Pauline, George's wife. For those of you who are finding out for the first time, phew! Sorry! Take a breather!

Let's go back to the start of the year, shall we?

January saw Ivan and Tania in Norwich where they attended a get-together of the Redundant Dairy Workers Association. Ivan enjoyed seeing some of his old colleagues and catching up on the news.

In February Tania started a night-school course in Citroen car maintenance, after receiving a horrendous bill for a service from Honest Jack's (Railway Arches) garage. Tragically, Bismarck, Ivan and Tania's adorable marmalade cat, died of leukaemia. She remains sadly missed to this day.

In March Tania took on more responsibility at De Montfort University- she formed a gardening club, Doigts Verts, which meets fortnightly in the physics department from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and already has a thriving membership. In the same month, George won a Spot the Ball competition in a local trade paper--PS25 for placing a cross correctly! But not as easy as it looks!

April saw Ivan and Tania drifting apart somewhat, though they enjoyed a weekend visit to Stratford and had a lovely meal in the Dirty Duck.

May: Pandora, bless her, was elected the Member of Parliament for Ashby-de-la-Zouch. We're so very proud of her. She has since been appointed a PPS to Julia Snodworthy at the Department of Agriculture. Pandora's ex-husband, Julian, has also been making a name for himself, becoming a leading campaigner for a bill to lower the homosexual age of consent to sixteen.

In late May Ivan began a clandestine affair with Pauline Mole. Meanwhile, Tania was working hard to pay the mortgage, the household bills and also to repay the loan on the garden chalet from which Ivan was going to freelance as a dairy management consultant, but as it turned out hardly ever did. Tania was devastated by Ivan's betrayals; she had meant every word of her wedding vows. However, in June she and George found that their relationship was more than friendship, and Tania is slowly accepting that it is possible to love again.

In September, Brett, George's only son by Doreen Slater, a.k.a. 'Stick Insect', wrote to his father from Rugby School, where he has been awarded a scholarship. George was pleased and not a little proud! Brett has since had several meals with us, and is a charming, good-looking boy, with exquisite manners!

Dear Diary, this is news to me! Why are all these sons suddenly creeping out of the woodwork? I put it down to the millennium. Why didn't my father tell me about Brett's success? After all, he is my half-brother.

I read on...

Adrian, George's elder son, has been away working in London's Soho! He once met Ned Sherrin in the street!

Is that it? Is that the full sum of my considerable achievements this year, to have met Ned Sherrin in the street? In fact I more than 'met' Ned in the street. I engaged him in conversation just as he was about to step into a black cab.

We have embarked on an ambitious plan to landscape the garden at The Lawns. The lawns are to be replaced and gravel laid in their place. We hope ultimately to re-create the Emperor Hirohito's palace gardens, though on a more modest scale! George will shortly be attending a course on Zen gardening at Dartington College, Devon, run by Isokio Myanoko, garden master to the Japanese Royal Family.

Lastly, but certainly not leastly, Henry, an adorable black Labrador puppy has arrived to share our lives. So, together with the Koi carp, Yin and Yang, we have become a family!

Happy Christmas,

Love to all,

Tania and George

I couldn't wait for my mother to get out of the bath. When she read the letter she laughed until she cried. Even Ivan smiled at the thought of my father raking gravel in a meaningful way. Tania 'n' George's round robin has been pinned up above the bread-bin. Every time I extracted a slice of organic white at breakfast I laughed quietly to myself.

Most of the World War II baby-boomer generation are to be pitied. My mother has often spoken about the overcrowded classrooms: 'Three of us to a desk, four of us to a book.' She claims that even the pavements were crowded when she was a girl, and that she had to queue to go on the swings in the park.

At 10.10 a.m. a post-office van drew up outside, then the doorbell rang and the New Dog began to bark. I took this to be an ominous portent. The New Dog never barks. (It cost me PS26 at the vets in April to have its vocal cords checked.)

The New Dog obviously sensed, with its canine intelligence, that the letter the postman was holding out to me contained bad news. I scrawled my name on the postman's clipboard and wished him a merry Christmas, then went upstairs to my bedroom. I locked the door and opened the letter.

Filey-on-Sense

Essex

Dear Mr Mole,

Tests carried out on blood samples by this laboratory show conclusively that you are the father of Glenn Bott, who currently resides at 19 Geoffrey Howe Road, Thatcher Estate, Leicester.

Should you wish to query the test results, there will be a further charge of PS150 plus vat. As requested, copies of this report have been sent to Barry Kent, Mrs Sharon Bott, and Mrs Bott's solicitor, Ms Miranda Pankhurst of Justice for Children.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Trott

(Director of Parental Attribution Tests)

I have now read the letter several times, including the enclosed lab report, which might as well be written in Welsh for all the sense it makes to me. I have hidden it under a pile of handkerchiefs, next to my rolled-up socks.

I am in shock.

### **Saturday December 13<sub>th</sub>**

Spent the morning searching for a word or phrase to express my feelings. I tried to imagine what Tony Blair would do under the circumstances, and was certain that tears would not be very far away.

Glenn Bott Seen from a distance Tall, frowning, twelve. Gangsta clothes In an English market. Half of Sharon, half of me. Fully himself.

### **Sunday December 14<sub>th</sub>**

I phoned Sharon this morning. Duggie answered. He said that Sharon was out Christmas shopping. He said, 'She'd better be back soon. I'm stuck here with the bleddy kids, waiting to go out for a few bevies.'

I said that I would ring later. He said, 'Bad luck on the blood test, eh?'

I said icily that I was looking forward to making my son's acquaintance. He laughed a smoker's laugh and put the phone down.

### **Monday December 15<sub>th</sub>**

The New Dog had a sudden burst of energy this morning and attacked the Christmas tree, almost destroying it. Ivan offered to repair the damage. It is now back up, but many of the old decorations seem to have disappeared. I searched the waste-bins and the wheelie-bin, but found no evidence, yet I know that the cardboard star I made for my mother twenty-two years ago is in the house somewhere.

As I was loading the washing-machine tonight, I found a note in the pocket of William's anorak; it was dated Thursday December 3<sub>rd</sub>.

Dear Parent, Guardian/Primary Carer

Your son/daughter has been allocated a part in the Kidsplay Nativity enactment.

He/she will require a costume for the following character: goat.

The performance will begin at 4 a.m. sharp on Tuesday December 16<sub>th</sub>.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Parvez

Tomorrow!

I was outraged. William is to play a lowly goat! Mrs Parvez obviously still bears a grudge over the farm visit incident.

And how am I supposed to find a goat costume before tomorrow morning? And, anyway, what role does a goat play in the Nativity? I checked the Christmas cards hung by a string on the living-room wall, but didn't see a single goat in any of the mangers.

My mother has refused to have anything to do with the goat costume, so I was forced to ask for Tania's help.

### **Tuesday December 16<sub>th</sub>**

William was easily the best performer in the Nativity play. He was the essence of goatiness. My mother whispered, 'How is he getting his eyes to protrude like that?'

He looked magnificent in his goat outfit--though Ivan was furious to see that Tania had cut up his old grey car-coat for the body, four legs and goatee beard. He had a little trouble with the 'horns' made of painted carrots, but the cloven hooves that my father had fashioned from four empty Flora tubs were a triumph.

Pauline 'n' Ivan and George 'n' Tania ignored each other and also the printed notices left on our seats.

Please do not take flash photographs.

Kidsplay will be selling official photographs @ PS27.50 per pack in the new term.

NB. Please note, it is not possible to split packs.

I thought the other children gave a distinctly lacklustre performance. Joseph looked particularly gormless.

During the children's long and atonal rendition of 'Away In A Manger', my thoughts drifted to Glenn Bott; the type of child who was unlikely to be chosen to play anything ever in a Nativity play, not even a goat.

I phoned the Bott household when I got back home, but there was no reply.

### **Wednesday December 17<sup>th</sup>**

A Christmas card from Pandora. It began 'Dear Constituent,' and was signed with a rubber stamp.

I drove to Sharon's tonight and sat in the car rehearsing what I would say to the boy. Would I be expected to hug and kiss him, or merely shake his hand in a manly way?

As I sat there, a battered white van drew up at the kerb. Glenn and Douggie emerged. Douggie pointed at my car and laughed, and Glenn put his head down and went into the house, slamming the door behind him. I turned the engine on and drove away.

### **Thursday December 18<sup>th</sup>**

Brick Eagleburger rang to say that he'd had an irate Arthur Stoa on the phone, demanding the manuscript of Offally Good!--The Book!.

Brick said, 'Level with me, Aidy, I'm your agent for Chrissake, I lie for a f--living. I can ring Stoa and tell him you've been in a f--coma. But I wanna know the truth. I'm gonna ask you two questions. One: have you written the f--book?'

'No,' I said.

'OK, so now we're getting somewhere. Two: is a ghost-writer writing the f--book?'

'No,' I admitted.

Arthur Stoa is threatening to sue me for breach of contract and claim compensation for lost income and damage to his professional reputation. I asked him how much Stoa was demanding. Brick said, 'The guy was quoting a ballpark figure of sixty K.'

After I'd replaced the receiver I sat on the stairs for a full five minutes trying to imagine the life that lay ahead of me. I did a quick calculation on the telephone message pad.

- Stoa Books 60,000
- Legal fees 6,000 (approx)
- PS66,000

I would be forced to live in penury in my mother's house with two sons to support and my professional reputation in tatters. It was my darkest hour.

When my mother came in from Christmas shopping I told her everything: about Glenn, and Stoa Books, and the hopeless future that lay ahead of me.

She put her arm round me and said, 'Don't worry, pet, you've still got your mother. I can be strong for both of us.'

She then went to her bedroom and lay down with a cold white flannel over her face.

### **Friday December 19<sup>th</sup>**

I heard my mother get up at five this morning and then start clacking on her computer keys in the alcove. My bedroom lies directly above Ivan's work-station and I was forced from my bed by the disturbance. I went down to complain. She swung round guiltily on her typist's chair and said, 'I'm writing our round-robin Christmas letter. Go back to bed.'

She is so inconsiderate: I need all the sleep I can get at a time like this.

### **Sunday December 21<sup>st</sup>**

Am I the only person in this house who is remotely interested in the arrangements for Christmas? There isn't a candle, a mince-pie or a bag of nuts in the house. And I need to focus my little remaining energy on tracking down a Teletubby.

### **Monday December 22<sup>nd</sup>**

I have bought book tokens from Waterstones for everybody, apart from my mother, for whom I already have a gift. It is a set of mini toiletries I took from a boarding house I stayed in last year: shampoo, conditioner, bath gel, sewing kit, cotton buds and a shoeshine pad. I plan to place them in a wicker bread-basket and cover them with clingfilm. She will never know it is not a bona fide shop-bought present.

### **Tuesday December 23<sup>rd</sup>**

My mother has still not bought a turkey, even though we are apparently to host the entire family on Christmas Day. She is spending sixteen hours a day at the keyboard writing her interminable round robin.

### **Wednesday December 24<sup>th</sup>**

#### *Christmas Eve*

I rose at dawn and went downstairs to find my mother still seated in front of the screen, the ashtray next to her overflowing. I pointed out to her that this was a pointless exercise as she had long missed the last posting day for Christmas and she said that she had turned it into a New Year greeting. When I told her that, after a tip-off from Nigel, I was going to queue outside Safeway's for a Teletubby, she said, 'Pick a turkey up while you're there, and a Christmas cake and stuff.' As I slammed the door she shouted, 'Don't forget the bread-sauce mix.'

The Teletubby queue was at least thirty people long by the time I arrived; some had been there all night. I cursed God, went inside, filled two trolleys with Christmas Fayre, drove home, unpacked, put the turkey in the bath to defrost, drove to Toys 'R Us, threw a lot of plastic rubbish suitable for a three-year-old into a trolley, and drove home again.

I was wrapping the book tokens in my room when the doorbell rang with an aggressive urgency. My mother shouted from the computer alcove, 'For Christ's sake! Will somebody please answer that bloody door!'

William got there before me.

Glenn Bott stood on the doorstep looking down at his half-brother. He was holding a large envelope. Wordlessly he handed it over to me.

Wordlessly I took it. He would not look me in the eye.

William said, 'Do you want to see my dinosaur farm?'

Glenn nodded, and William led the way up the stairs. I followed, tearing open the envelope. Inside was a Christmas card. A picture of a pipe-smoking-dad type, in a cardigan, sitting by a roaring fire in an armchair with a decanter and a glass on a small round table next to him. Across the top was gold-embossed writing: 'To Dad at Christmas'.

May Yuletide cheer Be yours this year And may your Christmas Dreams come true If e'er I'm sad I think of Dad And I'm so pleased My Dad is you!

He had signed it--'To Dad, from Glenn'.

I thanked him and he frowned. He doesn't go in for smiling much. He looks like a cross between William Brown (the same tuft of hair sticking up at the back) and a younger, blonder, thinner, more authentic version of Gordon Brown. The Chancellor of the Exchequer.

I couldn't think of anything to say to the boy, and thanked God for William's obvious social skills. But when William went to the toilet and we were alone, I confided in him my despair at being unable to give William his most devout wish, a set of Teletubbies.

Was I subconsciously warning the boy about my inadequacies as a parent?

Eventually, Glenn said, 'What shall I call you? Dad or Adrian?'

I said, 'Dad,' and he now calls me Dad at least once every sentence. I never call my father anything.

When William came back, Glenn got to his feet and said, 'I've gotta go, Dad.'

My mother was waiting at the foot of the stairs. Her face crumpled slightly when she saw him. Glenn blushed a deep red as they were introduced and my mother was uncharacteristically lost for words, so I hurried the boy out of the door. He said, 'I'll be back, Dad.'

After he'd gone I drove to the BP garage, where I panic-bought a plastic football. I hoped that the boy had at least a passing interest in the game.

I got back to the house to find my mother in the kitchen with Ivan. She kept saying, 'Just you wait until you see him,' in a kind of despairing way. Ivan said, 'Pauline, the child has had none of the advantages of our children: library tickets, nourishing food, etc.'

This is a joke: I was brought up on boil-in-the-, bag.

Rosie said, 'He's riding around on a PS200 BMX.'

'It's probably stolen,' said my mother.

I defended Glenn, saying, 'He is my son, a member of the Mole family. We must grow to love him.'

My mother said, 'I'll try to like him, Adrian, but love may take some time.'

Rosie had prejudiced my mother against Glenn by telling her that he is a psycho and has been suspended from school three times, once for throwing his shoes over the oak tree in the grounds (one got caught in a lower branch), once for saying that the moussaka he had for school dinner was 'crap', and once for asserting to his comparative religion teacher that God was 'a bit of a bastard' for allowing famines and plane crashes to happen.

**Thursday December 25<sup>th</sup>**

*Christmas Day--Bank Holiday*

The day has been exhausting. William was up at 5.30. I tried to fob him off with his Christmas stocking and then to persuade him back to bed, but the kid was in a frenzy of excitement and made several attempts to break into the living room, where Santa had left his presents. As arranged I telephoned my father and Tania, and told them that William was about to 'open'. Next I knocked on my mother 'n' Ivan's door and told them the same. I shouted to Rosie and went down to put the kettle on. This was only the first of my many domestic duties on this day. I sometimes wish I lived in pre-feminist times when if a man washed a teaspoon he was regarded as 'a big Jessie'. It must have been great when women did all the work, and men just lolled about reading the paper. I asked my father about those days when we were preparing the Brussels sprouts, the carrots and the potatoes, etc., etc. His eyes took on a faraway misty look. 'It was a golden age,' he said, almost choking with emotion. 'I'm only sorry that you never lived to see it as an adult man. I'd come home from work, my dinner would be on the table, my shirts ironed, my socks in balls. I didn't know how to turn the stove on, let alone cook on the bleeding thing.' His eyes then narrowed, his voice became a hiss as he said, 'That bloody Germaine Greer ruined my life. Your mother was never the same after reading that bleeding book.'

The Norfolk Sugdens, my mother's parents, turned up at 1 a.m. I'm amazed that the Swansea licensing authorities allow Grandad Sugden to drive. He's got cataracts and narcolepsy, a condition that sends him to sleep every twenty minutes.

'He ain't asleep for long,' said Granny Sugden, 'no more 'n a second or so.'

They sat down in front of the television five minutes after arriving, and watched everything on the screen with the same open-mouthed fascination. The signal is weak where they live. I asked my mother if she'd told the Sugdens about the Great Mole/Braithwaite Partner Swap.

'No,' she said, 'they're retired potato farmers. It would only confuse them.'

I certainly saw confusion in Grandma Sugden's eyes when Ivan took my mother into his arms under the mistletoe and French-kissed her for a good two minutes. I was glad to leave them all to it and get into the kitchen. Though I was enraged to find out that the turkey hadn't defrosted properly!

Why not? It had been in the bath at least sixteen hours.

Rosie sat for an hour with her new Rowenta hairdryer on full, directing heat into the turkey's cavities. By the time it came out of the oven, the light was fading and everyone had stuffed themselves full of chocolates and mince-pies. I must admit, my dear Diary, that the last ten minutes before dishing up the Christmas dinner were possibly the most pressured of my life. Serving dinner for sixty at Hoi Polloi was a doddle by comparison. I have been nagging my mother to have the large ring on her electric cooker repaired for months but, oh, no, that would have been too sensible!

Finally, when all the vegetables were in their serving dishes, and the roast potatoes and chipolatas and stuffing balls were clustered around the turkey, I realized the horrible truth: I had forgotten to make the gravy! In a normal household this would hardly matter--a dollop of Bisto and a few pale Oxos would suffice. But the Christmas Gravy in the Mole house has over the years taken on the stuff of myth and legend.

My dead grandma, Edna May Mole, is responsible for setting the standard. First the turkey giblets are stewed for twenty-four hours, and when the stock has been reduced and the scum has been removed, then and only then are proprietary gravy brands added, slowly and carefully, until exactly the right shade of light brown liquid, not too thick, not too thin, simmers in the Christmas Gravy Saucepan.

I tore some kitchen paper from the roll and buried my face in it, only to be jolted from my feelings of inadequacy by Tania, who burst into the kitchen and asked irritably, 'How much longer must we wait? I'm hypoglycaemic you know.'

I said, through gritted teeth, that I had forgotten to make the Christmas Gravy.

'I'll do it,' she said.

This would be tantamount to having Charles Manson give the Pope's Easter Blessing. I tried to stop her but before I could she had pulled the chicken Oxos out of my hand and crumbled them into the turkey roasting-pan. She was stirring it (quite viciously, I thought) when my mother arrived on the scene. 'What do you think you're doing?' she asked.

'I'm making gravy,' said Tania.

'Only a person who carries the Mole name is allowed to make the Christmas Gravy,' said my mother, whose lips, always thin, had now all but disappeared. 'Give me that spoon.'

Tania said, 'Whether you like it or not, Pauline, I will soon be a Mole. George and I are getting married as soon as we're all divorced.'

'Fine! Fine!' shouted my mother. 'You can make your own Christmas Gravy in your own house, but until then get out of my kitchen!'

Everybody then congregated in the kitchen to join the row, apart from William who was putting his plastic insects (a present from Rosie, 30 for PS1 from Poundstretcher) to bed in various containers.

Meanwhile, the Christmas dinner, over which I had toiled for most of the day, grew cold. I went upstairs, slammed shut my bedroom door and threw myself on to my bed. I waited for the sound of feet on the stairs; surely somebody would come to me and beg me to rejoin the company? But the next sounds I heard were pings from the microwave, then crackers being pulled, corks being popped, and eventually, to my disgust, laughter!

Several times I heard the word 'gravy' shouted in tones of hilarity!

I must leave this house at the earliest opportunity.

I woke at 7.30 in the evening to find Glenn Bott shaking me roughly. 'Thanks for the football,' he said. Then, 'You've got dribble on the side of your mouth, Dad.' He gave me a badly wrapped and Sellotaped parcel, which bore an ill-written label: 'To Dad, from Glenn'. I opened it and found a bottle of anti-freeze and a mitt for scraping ice off a car windscreen. I was very touched. I'm going to try to persuade the boy to grow his hair. Apart from the tuft his scalp is intimidating.

Tania patronized Glenn for a few minutes, 'I say Glenn, those trainers are terribly cutting-edge,' then left to join Pandora at a hospice carol service. I was glad to see the back of her. She had made it obvious all day that Christmas Day at the Moles' had been a walk on the wild side for her.

My father, maudlin on Johnnie Walker, invited us to The Lawns tomorrow for Boxing Day 'Brunch'.

Glenn helped me to sort out the Sugdens' camp beds. We worked quite well as a team. Before he went home on his bike he said, 'I was just thinkin', Dad, Jesus is 1,997 years old today, ain't he?'

It was a rhetorical question, which, thank God, I didn't need to answer. Is the boy a religious obsessive? How will he react when he finds out that his father is a radical agnostic?

**Friday December 26.**

*Boxing Day--Bank Holiday*

Brunch at The Lawns was a tense affair. It started off badly when Grandad Sugden slipped and fell into the Koi carp pool and damaged the lining. Tania's mouth turned into a slit and stayed that way throughout lunch. The atmosphere was not helped by my mother laughing openly at their Christmas tree, on which were arranged twenty-five gingerbread men, each hanging by their necks from a noose-like silver ribbon. 'I thought you were against the death penalty, Tania,' she said.

'George forgot to put the holes in their heads for the ribbon,' Tania said, as she handed round a plate of home-made sushi; it looked suspiciously like bits of the Koi carp, which were gasping for breath outside as my father tried desperately to repair the pool lining.



I saw Ivan look wistfully around at his old spacious home.

Things livened up a bit when the Labrador puppy woke up and caught one of Rosie's hair extensions in his paws, but as soon as she was disentangled we left.

In the late afternoon I took William for a walk with his wheelbarrow, and bumped into Archie Tait outside the BP garage, where he'd just been to buy a turkey burger for his dinner. I asked him how he'd spent Christmas Day.

'Alone,' he said.

He asked me how I'd spent the day.

'Lonely, but not alone,' I replied.

Some insane impulse prompted me to say that if he felt like coming to Wisteria Walk at 6 a.m. there would be Christmas cake, pickles, leftover turkey, etc. He looked at the turkey burgers and said, 'I wonder if they would consider a refund.' Talk about mean!

10 a.m. I have just realized that the refund remark was almost certainly a joke, because Archie is far from mean. He arrived at the house festooned with presents. He gave me a copy of Boswell's Life of Doctor Johnson that I admired when I was last in his house. To William he gave a set of Lakeland drawing pencils, sixty of them in a wooden box, graded colour by lovely colour. It is far too handsome a present for a three-year-old. William will almost certainly lose or destroy them within hours. I said so to Archie.

He bent down to William and said, 'William, these pencils each have their own place in the box and they must be replaced exactly before you go to bed each night.'

William spent the rest of the day taking the pencils in and out of the box. I asked Archie where he had bought such a lovely present at such short notice. He said he'd had the pencil box for fifteen years. His face showed that he didn't want to go into further details.

### **Saturday December 27<sup>th</sup>**

Thank God it's all over and there's only the New Year to get through.

### **Monday December 29<sup>th</sup>**

My mother received the following note from Archie Tait today.

Dear Mrs Mole,

It was most kind of you to have me to your Boxing Day celebration. I enjoyed myself enormously; it was so refreshing to be among people with whom one feels an affinity. As a young man I campaigned for the principles of free love, and the rejection of bourgeois values. It was good to see these values being practised so assiduously in your family.

Yours, with best wishes,

Archibald Tait

PS. Adrian is a fine young man. Congratulations.

My mother has taken this short note to be a total vindication of her louche and undisciplined behaviour since she came to sexual maturity.

Glenn turned up (again) this evening to wish us all a happy New Year. And to give me a Hogmanay card from his mother, Sharon. I put it unread on top of the refrigerator. 'You oughta read inside it, Dad,' said Glenn.

I opened it and read,

Dear Adrian,

I hope you had a very happy Christmas and that you will have a happy and preposterous New Year.

I presumed she meant prosperous; a moment with the dictionary would have saved her considerable embarrassment. There was an invoice inside the (bag-piper-with-mountains-in-background-Labrador-in-foreground) card.

To arrears of child maintenance @ PS15,000

Payment to be made immediately, to Pankhurst, Barnwell, Brewin, Laker, Medwin, O'Keefe, Family Law Centre.

I did some mental arithmetic. The PS66,000 I owe Arthur Stoa plus PS15,000 equals PS81,000!!!!

I leaned against the fridge.

'Sorry, Dad,' said Glenn. 'It's nothin' to do with me.'

I felt like saying, 'On the contrary, Glenn, it has everything to do with you.'

This is such a horrific development in the trajectory of my life that I can't see how I am going to recover from it. I have a morbid horror of debt. My parents have never, to my knowledge, been out of debt. Indeed, my father claims to have been in debt since he was a small child (a loan to buy a Corgi Ferrari).'

I can do nothing at the moment: all the Crisis phone lines are clogged up. I've tried the Help With Debt line several times. I even tried to get through to Talk Radio's Anna Raeburn, but I was only one of many to be disappointed.

Later, me and William and Glenn went to Leicester Town Hall square, although I was in no mood to celebrate. There were hundreds of people there. Some in fancy dress. The council had switched all the Christmas decorations off. The place was in total darkness. The only light that could be seen was the red one on the police video camera, which was filming the crowd from the Lord Mayor's balcony.

At the stroke of midnight the crowd went mad with excitement and the policemen got out of the vans where they'd been sitting waiting. We sang 'Auld Lang Syne'. There was no trouble, just an air of terrible anticlimax and sadness that the council and the police had such a poor opinion of their citizens.

At 1 a.m. I took my boys home. I was pleased to see that Sharon came to the door to welcome Glenn back. We waved, but didn't speak. She looked fatter than ever.

# 1998

## Thursday January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998

These are my New Year resolutions:

1. I will be charitable. Not give money, just be kinder to those less fortunate than myself.
2. I will support both my sons.
3. I will find somewhere to live.
4. I will take out insurance.
5. I will get The White Van produced.
6. I will resume sexual relations with women.
7. I will give Mr Blair another six months.
8. I will throw all my white socks away.
9. I will stop obsessing about my hair loss.
10. I will join a gym.

## Friday January 2<sup>nd</sup>

I arranged to meet Sharon Bott in McDonald's 'Restaurant', as she calls it, in Leicester city centre. I was a little early and caught her with her mouth full of a triple something or other.

There was an awkward pause, during which she chewed like mad and I tried to think of something to say that wouldn't require her to speak. I commented that Glenn and I were getting along quite well, considering our short acquaintance. She nodded. I added that he would look better if he allowed the shaved bits of his scalp to 'grow out'. She chewed and nodded frantically. Her fingers look like Walker's thick sausages.

Eventually she swallowed and we talked about the PS15,000 her solicitors were demanding. I pointed out that, unlike Barry Kent, I was not a rich man. I said I would give Sharon an interim payment of PS1,000 if she would not reveal to the Child Support Agency where I lived. 'They will only claw it back,' I said, 'and you could lose your Income Support.'

She agreed to take PS1,000 by bank transfer.

## Saturday January 3<sup>rd</sup>

I went to see Pandora at her surgery this afternoon. I needed advice about my entitlement to legal aid. It's no good, Diary, I can't lie to you. The truth is I just wanted to see her.

There were dark shadows under her eyes, but she still looked beautiful in her pink cashmere twinset. She took a packet of Ultra Low from out of her grey patent Prada bag. I commented on the handbag. Shouldn't she be seen to be buying British?

She said, 'It was a Christmas present.'

'From a rich man, obviously,' I said, trying to control my jealousy.

She smiled enigmatically.

I went on to tell her about my failure to write the book, the impending legal action from Stoa, and my maintenance problems re Glenn Bott.

At the end she burst out laughing! And said, 'Your life is a situation comedy! You're over thirty, you're living at home with your mother, you're frightened of women--you're a Ronnie Corbett for the nineties!'

When I'd recovered my composure, I asked how she was enjoying the world of Agriculture and Fisheries. She grimaced and said, 'I should be at the Foreign Office. I speak fluent Mandarin and Serbo-Croat, for Chrissakes! I could be useful. As it is, I'm wasting my bloody time on wheelks!'

Her pager beeped and a message flashed across--ring alastair. She paled a little and reached for her mobile.

I left with a heavy heart.

Bowels--loose

Alcohol--bottle of Niersteiner, 2 vodkas

Pains--right knee, neck, left testicle

Sleep--v. little

Phobias--licking postage stamps, netting, ring-pulls, Psion Organizer

## Sunday January 4<sup>th</sup>

Now I truly understand the meaning of the phrase 'mother-love'. I am fortunate to have the most wonderful mother in the world. I blush with shame when I re-read these diaries. There is hardly a positive entry about this truly kind and self- sacrificing woman. Pauline Mole is a saint--she has saved me not only from humiliation, but also from a lifetime of debt.

My mother wrote OFFALLY GOOD!--THE BOOK!. What's more, she sent it to stoa on december 24<sup>th</sup>! and it has my name on the front page.

I found out this morning after a baffling call from Arthur Stoa. I picked up the phone thinking I was safe from him at 7.30 a.m. on a Sunday

morning.

Stoat said, 'Good, caught you. I'm reading the proofs of Offally Good!. On page forty-three you say, 'Take an otter tail.' Should that be, 'Take another tail'?'

I didn't know what he was talking about: there was no page forty-three. However, I remembered some advice my grandma gave me once: 'If in doubt, say nowt.' So I kept quiet, apart from making noncommittal grunts every now and then.

Stoat ended by saying that Offally Good! was a 'fine piece of work, funny, informative, compassionate, even'. He said he hadn't realized quite how much of a feminist I was, so chapter ten, 'The Future For Men Is Bleak', came as 'quite a surprise in a book about offal'.

He said he was 'enormously touched' by the dedication at the front of the book. 'To my beloved mother, Pauline Mole, who has nurtured me and inspired me throughout my life. Without this magnificent woman's wisdom and erudition I could not have written this book.'

Stoat sighed and said, 'You're a very lucky man, Adrian. My own mother is a dreadful disappointment. She's a dowdy, whining hypochondriac'

There was joy in my heart when I put the phone down. When I heard my mother moving about upstairs I put some bacon in the pan to fry, so that when she eventually came downstairs to feed the New Dog she was greeted by the sight of a full English breakfast laid out on the table for her, complete with a pot of freshly brewed coffee and de-crusted toast. I even placed an ashtray within reach of her place setting. I said, 'Thank you for writing the book,' and pulled a chair out for her.

She said, 'I did it for myself. I couldn't stand another minute of you whingeing on about the bloody thing.'

I said, 'I can't wait to read it. Have you got a copy?'

She padded into the alcove and pressed a few knobs on the computer. The printer started to whirl and throw out neatly typed pages. By the time she'd finished her breakfast, and smoked a fag, Offally Good!--The Manuscript! was sitting there, waiting to be read. My mother said, 'I shall expect 50 per cent of any monies due or earned, including royalties, a percentage of any merchandising deals and foreign-rights sales and, of course, residuals.'

I was in no position to argue.

*10 a.m.* I have just finished reading the manuscript. It's not bad, though there is far too much emphasis on gender politics for my taste. Germaine Greer appears fourteen times in the index.

### **Monday January 5<sub>th</sub>**

Zippo rang today. He wanted to congratulate me on the book I didn't write. Pie Crust intend to repeat the first TV series 'on the back of the book'. He said that it has huge cult potential, especially since the beef-on-the-bone ban. 'We should pick up some right-wing, beef-eating Telegraph types,' he said, 'which will broaden the advertising potential enormously.' He listed the advertising profile of Daily Telegraph readers. Apparently they go in for: garden sheds, incontinence pants, secateurs, erotic underwear, liquid manure, Egyptian cruises, pergolas, cutlery sets, denture fixatives and anything to do with dogs. Zippo is liaising with Stoat Books. Publication date is February 24<sub>th</sub>, which, according to Zippo, is a dead time in publishing. 'Nobody publishes then,' he said. 'It's a black hole as far as buying books is concerned.' When I asked why Offally Good!--The Book! was being published in this 'dead time', he said, 'Offally Good! isn't a book as such, is it, Aidy? It's a TV tie-in.'

### **Wednesday January 7<sub>th</sub>**

Archie Tait is dead. A policeman called Darren Edwards rang to tell me. He found my telephone number under a jar of Haywood's piccalilli. He thinks Archie died on Monday night. I asked the policeman why he'd rung me--I'm not Archie's next of kin. PC Edwards said that my phone number was the only one they could locate in the house.

### **Thursday January 8<sub>th</sub>**

I told William about Archie last night. I asked my mother for advice first. How do you explain death to a three-year-old?

She said, 'I don't know, it used to be easy when we all believed in God. You just told little kids that dead people had gone to heaven to see Jesus.'

Ivan said, 'We may have to re-invent God. He served a useful purpose at times.'

Rosie suggested an ecological approach. She said, 'Tell William that Archie's dead body is, like, gonna sorta fertilize the ground and make, like, vegetables grow bigger, an' that.'

In the end I told William that Archie had gone to sleep and didn't want to wake up. He understood that. He has often seen me unable to get out of bed in the morning.

### **Saturday January 10<sub>th</sub>**

Do the baby boomers have no sense of morality?

Robin Cook, the Foreign Secretary, has been revealed to be a serial adulterer! How can this be? I am at least twice as good-looking as him. It must be true that power is an aphrodisiac. How else do you explain the fact that Gaynor Regan is in love with the elf?

### **Sunday January 11<sub>th</sub>**

I sat out in the garden in the sun today and had a cup of tea! The weather has gone mad. The novelty fruit thermometer I bought from Spain for my mother, which is still nailed to the side of the house, showed the temperature to be two oranges past a banana--63degF.

### **Wednesday January 14<sub>th</sub>**

The bloke in the BP shop told me that Archie Tait is to be buried by Social Security unless somebody comes up with an alternative by Friday. It's not my problem. I hardly knew the bloke. And, anyway, death is death. Archie won't know, or care, whether he's cremated by Social Security or

Harrods' Funeral Service. The BP bloke said he died of pneumonia. He asked me if I wanted Archie's copy of the London Review of Books, which had come on Saturday. I said I'd take it off his hands.

### Friday January 16<sub>th</sub>

Archie is being cremated on Tuesday morning at 11 a.m. I'm doing the music and the words. The BP bloke is supplying Ginster's Cornish pasties and sausage rolls.

### Saturday January 17<sub>th</sub>

Poor President Clinton has had to put up with a lot since he was elected. The Ku Klux Klan, the Survivalists and the Daughters of the Revolution have all been out to discredit him. Now they had come up with a ludicrous story about him sexually harassing a woman called Paula Jones in a hotel room in Arkansas in 1991. As if! He is a good-looking bloke, he doesn't need to sexually harass any woman. I asked my mother if she had heard about the Paula Jones case. She looked back at me with pity in her eyes. 'The whole world has heard about Paula Jones,' she said. 'Where have you been? On the planet Zog?'

I said it wasn't possible to keep up with all the news.

She said, 'We're not talking about a three-car pile-up in Market Harborough, Adrian. This is top of the broadcast, world-class, CNN, BBC, headline news.' She advised me to see a neurologist: she thinks I may be suffering from selective memory loss.

### Tuesday January 20<sub>th</sub>

There were only eight people at Archie's funeral. Me, my mother, Rosie, the bloke from the BP shop, Archie's neighbour (a student called Liam), a representative from the Socialist Labour Party, Archie's solicitor Mr Holden, and a man from the crematorium. I'd only known him since May, yet here I was conducting his funeral service. My mother had made a nice job of desk-top-printing the funeral service.

11 a.m. Louis Armstrong: 'It's A Wonderful World'

11.02 Adrian Mole: 'The Archie Tait I Knew'

11.05 Liam O'Casey: Reading from Tom Paine

11.08 Hymn: 'Jerusalem', William Blake

11.10 Open for Archie's friends to comment on his life

11.15 As coffin slides into oven, 'Ode to Joy', Beethoven

Wake to be held at Wisteria Walk, Ashby-de-la-Zouch

Refreshments sponsored by BP

Everybody said that it was a lovely occasion. There was none of that morbid Church of England stuff about being 'born into sin and dying in sin'. The BP bloke came to the lectern to say that Archie came in every day for his groceries and was always polite, even when his London Review of Books hadn't been delivered. He said that Archie never complained about his artificial leg, even when the pavements were icy. Mr Holden, the solicitor, said that he had only met Archie a couple of times, but had found him to be a true gentleman who had made great personal and professional sacrifices in the cause of socialism. But it was a terrible thing to be at a funeral where nobody cried. I sometimes long for a bit of Mediterranean blood.

Only the Socialist Labour Party man and Liam, the student, came back to Wisteria Walk. The BP bloke had to go back to the shop, and Mr Holden was due in court. William returned from nursery school and entertained the company with his rendition of traditional nursery rhymes until the company tired and went away.

2 a.m. Have I got any principles I would sacrifice my personal and professional life for? I don't know the answer to this question.

4.30 a.m. Due to Mr Blair's obvious hatred for war I am never going to be tested in battle. A shame.

### Wednesday January 21<sub>st</sub>

An elaborate brochure from Peter Savage today, promoting his latest venture, an oxygen bar called H2O. A piece of stiff white card with H2O written in tiny silver print in the centre. Inside a list of what I presumed to be a selection of the oxygens available.

Mont Blanc

Bracing Skegness

California Dream

Cape Cod night

Hindu Kush

All oxygens @ PS25 per litre inclusive of VAT. All masks are sterilized between users.

I showed it to my father when he came to visit Rosie and William tonight. He was horrified. He said, 'Twenty-five quid for sniffing fresh air! Some people would stick tenners up their bums if you told them it was fashionable.'

I reminded him that it cost him at least PS45 a week to suck on burning carcinogenic leaves.

He protested that he'd cut down to fifteen fags a day now Tania was pressurizing him to give up, though conceded that he was spending 'another six quid a day on nicotine patches'. He said, 'You're lucky you haven't got an addictive personality, Adrian.'

He obviously doesn't know about my alarming daily consumption of Opal Fruits, and my increasing dependence on the green ones.

Mr Holden, Archie's solicitor, rang today and asked if I could meet him at his office at 2.30 on Friday afternoon. I expect he's going to ask me to stump up for part of the funeral expenses--which is not fair. As I've said many times, I hardly knew the bloke.

Stoat has faxed through four pages of editorial corrections. My mother is working on them as I write. Ha! Ha! Ha!

## Thursday January 22<sub>nd</sub>

Glenn in trouble at school for farting in maths. His maths teacher, Miss Trellis, says that the fart was deliberate. Glenn claims that his mother is feeding him 'too many beans'.

I rang the school today and made an appointment to see Miss Trellis (4.30 a.m. on Monday).

## Friday January 23<sub>rd</sub>

Mr Holden smiled, baring his yellow teeth. Then he handed me a document and said, 'This is Mr Tait's will, which he amended only three weeks ago.'

### *The Last Will and Testament of Archibald Erasmus Tait*

I made the acquaintance of Adrian Mole on May 1st when he was kind enough to give me a lift to the polling station. The two journeys were quite short, yet we covered a great deal of conversational ground and found despite the disparity of our ages that we had some interests in common.

He was gracious enough to compliment me on my cat, Andrew, of whom I am very fond. I am a difficult man, I have never had the gift of friendship and I have spent most of my life engaged in the cause of revolutionary politics--where so often friendship has to be sacrificed to principle.

Contact with my family was terminated at the time of the Suez Crisis when I led a pro-Nasser rally through the streets of Downham Market, where my wife and I were living at the time.

I have little to leave, apart from the house and a small insurance policy, which will cover funeral expenses. After careful consideration I have decided to leave my house, 33 Rampart Terrace, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, and its contents to Adrian Mole, of 45 Wisteria Walk, with the proviso that he resides in the house and cares for Andrew, my cat, until such time as Andrew dies. Mr Mole will then be free to do as he wishes with the property.

I leave my silver cigarette case to Rajit c/o the BP garage, Kedlestone Road, with thanks for his many small kindnesses to me.

To William Mole, of Wisteria Walk, I leave my folding binoculars.

To Glenn Mole, I leave the signed photograph of Sir Stanley Matthews, which he recently admired.

If Adrian Mole does not wish to reside at Rampart Terrace under the above conditions then the house is to be sold by my solicitor, Mr Holden, and the proceeds to be donated to the Socialist Labour Party of Great Britain.

Archie Tait

I looked up when I'd finished reading and said, 'How old is the cat, Mr Holden?'

He smiled and said, 'I've never had the pleasure of meeting the creature, Mr Mole.'

I get the keys on the 27<sub>th</sub>. My mother burst into tears of joy at the news. We drove to Rampart Terrace but it was too dark to see very much.

## Saturday January 24<sub>th</sub>

Liam helped me to get Andrew into his travelling basket. The cat certainly put up a fight. I had white and ginger hair all over my navy chinos. I took him to morning surgery at the Pet Centre where the New Dog is registered. The vet examined the struggling, spitting animal.

'How long will he live?' I asked.

'Don't worry, Mr Mole,' said the vet jocularly. 'He'll live to a good old age.'

Andrew is lying on my bed as I write. He's been banned from downstairs since he jumped on Ivan's back and drew blood.

## Sunday January 25<sub>th</sub>

I took the family to see the outside of Archie's house this morning. My mother peered through the letterbox and said it needed a lot doing to it. Rosie pointed out that there was no sign of central heating.

Ivan crossed the road, looked up at the roof and said that there were 'a quantity of tiles missing' and that, in his opinion, the chimney-stack 'looked unstable', and that the guttering could 'go at any time'. William said he liked the colour of the front door (red). His was the only positive statement.

Later I took Glenn and William. Glenn disappeared down the side passage and climbed over the gate, which he then unbolted. We went into the back yard and found a paved patio and trees growing in tubs, a tiny lawn and a picnic bench with a cup and saucer on it. There was a bird table near the kitchen window. Glenn said, 'It's all right, in't it, Dad?'

There was a shed at the bottom of the yard. Glenn pushed the door open and said, 'Ere, William, this'd make a great den.' They played inside the shed until it grew too cold. Later, I dropped Glenn off at Geoffrey Howe Road. 'Mam will have me dinner ready,' he said.

I've only just realized that Glenn can't read properly. Inside the shed was a bag that clearly said 'John Innes Potting Compost'. When William asked Glenn what was inside the bag, Glenn was at a loss.

I can't read words like that,' he said.

I didn't say anything to him at the time, but I will take the matter up with Miss Trellis on Monday. The boy is intelligent and has received compulsory schooling for seven years. In the car he asked me if I thought he should get an earring. I said, 'No, I absolutely forbid it.' He looked quite pleased.

I wish sometimes I wasn't a parent, even when I am alone I carry him and William with me, across my shoulders and inside my heart.

## **Monday January 26<sup>th</sup>**

Miss Trellis is a mousy little creature in a beige cardigan. She lacks many things: personality, humour, style, charm. I informed her of my recent entry into Glenn's life and told her I would be keeping a close eye on his future behaviour.

On the way out I made an appointment to see Roger Patience, the headmaster.

Glenn was waiting outside in the school car park.

'How'd you get on, Dad?' he said.

I said, 'All right.' I advised him to practise farting quietly. I assured him that it was possible.

He said that he would 'give it a go, Dad'.

On the way home I took him into the library where I used to work and enrolled him as a member. He was amazed to learn that the library service was free. He said, 'How do they know you're not gonna nick the books, Dad?' He took four out. All picture books about football.

## **Tuesday January 27<sup>th</sup>**

I was given the key to Archie's house today. It doesn't seem right somehow. Archie was present in every room. His bed unmade, a pair of socks on the floor. A sinkful of washing-up. A plate, a bowl, a cup, a saucer. A knife, a fork, a dessertspoon, a teaspoon, an eggcup. I opened all the windows, then examined the bookshelves. What treasure! What joys ahead of me! Somebody called Eric Blair had inscribed Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*: 'To Archie, Best wishes, Eric Blair'. I didn't tell anyone else that I have the key.

## **Wednesday January 28<sup>th</sup>**

Roger Patience is a deeply neurotic person. He is under the delusion that Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools, is out to get him.

Patience is more obsessed with tables than a Premier League football manager. I asked him why his school is near the bottom of the league. He blamed 'the catchment area, the riff-raff from the estates'. He blamed the teachers. 'They won't stay.' He blamed the caretaker. 'He undermines my authority.' He blamed 'Glenn Bott', whom he said was a 'borderline remedial'.

Apparently the last time the school was inspected Glenn was selected at random by an inspector to name three successful British manufacturing industries.

He couldn't name one.

I asked Roger Patience to arrange for Glenn to have extra help with his reading and writing. 'I believe it's called teaching,' I said, sarcastically.

While I was there the school secretary rang through and said, 'Roger, Ofsted on the line.'

Patience took a bottle of Prozac out of his desk drawer, opened it with difficulty (a childproof cap) and slipped a capsule under his tongue before saying, 'Patience here.' After he had completed a grovelling phone call he called through and instructed his secretary to ask if 'Ms Flood is free'.

While we waited for Ms Flood, we spent five awkward minutes of conversation about my sister Rosie and her foul mouth. 'I think she has undiagnosed Tourette's syndrome,' I said.

There was a knock at the door and Eleanor Flood was ushered in. She is pale and thin, with thick black hair. She was dressed in a black polo-neck sweater and a black trouser-suit. She carried a large black-leather shoulder-bag. Her eyes are grey. The sight of her fragile wrists almost brought tears to my eyes.

When she spoke her voice was soft. 'I'm very sorry, Mr Patience, but my remedial reading class is already full to overflowing,' she said, after Patience had asked her if she could 'squeeze Bott in'. 'And, anyway,' she said, turning her eyes on me, 'Glenn needs one-to-one tuition for at least a couple of hours a week.'

Patience snorted at the impossibility of providing this service in school.

'I do give private tuition, in the evening,' she said.

Patience said, 'Ms Flood, I can't have you importuning Mr Mole during school-time.'

I explained to Ms Flood that I did not agree with private education. However, given the parlous state of Glenn's reading skills, perhaps I ought to take a more pragmatic view. She charges PS9 per hour. She is going to ring me to tell me when she can start. I thought about her wrists all the way home.

## **Thursday January 29<sup>th</sup>**

President Clinton has denied in the strongest possible terms that he ever had sex with a White House intern called Monica Lewinsky. Looking into the camera and stabbing his finger for emphasis, he said, with burning honesty, 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.' He then added, with his charming Southern manners, 'Miss Lewinsky'. I, for one, believe him totally.

My mother and Ivan seem to know all about the Lewinsky affair. When I said that I had never heard of the young woman before today, they looked at me incredulously. Ivan said, 'I once had a secretary at the dairy who'd never heard of Van Gogh. She thought Van Morrison had painted Sunflowers.'

My mother said, 'You seem to filter out anything remotely detrimental to President Clinton.'

I said I admired the man.

She said, 'He's a sex addict.'

I pointed out that his wife, Hillary, was an attractive woman. Why would he need to look elsewhere for sexual gratification?

They looked at each other; 'I think we've got a Mary Archer 'fragrant' situation here,' said Ivan.

My mother said, 'Adrian, you'll be thirty-one in a couple of months. I know you've had sex at least twice, but you don't seem to know the first thing about lust.'

I went upstairs to watch Newsnight on my portable. Pandora's on now quite often.

## Friday January 30<sup>th</sup>

I have watched President Clinton's 'Lewinsky statement' endless times. The man is not lying. The truth cries out from his eyes, his nostrils and his lips.

## Saturday January 31<sup>st</sup>

Troubled by dreams about Monica Lewinsky in which she lives in Eleanor Flood's house, and we begin a lustful relationship after a game of Cluedo.

Penis function--10/10

Drugs--2 Nurofen

## Monday February 2<sup>nd</sup>

After reading some fan mail that came in from Pie Crust today, I'm convinced that the big Victorian mental hospitals should be reopened. A woman from Dorset is collecting the 'toenail clippings of the famous' for a charity auction. She enclosed a tiny self-seal plastic bag with Adrian Mole written on it, and asked me to post it back to her in the SAE she'd also enclosed. Rosie clipped the New Dog's claws and put them into the little bag. The New Dog looked happy for a change after its pedicure, so some good came of it. I am moving out of this house next Sunday. Nigel is providing his van. He has forgiven me for outing him since he found out that one of his uncles had a sex change in 1979--information that his family had kept from him.

## Wednesday February 4<sup>th</sup>

I am not moving out a minute too soon! I came perilously close to a row with my mother today. She is very cool towards Glenn. When I said, 'You've hardly spoken to Glenn since Christmas Day when you told him to take his elbows off the table,' she shouted, 'One of his elbows was in the Brussels sprouts dish, for Chrissake!'

Ivan, of course, defended my mother and in a sudden rush of rage I accused him of being a cuckoo in the nest of Wisteria Walk.

'It's you who's the cuckoo,' yelled my mother. 'Sunday can't come too soon for me!'

I said she hadn't given Glenn a chance. She screamed, 'I've never known a boy to fart so often. It's like being on the edge of a sulphurous volcano? I explained about the beans, but she didn't want to know.

Sunday can't come too soon for me either.

## Saturday February 7<sup>th</sup>

Rampart Terrace, Leicestershire

Glenn told me he wished I would marry his mother. We were putting empty Walker's crisps boxes into the back of Nigel's van at the time. I almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of the idea, then I looked at his face and was glad that I hadn't. I said that Sharon and I would never marry.

'Why not, Dad?' he said.

Out of the thousand and one reasons I could have given the lad, I chose one that I knew he would understand. 'I'm in lurve with somebody else, son,' I said, trying to sound like Grant Mitchell from East-Enders (his hero).

'Right, Dad,' said Glenn, and we spoke no more of it.

## Sunday February 8<sup>th</sup>

It only took one van journey to move my possessions to Archie's house. When the last box had been lugged out of the van and dumped on the front-room floor, Nigel said, 'The rolling stone gathers no moss, eh, Moley?'

It was freezing in the house. I had to keep going outside to get warm. I found some firelighters and some chopped-up sticks in the kitchen and I lit a fire in the little grate. Nigel drove round to the BP garage, bought some compressed sawdust logs and a bag of smokeless fuel, and the fire (and the heat) were soon roaring up the chimney.

Archie had not been a meticulous housekeeper. The floors are covered in Andrew's hair. Nigel advised me to buy a Dyson vacuum cleaner and a cat comb. We went upstairs to examine what was to be my bedroom. Nigel shuddered at the sight of Archie's unmade bed with its grey sheets and light green candlewick bedspread. 'Did he die in bed?' he asked, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. I admitted I didn't know. Nigel said, 'I won't let you sleep in that bed tonight, Moley. It's like something out of Les Miserables!'

We went to Bed City, where we took off our shoes and lay side by side on every king-sized bed in the shop.

'Have you tested the Queen's, sir?' asked a smarmy salesman of Nigel, who was wearing a diamond stud in one ear.



We chose a four-drawer divan that had the approval of the British Bed Council. I also treated myself to four new foam-filled pillows and a 15-tog duvet.

When we got home Andrew was hogging the fire. He watched with his usual indifference as we lugged the old bed out and the new bed in. He has shown absolutely no signs of grief. William is still at Wisteria Walk: my mother is refusing to let her first grandchild go until I've done something about the damp and cold at Rampart Terrace. So I will spend my first night here alone.

My address is now 33 Rampart Terrace, Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire.

Ms Flood rang on the mobile and said that she had 'a window in her schedule' and could start Glenn's tutorials on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> at 7.30.

## **Monday February 9<sup>th</sup>**

I still can't decide between having an upstairs study in the spare bedroom or making it into a room for Glenn. My indecision is creating a bottleneck of unpacked boxes in the living room, hall and kitchen. The kid has never had a room of his own—he shares with his two younger brothers, Kent and Bradford. On the other hand, I long to sit at a desk under an Anglepoise and write and think. Wasn't it Leonard Woolf who said, 'Every man should have PS100 a year and a room of his own?' I've been neglecting my intellectual life lately. I haven't seen Titanic yet, for instance.

## **Tuesday February 10<sup>th</sup>**

Sharon Bott has gone into hospital because her blood pressure is sky high. I thought she was just fat, but I find, in fact, she is eight months pregnant. Glenn told me that her bloke, Douggie, 'has done a runner, Dad'. Her younger kids have been farmed out and Glenn has opted to come here. He could have gone to his Bott grandmother, but he said, 'She's mean with the spuds, Dad.' Sharon phoned me from her hospital bed to say how grateful she was. I asked her how long she was likely to be in hospital. She said, 'Until the baby's born. It could be a month if I go full term.' She sounded hopeful.

This clashes with the publication and promotion of Offally Good!—The Book! I asked her if Douggie was likely to come back. She broke down and said, 'No, he's took all me money out the tea caddy and moved to Cardiff with the girl from the video shop.'

This is not how I expected my life to pan out! I am too young to be bringing up two boys! and anyway I only ever wanted one child, a daughter. She was to be called liberty and pandora braithwaite was to have been her mother!

Goodbye, upstairs study! Goodbye, writing! Goodbye, thinking! Goodbye, freedom! Hello, washing-machine! Hello, Dyson! Hello, stove! How can I possibly be responsible for the upkeep of two children! I can't do it! I haven't been taught! I don't know how to be a father! I can't play football! I've never read a Terry Pratchett Discworld book! I can't control a Black and Decker drill!

What I want is to live with Pandora, to work in the day at something interesting (novel-writing preferably) and then to have cocktails in the bath with her at seven before we go out to eat at eight. This is what I want! Why can't I have it?

## **Wednesday February 11<sup>th</sup>**

Calmer today. Called a helpline—Single Fathers. The bloke on the end of the line said my reaction was quite common. 'We're still cavemen,' he said. 'We want to be out there, killing things. We don't want to be in the cave, tidying up and looking after the kids.'

## **Thursday February 12<sup>th</sup>**

My money and I are slowly but surely parting company. Accepted an estimate of PS1,405 to install central heating. Another of PS795 to mend roof and supply new guttering. Went to Bed City and bought another bed, for Glenn. William still fits his plywood racing-car bed, thank God.

Made a payment into Sharon's bank of PS1,000. The bank clerk asked if I was all right (my hands were trembling, my cheeks were wet with tears, as I passed the banknotes over). I said I had an allergy to pot plants; the bank is full of them.

Took Glenn to see his mother in the maternity hospital. Her moronic relations were crowded round her bed. Nobody greeted us. Apparently the Botts don't go in for greetings or introductions. Sharon gave Glenn two pound coins for his pocket money and said she hoped he was 'being good'. I said he was 'behaving impeccably'. Several of the Botts sniggered at this. I took the boy away as soon as was decent. I called in at Wisteria Walk on the way back and told my mother that she must release her tenacious hold on William. I said that there was a fan heater in his bedroom, should he need it.

She went upstairs to pack his things with the air of a woman on her way to the gallows.

William loves his room, which overlooks the back yard. He especially likes the racing-car posters that Glenn drew with felt-tip pens from the Everything's A Pound shop, and which now adorn his walls.

## **Friday February 13<sup>th</sup>**

### *Rampart Terrace*

My mother made a point of keeping her Puffa jacket on throughout her visit here this afternoon. She said, after looking around, 'Those fan heaters are a waste of space. It's as cold as a polar bear's bum in here.' William said he liked wearing his anorak in bed. I wanted to smite him. She was critical of my food supplies, and said pointedly, 'I bet that big lummox costs a fortune to feed.'

I said, 'Are you referring to Andrew, or to Glenn?'

She claimed she was talking about the cat. I asked her why she was in such a bad mood.

She said, 'I miss my baby,' and pulled William to her. He struggled free and she left soon afterwards.

Glenn and William and I cleaned the kitchen in honour of Ms Flood's visit. At 7.15 Glenn took off his baseball cap, combed his hair and sat at the kitchen table, waiting.

She arrived at exactly 7.30. She was wearing a long black leather coat and tiny black suede boots, which could have been fashioned by a fairy cobbler under a toadstool somewhere. I helped her off with her coat. She has no breasts to speak of, though her nipples were surprisingly

discernible behind her dark grey sweater. The end of her nose was slightly pink from the cold outside. It was the only touch of colour about her.

I hovered about in the kitchen for a while, watching as she unpacked books and writing materials from her capacious black handbag. Then she sat down at the table next to Glenn, who said, 'Are you goin' or what, Dad?'

I took William upstairs to bed and told him a story about a quiet dark-haired princess who falls in love with a dinosaur. The boy completely accepted this unlikely scenario. After he'd gone to sleep, I took advantage of the peace to do a little of my own writing. I think the Archers/Royal Family idea has legs.

Pandora was grilled on the question of beef-on-the-bone by Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight last night. She kept to the Party line: 'Must protect the public, blah, blah, blah!' Though in the last conversation I'd had with her she said, 'It's all quite absurd. Statistically the average Briton is more likely to die from falling off a f--step-ladder.'

She did show the woman behind the politician once during her interview. After Mr Paxman had said, 'Oh, come off it, Ms Braithwaite', 'she said, dropping her voice, 'Jeremy, you're so very forceful,' then laughed her husky laugh and appeared to poke her tongue out at him.

It was almost the most erotic thing I've seen or heard since Barbara Windsor lost her bra in Carry On Camping.

The newspapers are full of it this morning. Brutus in the Express alleged that Paxman ran straight from the studio into a cold shower and stayed there for twenty minutes.

## **Saturday February 14<sup>th</sup>**

### *Valentine's Day*

*10 a.m.* Not a single card in the first post. Not one. Is this all I've got to show for nearly thirty-one years on this earth? An empty mantelpiece on Valentine's Day?

However, William and Glenn made me a card this afternoon. William used the Lakeland pencils. It was nice enough, a big heart with stick arms and legs, with a bubble coming out of its 'mouth' saying, 'To Dad, your grate'.

At 9 a.m. or thereabouts a Valentine card was dropped through the letterbox. I immediately opened the door and looked up and down the street, but there was no one to be seen. The card was everything a Valentine should be: a big red padded heart. Inside there was a single letter E. I don't know anybody whose name begins with an E. Who can it be, dear Diary?

## **Sunday February 15<sup>th</sup>**

Les Banks, the builder I have engaged to do the work on Archie's house, phoned today to say that he can't start tomorrow as promised. His mother-in-law died suddenly last night.

## **Monday February 16<sup>th</sup>**

A person called Nobby called round to ask if he could 'leave the ladders round the back'. He claimed to work for Les Banks. I asked for some ID. He said, 'Phone Les on his mobile.'

I did so. Les confirmed that Nobby was one of his labourers and said that the work at Rampart Terrace could start on Wednesday 'once the funeral is out of the way'. He didn't sound grief-stricken. In fact, he sounded as though he was outdoors somewhere, on a roof, with Radio One playing.

*3 a.m.* Aren't the Banks family burying the dead woman with indecent haste?

## **Tuesday February 17<sup>th</sup>**

Glenn said to me today, 'Do you think Glenn will play Michael, Dad?' I had no idea what he was talking about. I thought the boy had started to refer to himself in the third person, as Thatcher used to do. A sure sign of madness, or megalomania.

After watching the news, I now know that 'Michael' is Michael Owen, an eighteen-year-old footballer, and 'Glenn' is Glen Hoddle, the England football manager. From now on I will have to read the sport pages of the Independent. Until this day I have used them to line the waste-bin under the sink.

Eleanor Flood came again tonight. She was wearing lipstick and she smelled of ripe mangoes. It was all I could do to stop myself from stroking her delicate wrists.

I realize now that I have always been attracted to women's joints: I am a knee, shoulders, neck, ankle and wrist man. Though I can take or leave their fingers.

Eleanor told me after Glenn's lesson that she thinks he is 'a very intelligent boy, though culturally impoverished'.

I said that I was trying to address the problem. We were talking in the front room, sitting either side of the fire. She glanced around the room at the books and my print of Matisse's goldfish and said, 'He's very fortunate to have you as his father. My own father was an...' She lowered her grey eyes and looked into the flames of compressed sawdust logs, unable to finish her sentence. The firelight made her black hair shine. The phrase 'raven's wing' came into my mind.

I said, 'Alcoholic?'

'No,' she replied, but maddeningly she wouldn't say what he was. Then she left as she had an appointment to have her bikini line waxed. At this hour?

Glenn said, when I went in to say goodnight, 'D'you reckon I'll be readin' in time for the World Cup, Dad?'

I said, 'When is the World Cup?'

Glenn frowned and said, 'You gotta know that, Dad, surely?'

I said the date had slipped my mind, but I could tell that he was disappointed in me.

2 a.m. I am in lust with Eleanor Flood. I can't stop thinking about her bikini line.

### **Wednesday February 18<sub>th</sub>**

No sign of Les Banks. Nobby called at 5 a.m. and took the ladders away. I phoned Les's numbers but only got his message service.

Gateshead City Council has erected a sixty-foot statue called The Angel of the North next to the Ai. My mother and Ivan are cycling up to see it, stopping off at bed-and-breakfast places on the way. Ivan said, 'I'm a long-term fan of Anthony Gormley's.'

My mother said, 'Didn't he used to be married to Joan Collins?'

### **Thursday February 19<sub>th</sub>**

Les Banks rang to say that he couldn't start work today because he was 'at Casualty with the wife. She's gone and cut her fingers up on an electric carving-knife.' Nobby brought the ladders back.

### **Friday February 20<sub>th</sub>**

Mrs Banks's fingers have turned septic, necessitating another visit to the hospital. Les is obviously devoted to her. He promised to start work on Monday, 'without fail, Mr Mole'.

### **Saturday February 21<sub>st</sub>**

My mother rang from Gateshead and said, 'What day is my book being published?'

I said, 'It's my book, I think you'll find.' I told her it was the 24<sub>th</sub>. She said, 'Are we celebrating?'

I replied that I would be too busy with publicity.

She said, 'It should be my publicity.' Is this the 'ghost' coming out of the woodwork? She is desperate for fame! Being in the tabloids last year has only fuelled her hunger. I asked her what The Angel of the North was like. She said, 'It's heartbreaking, like everything else in my life.'

3 a.m. ∴ Stop press! Securicor delivered five copies of Offally Good!—The Book! this afternoon. Dev Singh is on the cover! I am a photographic blur next to him. My name is partially obscured by a saucepan, his is not.

### **Sunday February 22<sub>nd</sub>**

Took my Next suit and my Boss overcoat into Safeway's dry-cleaners this morning. I requested the express service. I stressed to the youth behind the counter, 'Darren Lacey, Executive Dry Cleaning Manager', how important it was that the articles be immaculately cleaned and pressed. I told him that I was intending to appear in front of the public in them. As I left the counter with my receipt I heard an old git who had been waiting beside me say to 'Darren', 'Where does he usually wear his clothes then? In a cupboard?'

### **Monday February 23<sub>rd</sub>**

Mrs Banks' fingers have turned gangrenous. 'She could lose 'er 'and.' Meanwhile the house is freezing and the roof is leaking. Will Mr Banks' domestic misfortunes ever allow him to start work on my house?

### **Tuesday February 24<sub>th</sub>**

#### *Publication Day*

Today should have been a great day in my life. Offally Good!—The Book! may be 80 per cent mother-written and it is certainly not literature but, even so, it is a book and it bears my name. Yet could I enjoy this considerable achievement unfettered by domestic and child-care worries? No! I could not. Publication Day found me ransacking the house looking for Glenn's trainers, which he claimed to have kicked under his bed but which 'disappeared in the night, Dad'.

William's school shoes had also disappeared. I was forced to take him to school in his red Wellingtons. For once I prayed for rain, though none came. Glenn had to wear a pair of my own Marks & Spencer's trainers, which were three sizes too big, obliging him to wear two pairs of wool socks with them. I dropped him off at the school gates and watched as he reluctantly sloped into school. If he wasn't exactly dragging his feet, he was certainly dragging his trainers.

Why are schoolday mornings at Rampart Terrace so fraught with domestic tension? Even Andrew twitches with nerves from 7.30 until 8.45 a.m. Never once have William, Glenn and I sat down to breakfast together with that glow on our faces that the families in advertisements are blessed with. William carries on like the Last Emperor, petulantly rejecting all the cereals offered until it's too late and he has to eat a piece of fruit in the car. And Glenn is so slow. It infuriates me to watch him spreading butter on his toast; how he covers the four corners of the bread, then goes back to the centre and starts the whole tedious business again.

This morning in the car, Glenn said, 'You're doin' a lot of shoutin', Dad.'

I shouted, 'Don't talk with your mouth full. You're dropping toast crumbs all over the upholstery.'

William was peeling a satsuma in the back seat and I noticed that his Kidsplay sweatshirt was on inside out. And how does the house get itself into such a state? I only have to turn my back and it's littered itself with objects.

At 10.30 I was live on air, broadcasting from Zouch Radio. The presenter, Dave Wonky (surely not his real name), introduced me 'as the latest talent to emerge from Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Who is he, listeners?'

I was puzzled by this introduction until Mr Wonky played an inane jingle.

Mystery Guest That's the test Play the game If you know the name.

Nobody rang, so Mr Wonky gave out a further clue. 'OK, clue number two. He's a celebrity chef.'

The lines remained silent. Mr Wonky played the jingle and read out the traffic news. A lorry had overturned on the Billesdon bypass, spilling its load of goldfish food. Still nobody rang. I had now been in the studio, totally silent, for ten minutes. I was forbidden to speak until my identity had been guessed at by a listener.

After Wonky had read out a list of rummage sales to be held 'in the upcoming week', a woman rang to ask if I was Delia Smith.

Five minutes later Wonky gave out his third clue. 'He married into the Nigerian aristocracy.'

Even I wouldn't have recognized myself from this description. A moronic youth, Tez, from Coalville, asked if I was Lenny Henry. Wonky got slightly irritated and said, 'Tez, Dawn French is not a Nigerian aristocrat, is she?'

Tez said he didn't know and Wonky cut him off quite abruptly, without saying thank you. Wonky has aspirations to be the first Midlands Shock Jock. He told me this while playing Max Bygraves' 'Windmill in Old Amsterdam'. When it finished he said, 'That was for Mrs Agnes Golightly, who is eighty-nine years young today, God bless her.'

His fourth clue was that 'My mystery guest's family has been in the news lately. His parents have been embroiled in a love-swap tangle, involving a certain lady called Pandora.'

The lines were jammed, though nobody remembered my name properly. Was I 'James Vole'? 'Adrian Sole'? 'Lance Pole'? I was hurt and humiliated, especially when Wonky told the listeners that since nobody had got my name right, he would be rolling today's prize, a Radio Zouch T-shirt, over to tomorrow's programme.

He allowed me to speak briefly for two minutes on Offally Good!--The Book!, but I was not at my most articulate. He then invited listeners to phone in and ask me questions. A vegetarian called Yvonne rang to ask why I was encouraging the mass genocide of animals by advocating the cooking of offal. I told her that I was an animal lover and a cat owner, and said that it was a well-known fact that vegetables and fruit screamed in agony when pulled from the ground, or cut from the bough. Yvonne then got hysterical and accused me of being a man.

Wonky said, 'It's not a crime to be a man yet, is it, Yvonne?'

Yvonne then broke down and confessed that her ex-husband, a womanizing carnivore, had left his goodbye note under a plate of calves' liver in the fridge. Wonky began to counsel the woman and indicated to me that I was to leave the studio. I was glad to do so.

William came home with a note from Mrs Parvez:

Dear Mr Mole,

If you require help in purchasing school shoes for William, may I draw your attention to the enclosed Social Security leaflet, 'Help with Footwear'.

Sincerely,

Mrs Parvez

There was a message on the answerphone to say that Glenn had not attended morning or afternoon registration. When I tackled him on this, he said, 'I couldn't do it, Dad. There was no way I could go walkin' in that school in Marks & Spencer's trainers.' Tears sprang to his eyes. He looked surprised at this.

I took him and William to the out-of-town shopping complex The Pastures, where it is now possible to shop until 10 a.m. seven days a week. We went to Footlocker. A handsome black shop assistant said to Glenn, 'These equal respect, man.' He handed Glenn a pair of trainers that to my eye looked like those vehicles that pick up minerals from the surface of the moon. Glenn tried them on and I could tell he had a moment of epiphany. He said, 'Oh, Dad, they're top!' They were PS75.99.

I said, 'Almost PS76 for two bits of rubber! It would kill me, Glenn.'

He handed them back to the shop assistant, who put them back in the box. Then I remembered the grey slip-ons I was made to wear to school, instead of the Doc Martens that everyone else in my year was wearing. I heard Barry Kent's taunts in the playground and went back into the shop and bought the trainers. PS75-99! It has made me ill.

Bought William some Lion King slip-ons. He wanted some Titanic zip-up boots, but I said no. We looked around the bookshop on the complex. There was no sign of Offally Good--The Book! My sons were disgusted.

I buried Barry Kent's book, Blind, under a pile of Stephen Kings.

## **Thursday February 26<sup>th</sup>**

Nobby came round for the ladders.

Radio Leicester interview at 12.30. Larry Graves, the interviewer, said he had tried the pig's trotters recipe at home last night, but he had found them inedible. He'd watched the TV series and thought that Dev Singh was 'a comic genius'. He asked me if I would get Dev to sign his copy of the book.

## **Friday February 27<sup>th</sup>**

Eleanor very gloomy tonight after the lesson. I said that I hoped Glenn was not to blame. She told me Roger Patience was not going to renew her contract at Neil Armstrong Comprehensive. I asked why, but she was curiously evasive. She put her oversize black coat on and left in rather a hurry.

Patience is a fool: she is a brilliant teacher. Glenn's reading age has improved by two years in as many weeks. He is now almost on a par with the average nine-year-old.

## **Saturday February 28<sup>th</sup>**

Heard on Radio Leicester that several cars were set alight in the staff car park at Neil Armstong Comprehensive at lunchtime yesterday. 'Mindless vandalism' is thought to be the cause.

I hope Eleanor's Fiat wasn't damaged. The headmaster's Volvo was a write-off.

Sharon Bott has given birth to a girl. She has called the poor child Caister, after the place where conception took place. Took Glenn to see his half-sister. On the way home he said, 'I'm worried about me mam, Dad. How's she goin' to manage?'

I diverted the conversation to Gazza. 'Will Hoddle play him?' I asked.

'No, Dad, he's too fat,' he predicted.

## **Sunday March 1<sup>st</sup>**

Glenn and I both got pinched and punched 'first day of the month' by William. I noticed that Glenn has already started instinctively to cover his genitals when William is within hurtling distance. Women don't know how lucky they are to have their sexual paraphernalia tucked inside their bodies.

A review in the Sunday Times Book Section. Under 'Briefly' it said:

Love by Lamplight--Hermione Harper Gritty tale of Crimean War romance.

Filth--Spike McArtney

Thinly veiled autobiography of life in Glasgow's sewers.

Offally Good!--The Book!--Adrian Mole 100 ways with ofal--a hoot.

Went to the BP garage and bought six copies of the ST. The boys were so proud to see my name in what Glenn called 'one of them long newspapers'. My mother phoned at 10 a.m. to ask if I'd seen 'her' review.

## **Tuesday March 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Met Les Banks buying cigarettes in the BP shop tonight. I asked after his wife. He looked me in the eye and said, 'She's not good, her father dropped down dead last night.' I laughed a bitter, cynical laugh and walked away.

Banks shouted after me, 'You callous bastard.'

## **Thursday March 5<sup>th</sup>**

Was shocked to see a photograph of Les Banks and his family in tonight's Leicester Mercury. A headline said, 'What Next?' Asks Tragic Banks Family'.

I couldn't bring myself to read the article. I wished I hadn't noticed that Mrs Banks was described in the caption under the photograph as 'Lydia Banks, 41, Brave Amputee'.

Glenn asked where Kosovo was tonight. I handed him the Times Atlas of the World and told him to look it up in the index. He looked at me blankly. He doesn't know what an index is.

I rang Les Banks and apologized. He said he'd come round tomorrow, 'weather permitting'. I asked him what would preclude him from starting. He said, 'Anything that's gonna blow me off the roof.'

## **Friday March 6<sup>th</sup>**

Gale force winds all day. Attended the small-claims court with my mother this morning for her hearing: Mole versus Shoe Mania!.

That legal buffoon Charlie Dovecote had led her to believe that she stood a good chance of winning sizeable damages for injury, stress and trauma suffered when the heel of a stiletto broke off as she reached the summit of Snowdon, believing Sir Anthony Hopkins to be making a public appearance there on that day. When asked in court why she was wearing such unsuitable shoes she said, 'I only wore them for the final stages, I didn't want Sir Anthony to see me in my hired climbing boots.' Charlie Dovecote cross-examined Justin Swayward, representative of Shoe Mania!. 'Did the said stilettos bear a health warning, Mr Swayward?'

'Of course not.'

'Of course not? Why not?'

'Because any reasonable person could see at a glance that these shoes are unsuitable for--'

'Ah, yes! A reasonable person might. But, Mr Swayward, my client, Mrs Mole, was not a reasonable person at the time. She was a middle-aged woman in the grip of a menopausal fixation about Sir Anthony Hopkins, the film actor, who had recently donated one million pounds towards the purchase of the said mountain.'

She won damages of PS2,000 plus costs. The judge/magistrate said that Shoe Mania! 'intended, by the use of the word 'mania' followed by an exclamation mark, to excite and encourage vulnerable women into making unwise and unsuitable purchases'.

I am, quite frankly, disgusted at this flagrant misuse of our overcrowded civil courts.

Eleanor has started another job at the Keith Joseph Community College. She is head of remedial studies. She said, 'But nothing will come between me and my weekly visits to Rampart Terrace. I live for Fridays.'

## **Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup>**

Les Banks rang to say that an articulated lorry reversed over his dog yesterday. I was careful to sympathize. He said he would send a subcontractor round: Bill Broadway. He said, 'He's sound, Mr Mole.' I said I hoped his dog made a full recovery.

### **Monday March 9<sup>th</sup>**

Dev Singh was on with Richard and Judy this morning, promoting Offally Good!—the Book!.

I got on the phone to Brick Eagleburger immediately and left a message on his voicemail protesting in the strongest possible way about Dev's usurping of my role.

Bill Broadway is on the roof playing Radio Two at full volume. I'd guess from his accent that his parents come from Jamaica. His hair is almost entirely grey, yet he's only thirty-seven. He blames the stress of being in the building trade. He doesn't like heights.

### **Friday March 13<sup>th</sup>**

While the boys were in bed I did some work on my Royal Archers Radio series. Experimented with adding the Blairs.

#### **THE ROYAL ARCHERS**

Agricultural bagpipe music which fades to:

Sound: Helicopter landing in barleyfield.

QUEEN: More bacon, Philip?

PHIL: (Grumbling) Who's that landing a helicopter in my barleyfield, just as I'm eating my breakfast?

QUEEN: I'll just cross from the Aga to the window, while still carrying the frying-pan, and look out and tell you. Oh, it's Charles and there's somebody with him...a woman in jodhpurs.

PHIL: Who is it, Liz? Who? Who is with our eldest son?

Cut to:

#### **CHERIE AND TONY'S DAIRY**

Sound: Of yoghurt pots being washed.

CHERIE: (Deep sigh) I can't get the yoghurt scab virus out of the yoghurt pots, Tony (sigh).

TONY: Does it matter, Cherie?

CHERIE: (Screaming) If I don't, the whole of Ambridge could go down with yoghurt scab!

TONY: Oh, let them, Cherie. Let them. (Agricultural bagpipe music.)

The End

A strong start, I think.

When the hour was up I went downstairs and paid Eleanor. I offered her a glass of Bull's Blood. She accepted. We sat by the fire and discussed Glenn's progress. He is doing well, and can now read nearly everything in the sport pages of the Sun. Eleanor gazed into the flames and gave a loud sigh. I asked her what was wrong. She said, 'I've been wrestling with my personal demons.' But she didn't go into details. I told her of my netting phobia. Something I have never spoken of to another human being. Baby and Child Care was my parents' bible. They followed Spock's advice to the letter. When at the age of eighteen months I started to climb out of my cot several times a night, they looked up the appropriate remedy in the index. Spock advised my gormless parents to imprison me at night by throwing a badminton net over the side of the cot, securing it to the legs. (The cot's legs, not my legs.) My parents followed this advice slavishly, though it is on record\* that my grandma Mole objected violently.

[?] Source letter from Edna May Mole, mother of George Mole, to Mrs Sugden, mother of Pauline, May 2nd, 1968.

She maintained that 'A good hard slap across the back of his legs would have helped him to settle down at night.' I well remember trying to fight myself out of that badminton net. Spock may have been sound on Vietnam, but he was oh-so-wrong on badminton nets. I have never been able to enjoy Wimbledon because of him. Even the sound of Virginia Wade's voice makes me break into a light sweat. Because of this childhood trauma I let William sleep where he drops, then carry him to bed.

### **Tuesday March 17<sup>th</sup>**

Glenn has now been here at Rampart Terrace for over four weeks. I asked him last night where he wants to live and who he wants to live with. He said, 'Here, with you, Dad.'

It wasn't especially what I wanted to hear. I'm fond of the boy but...

I phoned Sharon this morning and asked her if I could come round and talk to her about Glenn's future. It was a difficult conversation: Caister was crying in a distant room and Bradford and Kent were quarrelling somewhere very near to the telephone. Not surprisingly, Sharon sounded distracted. When I first mentioned Glenn's name, she said, 'Who?' We agreed I'd go round on Thursday night.

### **Wednesday March 18<sup>th</sup>**

A police patrol car pulled up outside the house at three o'clock this afternoon. A policeman came to the door and said, 'Did you know, sir, that there's a black man on your roof?'

I said, 'Yes, I do know, I'm paying him PS20 an hour to be there.'

Glenn v. unhappy. Man U out of European Cup after drawing 1-1 with Monaco. I said to him, 'Glenn, football is like life, you must have a goal. But sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.'

He said, 'But why couldn't Man U get another goal and win, Dad?'

He doesn't know about metaphors.

## Thursday March 19<sup>th</sup>

My father rang me today, which is an unusual occurrence. His voice was lowered, so I knew that Tania was in the vicinity. He said, 'Have you seen the papers, Adrian?'

I said that, no, I hadn't, I had been too busy scraping burned stuff from the hotplate of the steam iron to go out for a paper.

He said, 'They've gone too bleeding far now. They've gone and put a woman in charge of a warship. HMS Express. Think of the carnage that woman could cause.'

I heard Tania call from the garden, 'Darling, come and hear the blackbird.'

My father muttered, 'Got to go.'

My mother once steered a canal boat into the wall of a deep lock, causing my father to nearly fall overboard. This incident was watched by drinkers in the garden of the Lock-keeper and Camel public house. I will never forget their jeers.

*1 a.m.* Sharon was so tired she fell asleep twice while I was talking to her about Glenn's future. Caister is the type of baby who prefers to be fed every three-quarters of an hour. Unfortunately Sharon is breastfeeding. This may be beneficial to the baby but it did me no good whatsoever. I once enjoyed gazing at her eighteen-year-old breasts, but now she is aged thirty they are vast, intimidating, blue-veined edifices. Sharon Bott is a walking dairy. Her nipples look like Liquorice Allsorts.\* She looks more like fifty than thirty.

[?] I meant, of course, liquorice torpedoes.

I asked her how she would feel if Glenn came to live with me permanently. She said, 'I know he'd have a better life with you. I can't give him nothing.'

I said that, on the contrary, she had given him a lot. I told her that she had done a good job of bringing him up and that I was very fond of the boy.

She looked relieved, and said, 'He could come to me for the weekends sometimes, couldn't he?'

I said that I would be glad to have the occasional weekend free.

I looked around her living room. There were no books, or magazines, or even newspapers. I looked forward to the day when I could introduce my eldest son to the world of literature. When I got home we celebrated by sending out for a Chinese takeaway. They forgot William's prawn crackers, but he didn't have his usual tantrum. He was happy because Glenn is going to be living with us for ever.

When I went upstairs to carry William to bed, I saw that there was a notice pinned on Glenn's bedroom door. It said, 'Glenn Bott privet'.

## Friday March 20<sup>th</sup>

Left Bill Broadway pointing up the chimney-stack and drove into Leicester. I miss big-city life. Bought William some Power Ranger underpants from the Everything's a Pound shop. Was disturbed to see that somebody has opened an Everything for sop! shop. Things are going downhill fast. This is a sure sign that city-centre shopping is in its death throes.

I was examining some Baywatch eggcups, with a view to purchase, when a man in a green-knitted bobble hat approached me and said he had seen me on the telly. He asked me for my autograph, saying it was for Phyllis, his mentally ill sister, who was my 'biggest fan'. On the back of his gas bill I wrote: 'To Phyllis, It was Offally nice to meet your brother. Best wishes to you, From Adrian Mole.'

The man looked at the back of the bill and said, 'She won't like this.'

I asked why. Apparently the cause of Phyllis's mental problems centred around her being the first-born and having her 'nose put out of joint' when he, her brother, was born. 'She never recovered,' he said. 'You writing, 'It was nice to meet your brother,' could tip her over the edge.'

He gave me his bus ticket and on the back I wrote: 'To Phyllis, Best wishes from A. Mole.'

He looked at it for a minute, then said, 'She might think that A Mole meant one of them little burrowing animals. She's got a thing about small mammals.' He handed me a dry-cleaning ticket and I wrote on the back, 'Hello Phyllis, This is Adrian Mole, the TV chef. Get well soon!'

He shook his head. 'No, you can't write, 'Get well soon',' he said. 'She doesn't know she's ill.'

I snatched at the Bhs receipt he held out and scribbled, 'Best wishes, Adrian Mole', on the back. He said a grudging thank-you, adjusted his bobble hat and sloped out of the shop. I was too flummoxed to be able to concentrate on the Baywatch eggcups, and I left the shop without buying anything.

To calm down I had a cappuccino at a pavement cafe in the high street. This place, the Brasserie, has only been open a week, and has been viewed with suspicion by some sections of Leicester society. An OAP passed my table, saying to her companion, 'It's obstructing the pavement, in't it? What about blind folk and them in wheelchairs?'

In the afternoon I went to see my father and Tania, to inform them that Glenn was living with me permanently. They had just been to the sexual dysfunction unit at the hospital. Unfortunately they felt the need to tell me, in minute detail, about their joint consultation. Tania held my father's hand and said to me, 'I've tried to reassure him that penetrative sex is not the be all and end all.'

When she got up and went to the kitchen to make some herbal tea, my father's gaze followed her ample hips out of the room as he said, 'Penetrative sex is the be all and end all with me. I can't be doing with all that bleddy tongue-wagging stuff—I even failed the oral when I took my driving test.'

I changed the subject by informing him that learner drivers now had to take a written test, but he returned like a homing pigeon to the topic of his private parts by telling me that Tania was treating his piles with aromatherapy. He shifted uncomfortably on his chair. I suggested that a rubber ring

or an operation might give more effective relief than a whiff of lavender oil. He glanced at her fearfully as she re-entered the room and said loudly, 'I've got great faith in aromatherapy. You shouldn't mock it, Adrian.' Tania smiled down at him as though he were a well-behaved toddler.

Eleanor mobiled me to say she can't come tonight, she had 'an emergency appointment' to see her therapist.

On the way home I did some shopping at the BP garage and bought Glenn a World Cup fixtures chart for his bedroom.

## **Saturday March 21<sup>st</sup>**

Glenn said today, 'Shall we do the lottery, Dad?' I almost gave him my standard anti-lottery lecture. Then I heard myself saying, 'Why not, son?' Our numbers are 3, William's age, 13, Glenn's age, 31, soon to be my age, 16, Rosie's age, 30, Sharon's age, and 5, the New Dog's age.

## **Sunday March 22<sup>nd</sup>**

A weekend of non-stop toil. The washing, ironing, folding, putting away of clothes! The washing, drying and putting away of crockery! The sucking up of dirt from the floors! The endless wiping of surfaces! The constant preparation of food! I should have a woman to do all this for me. A woman I don't have to pay. A wife.

After the housework there was the mind-numbing boredom of reading aloud to Glenn from his World Cup wall chart. He is determined to have memorized the fixtures by June.

## **Tuesday March 24<sup>th</sup>**

Over dinner we discussed what we would do if we won the lottery. Glenn said, 'What does a million pounds look like, Dad?' I wrote out a cheque for a million pounds and made it payable to 'Glenn Bott Esquire'. He was dead chuffed and put it in the breast pocket of his school shirt.

## **Wednesday March 25<sup>th</sup>**

Roger Patience rang me at 11.30 this morning. He asked me to go into school immediately, there was a serious problem. I was so alarmed I drove well over the speed limit (39 <sub>mph</sub>). I was escorted to his office by the duty pupil of the day, a charming girl called Nell Barlow-Moore.

Patience was sitting behind his mock mahogany desk staring at a computer screen.

'Ah, Mr Mole,' he said, rising from his back-sufferer's chair. 'Sorry to call you in, but there's been an incident.'

Incident. The word hung in the air, pregnant with menace.

'Glenn brought a cheque for a million pounds to school today,' he said. 'There is a strict rule that anything over a monetary value of PS10 has to be given to the school secretary for safe-keeping. However, when Miss Trellis, his maths teacher, tried to take the cheque from Glenn he became abusive and called her a drongo. I won't have my female staff abused and intimidated, Mr Mole. I have suspended Glenn for a week.'

I said, 'The cheque was for a million pounds, Mr Patience. What did you think it was? His pocket money?'

Patience said, 'He was waving it around in the playground. Some of the first-years were sick with excitement.'

I threatened to take Glenn away from the school.

Patience said, 'You won't get him into another school round here. Bott is known to staff rooms up and down the county. He is infamous.'

Glenn was sitting on a scratched-up wooden bench outside the office. He stood up as I came out and said, 'Sorry, Dad.'

## **Saturday March 28<sup>th</sup>**

William and Glenn asked me what we were going to 'do' over the weekend. I said that when I was a boy I didn't do anything. I just hung about the house until it was time to go back to bed.

## **Monday March 30<sup>th</sup>**

My mother rang and asked me what I would like for my birthday on Thursday. I said, 'I would like a lilac lavatory brush and holder from the Innovations catalogue.'

She said, 'Don't be ridiculous!'

I said, 'I'm perfectly serious. Archie's brush has lost all of its bristles.'

She said, 'I'll get you a book token as usual.'

She asked how William was. I said, 'He's extremely well,' then pointedly, 'as is my other son, Glenn.'

She said, 'I'm trying very hard with Glenn, Adrian, but I have to admit that...' There was silence, then she burst out with, 'I can't bear the way he breathes through his mouth, and I can't stand to watch him with a knife and fork.'

I said that I couldn't bear the way that Ivan's eyebrows met in the middle, or the way he knotted his tie or the way he pushed himself up against her when she was at the sink. But I replaced the receiver with a heavy heart. We had both gone too far. Dishonesty is obviously the best policy.

## **Tuesday March 31<sup>st</sup>**

A panic attack at 3.17 a.m. What had I done with my life?

I am an unsuccessful husband.

I am a disappointing son.

I am a failed writer.

I have failed to master the Psion Organizer.



I prayed fervently that I wouldn't fail with my sons.

# Spring

**Wednesday April 1<sup>st</sup>**

*April Fools' Day*

Oh, joy! Oh, precious rapture! A letter has arrived from the BBC!

Dear Adrian Mole,

I will cut to the chase. I have just finished reading *The White Van* (never mind how it got into my hand, suffice it to say that it has a large cult following here at the BBC). I am bowled over by this magnificent piece of work, and I would like to make a TV series out of it. I envisage 20 hour-long episodes.

The casting, of course, is crucial, but early thoughts include Robbie Coltrane, Dawn French, Pauline Quirke, Richard Griffiths.

I am away today on a Stress Awareness Course (mobile phones are banned). I will be back in my office tomorrow. Please telephone me then.

Yours sincerely,

John Birt

Director General

Then, handwritten,

PS. I can't tell you how excited I am by this.

I immediately telephoned Brick Eagleburger and left a message on his voicemail asking him to ring me back. Then, after supplying the boys with food and clean clothes and conducting the now almost obligatory search for shoes, I drove round to my mother's and photocopied the letter.

I have faxed copies to George 'n' Tania, Brick Eagleburger, Pandora, Barry Kent, Peter Savage and the Leicester Mercury. I then posted copies to the faxless: Nigel, Grandma and Grandad Sugden, Auntie Susan and her wife.

Dear Diary, I will sleep well tonight. John Birt has given me a wonderful thirty-first birthday present.

**Thursday April 2<sup>nd</sup>**

I was woken by William throwing himself on to my bed and poking the sharp corner of a birthday card into my neck. He had made the card at nursery school under the supervision of Mrs Parvez. There was a crude approximation of me on the front: a stick man with huge teeth and wild hair. Seven fingers on each hand, and wearing high-heeled shoes. Inside, Mrs Parvez had made William copy 'To Daddy, best wishes from William'. 'Best wishes!' It speaks volumes about Mrs Parvez's relationship with her own father.

Glenn hung about in the bedroom doorway, glowering and smiling in turn. His hair has grown considerably, but he still looks like a thug. I will be glad when he has outgrown his thug clothes and I can introduce him to the Next range of junior menswear.

Eventually he came forward and thrust a shop-bought card into my hand. I took it out of its lurid red envelope. The illustration on the front was of a pipe-smoking, jutting-jawed fly fisherman who was up to his waders in a river. Jut-jaw's vintage car was parked on the bank. The boot of the car was open, showing that Jut-jaw had already caught five large fish, and placed them in a wicker basket. There was a black Labrador gazing up at its master. On the front of the card it said, 'To A Special Father On Your Birthday'. Inside there was a verse printed in Gothic script:

Father, it's your Special Day,  
Time for fun and pleasures gay.  
The sporting life it is for you,  
tramping through the morning dew,  
with dog and rod and fishing-line,  
then home to bathe and sup and dine.

It could hardly have been more inappropriate. I loathe the great outdoors, and the thought of encouraging a harmless fish to impale itself on a sharp hook fills me with horror. However, when I saw that the boy had written 'Love from Glenn' in not too bad handwriting, and had scrawled thirty-one kisses on a blank interior page, I was touched.

Glenn also handed me a snake ashtray he'd made in Pottery at school. It consisted of a long thin coil of baked clay, ending in a snake's face. He said, 'In case you want to start smokin', Dad.' The post brought cards from Pandora (Happy Birthday, Constituent), Nigel (a card that said, 'Come out of the closet, you know you're gay,' with a drawing of a man stuck in a wardrobe), the Sugdens (a jut-jaw washing a sports car).

When I was in the shower somebody came round and pushed the Mole family's cards through the front door. My mother's card was tactless in the extreme: a cartoon balding man (who looked uncommonly like me, actually) had a bubble coming out of his mouth saying, 'I'm over thirty, can you direct me to the Hill?' My father's card was of a village green cricketing scene, and several black Labradors were watching the match from various vantage-points. A woman was coming down the pavilion steps with a tray of sandwiches. The women spectators were wearing pretty frocks, hats and high-heeled shoes. My father had written: 'Those were the days! Happy Birthday, Adrian, from Dad and Tania.'

I rang John Birt but his secretary said he was in a meeting. I was surprised to find that she didn't know about *The White Van*! I rang at various intervals throughout the day, but Mr Birt seemed to go from meeting to meeting. There was a small birthday celebration at my mother's at 4 p.m.: a

Spice Girls and a Marks & Spencer's party-food pack, which my mother hadn't properly defrosted. A toast to me in sparkling wine. Rosie gave me a boot-fair find, a leatherbound copy of Chekhov's short stories.

She said, 'It smells f--mouldy, but it might clean up.'

I thanked her from the bottom of my heart. She is obviously the only member of my family who understands me. My mother started whimpering when Glenn levered a mini-pizza into his mouth with the flat of his knife, so I took him and William home.

At 11 a.m. an extraordinary thing: there was a knock on the door. I laid aside my copy of Lee Salk's *What Every Child Would Like His Parents to Know* and went downstairs. On the doorstep was a box. I took it inside and opened the lid. A balloon floated out and hovered near the ceiling. A card inside the box said, 'I burn for you, I yearn for you.' Who can this be from, dear Diary?

### **Friday April 3.**

6.30 a.m. John Birt is now out of the office, again, on a 'Visions and Values' course. His secretary was unable to give me an account of his movements. I rang Brick, but he had heard nothing either. I asked to speak to Boston. Brick said, 'She don't work here no longer, Aidy. She kinda flipped and I had to let her go. She's back on the East Coast.'

Ms Eleanor Flood arrived at her usual hour; she admired the balloon and said, 'I didn't know it was your birthday.'

I was quite relieved.

### **Tuesday April 7.**

Apparently the sales figures for *Offally Good!--The Book!* are disappointingly low. The publishers are talking about remaindering some and pulping others. Apparently W.H. Smith have got a machine somewhere that turns books into fertilizer. My father, the book-phobic, would no doubt enjoy seeing this literature-crushing machine in operation.

Pie Crust rang and asked me to go on the *Late Night with Derek and June* show on Thursday. Dev Singh had to cancel due to stress. He has booked into the Priory for a week. Derek and June is filmed at studios in Soho at midnight. I said I would require a hotel room, as I was reluctant to drive both up and down the M1 on the same night due to the danger of falling asleep at the wheel.

Rosie is going to babysit.

Nothing from the BBC. A bloke called Richard Brookes, from the *Observer*, rang me and asked for details about the BBC deal. He told me that he had first read the treatment for *The White Van* three weeks ago. When I asked him how he had got his hands on it, he said that it had been passed around in the Groucho Club. I don't know whether to be flattered or outraged.

I prayed throughout my interview that nobody of my acquaintance would watch *Late Night with Derek and June* tonight. First I had to go along with the lie that I was sitting at their own kitchen table, whereas in fact we were in a crappy little 'studio' in the red-light district. Then, to my astonishment, Derek said to me, live on camera, 'We've been friends for years, haven't we, Adrian?'

He appeared to be doing an impression of Mr Bean. He took a copy of *Offally Good!--The Book!*, turned to the recipe for chicken giblets in parsnip coulis, and began to read aloud.

June's fat shoulders shook throughout. The whole interview was risibly amateurish. Derek and June made personal remarks about my appearance, then appeared to ignore me and chatted between themselves about their caravan holiday at Ingoldmells. The studio crew seemed to find their every banal utterance hysterically funny. When they turned their attention back to me it became obvious to me that Derek and June were having fun at my expense. They were, in fact, totally uninterested in *offal*. I felt angry and humiliated. I left the studio as soon as the filming was finished.

A spotty girl in denim shorts and thigh boots was leaning against my car smoking a cigarette. 'Hand job?' she said.

'No, it's fully automatic,' I replied, got in and drove to the Temple Hotel in Haven Hill Gardens, W2.

### **Temple Hotel**

2 a.m. This place is a minimalist nightmare of Japanese design. My room is white and cream, and is decorated with old Japanese petrol cans. I can't find a way to open the wardrobes, or discover how to flush the lavatory. I will have to sleep with the lights on as don't know how to switch them off. When I finally managed to turn the shower on it was so powerful that it hurled me out of the cubicle, then flooded the floor and gushed into the sleeping pit, where it was soaked up by the futon.

I should have paid more attention when the hall porter showed me around the room but, to be honest, I was too intimidated by his severe black uniform and French accent to concentrate.

8 a.m. I found it hard to sleep for worrying about the flood from the shower. Would they charge me for water damage to the futon? Then there were the contents of the lavatory bowl: how would I dispose of them? I made another search for the flushing mechanism, but failed to find anything remotely like a handle, a knob, a switch or a floor pump. I took a tumbler and used it to pour water into the lavatory. It took twenty minutes before the contents finally disappeared.

### **Saturday April 11.**

Glenn told me that it's his birthday next Saturday. 'I'm becomin' a teenager, Dad.' He is very excited. I didn't like to tell him that my own teenage years were utterly desolate and miserable. However, he has one advantage over me: he can in no way be described as an intellectual. Glenn does not lie awake pondering on the nature of existence. He lies awake wondering who Hoddle will field in the World Cup.

### **Monday April 13.**

A postcard from Cape Cod, America! I know no one in those parts! Blank, apart from my address on one side, and on the other 'April Fool, Nebbish!' A mystery.

## Tuesday April 14<sup>th</sup>

The shame of it! No wonder John Birt failed to ring me back. I have studied the handwritten PS endlessly, but don't recognize the prankster's handwriting. How will I ever overcome my terrible humiliation and disappointment?

Glenn tried to console me with a joke. 'At least you know it weren't me, Dad, on April 1<sup>st</sup>. I didn't have no handwritin'.'

## Wednesday April 15<sup>th</sup>

Tonight, with Eleanor's assistance, Glenn copied out his name and address and also 'Gazza', 'Hoddle' and 'World Cup'.

I opened a bottle of Mateus Rose and asked Eleanor to join me in celebrating his progress. I almost wished I hadn't--after half a glass she began to gaze at me very intensely. I think I am going off her a little.

## Thursday April 16<sup>th</sup>

Eleanor rang at 7.30 a.m. (a touch early, I felt) to apologize for her melancholic behaviour. Apparently she is in therapy due to 'inadequate nurturing and a subsequent lack of self-esteem'. I didn't ask for details.

I said that I, too, had been in therapy due to my parents' neglect of me when young.

In thirty-one years I can remember only two acts of parental self-sacrifice from my father. The first was when I was six years old, and dropped my raspberry ripple on the sand at Wells-next-the-Sea. He gave me his own (slightly eaten). The second was when I was suspended from school for contravening the rules by wearing red socks. He took time off work and went to see the headmaster, the fearsome Mr Scruton, and forced him to make a grovelling apology.

2 a.m. Regarding the Red Socks Row. I've just remembered the true facts.

1. My father did not take time off from work. He was unemployed at the time.
2. He did not confront Scruton at the school. He telephoned him.
3. Scruton did not make a grovelling apology.
4. On the third day I capitulated and wore black socks to school.

## Saturday April 18<sup>th</sup>

### *Glenn's birthday*

Glenn came into my bedroom this morning and thanked me for the 'You're a teenager, Son!' card. (Picture: a blond boy with a baseball cap on back to front, sitting in front of a computer.) He asked me to read the verse inside. After I'd done so I wished I'd read the inscription thoroughly in the shop. I would almost certainly have bought another card.

'It's a boy!' the midwife said. Emotions went from A to Z. All your life I've guided you, taken you to school and zoo, Helped you with your ABC, been there when you needed me. Now you are an in-between, not child, not man, but new-turned teen. As you make your way through life, there may be days of woe and strife Remember I am always here to give, advise and lend an ear. I'm your dad and you're my son. When most is said, and all is done.

I thought Glenn was moved by these sentiments, though it's hard to tell, with his face being as it is. He liked the England strip I bought him from JJB Sports, and went to the bathroom straight away to change into it. He's got my legs: he doesn't look good in shorts. William gave him a card he'd made at nursery: a cardboard football decorated in glued and painted polenta. When we were sitting eating breakfast (I insist we sit around the table for all meals--I grew up watching my mother eat standing up with her back to the sink and my father sitting on top of the pedal bin), Glenn said, 'Am I havin' a surprise party, Dad?'

I said, 'No.'

Glenn said, 'But you'd have to be savin' that, wouldn't you, Dad?'

When he'd gone outside to kick his football up and down the yard with William, I phoned Sharon and asked her to come to a party with her children.

She sounded pleased--she's never been to Rampart Terrace before. I then rang round my family and begged them to attend at 5 p.m., and to bring cards and presents.

I left a message on Eleanor's machine.

I spent most of the day shopping for the 'surprise' party. I bought a Jane Asher football cake and thirteen candles. At 4.45 a.m. I made a huge cauldron full of mashed potatoes and put thirty-five links of Walker's sausages into the oven. I cut up two pounds of Spanish onions and fried them slowly. I then spent the next quarter of an hour on the doorstep, looking anxiously up and down the street, praying that the guests would turn up.

Eventually, Sharon, Caister, Kent and Bradford arrived on foot, then my own family. I asked them all to wait outside until I'd lured Glenn into the yard by telling him I wanted him to help me hone my footballing skills--an unlikely story, but he fell for it. After five minutes of tedious footballing pretence I led him into the living room, which was now crowded with his friends and relations. He blushed to the roots of his hair and fell silent as the assembled company sang 'Happy Birthday To You'.

Eleanor's voice soared above the others; she was like a song-thrush fallen amongst crows. Tania Braithwaite said, in a loud whisper to my father as tea was served, 'Sausages, mashed potatoes and fried onions? How very basic' My mother overheard and said to her, 'What have you got against sausages?'

Tania said, 'I've nothing against sausages per se.'

My mother nodded towards my father and said, 'I expect by now you've settled for chipolatas.'

Tania turned away angrily and spent the next half-hour talking to Eleanor about cashmere. 'It's scandalous,' I heard her say.

When she'd gone I said to Eleanor, 'If Tania thinks it's a scandalous price she shouldn't buy it.'

Eleanor looked back at me, baffled. Then she said, 'We weren't talking about cashmere. We were discussing the situation in Kashmir.'

I'm glad I'm no longer fixated with her. No full-blooded man wants a relationship with a flat-chested woman who talks about Kashmir in the late afternoon. Caister was passed around and admired by all the guests, except Eleanor. Privately I think the kid is a bit of a Woody Allen lookalike, though without the glasses, of course.

Sharon looked pleased when Glenn asked my mother to take a photograph of him with his mum and dad.

My mother took several shots of us with her disposable camera. She was not happy when Glenn thanked her, saying, 'Thank you, Grandma.' She likes William to call her Granny Paulie.

### **Sunday April 19<sub>th</sub>**

This morning I asked Glenn if he knew what 'Sabbath' meant. He screwed up his face in concentrated thought, then said, 'Would I be right in thinkin' it's an olden days' band?'

I said, 'That's Black Sabbath, who glorified in mocking Christianity and middle-class mores.' I explained about the Sabbath, saying that it represented the seventh day, when God had a day off from designing the world.

He was fascinated. He told me that they've done Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Paganism at school, but they haven't got round to 'doin' Christianity yet, Dad'.

He has never heard of Moses and the Ten Commandments. As we cleared the Sunday-lunch table, I told him and William about Jesus turning water into wine. 'Did he have a drinkin' problem, Dad?' he asked, when I finished.

Most of the people in Glenn's previous life had an official problem, which the state was helping them to cure. I didn't tell him about the Opal Fruits, and my netting phobia. He thinks I'm entirely sane. I don't want to disabuse him of that opinion. After lunch, I slept on the sofa while the boys played with the PlayStation that Sharon bought from a catalogue for Glenn's birthday.

Had an erotic dream about stripping Eleanor of cashmere in Kashmir. It was some minutes before I could move from the sofa with any dignity.

### **Wednesday April 22<sub>nd</sub>**

Bill Broadway is in Paris tracking down a pair of World Cup tickets. I rang the ticket hotline to buy a few as an investment, but apparently 20 million people had the same idea. Only 15,000 got through. I wasn't one of them.

3 a.m. Glenn has just had a nightmare that Alan Shearer, his hero, is dropped by Hoddle for being an atheist.

### **Friday April 24<sub>th</sub>**

There is a drug on the market (not Leicester market) called Viagra. It gives a man an hour-long erection.

My father is already in a state of ecstasy at the prospect! He has persuaded Tania to withdraw some of her pension-plan money and buy two return tickets to New York to track down a supplier! More 1950s baby-boomer madness!

At 6 a.m. I drove my father and Tania to Birmingham Airport. They both sat in the back with their seat belts on. The M6 was particularly awful so I drove slowly, but got trapped between two huge articulated lorries. At one point my father shouted, 'For crying out bleddy loud, get a move on. Overtake! We'll miss the duty-free at this rate.'

Tania looked even more tense than usual. I expect she was nervous about the effect the Viagra drug would have on their relationship. I loaded their luggage on to a trolley—they've both got bad backs from gardening. My father muttered to me, 'Nine thousand miles and two thousand quid for a bit of pork swordsmanship! It had better be worth it.'

Due to the unseasonable heatwave I promised to water their garden twice a day. Global warming is playing havoc with our English horticulture. 'Please don't let the containers dry out,' begged Tania. It's pathetic how enslaved people become to a few plants. I hope it never happens to me.

### **Saturday April 25<sub>th</sub>**

I saw my love on the news tonight: she was addressing a small crowd of whelk workers on a quay somewhere. She looked totally ravishing. Her hair was blowing in the stiff east-coast breeze. She spoke about the government's pledge to protect whelks with passion and intensity, as others might speak of Bach or early-English poetry.

### **Sunday April 26<sub>th</sub>**

My father rang from New York at 3 a.m. this morning, oblivious to the fact that in England people were sleeping. He asked about the garden. I lied and said that I had given it a good soaking. 'Good,' he said, 'because when we saw CNN the weather girl said that Britain was having freak hot weather for April.' To change the subject I asked him if he had managed to track down some Viagra. He said, 'Yeah, I've found a supplier. He's dropping some off at the hotel tonight.' He sounded like Al Pacino.

As soon as we'd had breakfast, we drove round to The Lawns. The gravel was OK, it was very nicely raked, but the plants in the pots were wizened and drooping. I dragged the hose out and ordered the boys to saturate the grass and the galvanized containers, which contained the various ex-flowers. The water just ran off the impacted surface. 'It's too late,' said Glenn. 'Everythin's dead, Dad.'

We debated whether it would be better to remove the wilting plants, or leave them where they were. In the end we pulled them up and replaced them with some nice cheerful stuff from Homebase.

We were invited to Wisteria Walk for Sunday lunch. I was pleased to accept. I'm sick of cooking and trying to cater for the very different tastes of

the boys. William will now only eat Coco Pops, Marmite on white bread with the crusts removed, seedless grapes and yoghurt with no bits.

Glenn has opted for vegetarianism after watching a World in Action documentary called 'Slaughter on Perkins Avenue', an expose of an abattoir in Upper Norwood. As the programme came to its horrific conclusion, freeze-framing the face of a stun-gunned cow, Glenn pushed away the beef sandwiches I'd prepared for supper and said, 'I shan't be eatin' meat ever again, Dad. Have we got any cheese?'

I seem to exist on a diet of boiled, mashed, fried, roasted, sauted and baked potatoes, as did the greatest writers in the history of literature, Dostoevsky and Joyce, both of whom hailed from countries where the potato was a staple foodstuff. There is obviously something in the humble spud that aids the creative process.

Ivan is looking increasingly stressed out. As we laid the table my mother told me that he is spending sixteen hours a day at his terminal in the alcove of the dining-room. She said, 'Information pours into this house twenty-four hours a day. There's e-mail, and voicemail, and data from the Web, then there's faxes and the ordinary phone and letters through the door. The human brain can't cope with it all, Adrian. Even his bloody car tells him what to do.'

I agreed that it sounded as though Ivan was suffering from sensory overload. I asked her, 'What exactly is it that Ivan does for a living?'

She confessed that she didn't exactly know.

When I went to tell Ivan that lunch was ready, he was at his terminal, white-faced and sweating. I asked him what was wrong. He said, 'I've done a Web search for drinking-straw manufacturers and received 17,000 entries.'

I steered him gently towards the dining end of the room, but I noticed that, as he carved the chicken, he constantly glanced towards the terminal where the names and e-mail addresses of manufacturers of drinking straws throughout the world were rolling ceaselessly down the screen.

Over lunch I tried to pin down what he did. 'I process information,' he said, tetchily.

'For whom?' I asked.

'For whomsoever will buy the information I process,' he said, raising his voice. The table fell silent, apart from the sound of cutlery on the plates and Glenn's noisy demolition of a roast turnip.

Later, as the boys and I washed up, I heard my mother say to Ivan, 'If this relationship is going to work, I'll have to have my own terminal and a dedicated phone line.' I asked her why she needed her own equipment, and she said that she was hoping to start up a business, desk-top printing greeting cards for the millennium. Divorce cards, love-child cards, I'm Gay cards and in-vitro-fertilization cards.

I was glad to get back inside my own house, where the only cutting-edge thing is Archie Tait's old bread-knife.

## Monday April 27<sup>th</sup>

Brick forwarded a letter from a bloke in Belgrade with an unpronouncable name full of Ks and Js who wants to translate Birdwatching, should it ever be published in the former Yugoslavia.

Dear Mr Mole,

I am reading your most wonderful good writings Bird-watching and I am thinking that this will be good for Serb people to read also. Are you permission giving for my translate this into English form Serbian language?

I am translating too The Catcher in the Wry, The Lord of the Files, and of my latest Bridget Jones Dairy.

If your agreement with this preposition you will send fax to mine office. As shows this at above.

I am send you in hope good wish.

Jajkj Vljkkjv

I rang Brick. He wasn't as enthusiastic as I had hoped. He said, 'I ain't got no faith in Vljkkjv's English. The guy don't got no feeling for the language.'

William blabbed the truth about the horticultural disaster at The Lawns to Tania as soon as we spotted them in the arrivals hall of Birmingham Airport. She visibly paled. 'Did you manage to salvage any of the herbaceous stuff?' she said.

'Describe them,' I said.

'When in bloom, they're rather lovely, pale and subtle,' she said.

Glenn said, 'You've gotta use another tense now, Mrs Braithwaite. Could have been rather lovely, you gotta be sayin' now.' He has obviously benefited from private education.

*10.30 a.m.* Tania has phoned my mother to complain. Apparently she thinks I ruined her garden deliberately. She has pulled up all my colourful replacement plants and replanted with her herbaceous weed look-alikes.

My mother told me in the strictest confidence that Tania is sick to death of my father's new sexual demands. Apparently (according to my mother, who is not always a reliable witness) Tania lies back for an hour and thinks about her seed catalogues. She told my mother that she will be glad when my father's supply of Viagra runs out. She is praying that the NHS refuses to prescribe it to impotent men. She said, 'I'd hoped that gardening would sublimate George's sex drive.'

I don't want my mother and Tania to be friends: it's against the natural order of things. It would be like Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams going to Ibiza together.

## Tuesday April 28<sup>th</sup>

Pandora was on the news tonight. She has been outed as a whelk-hater by an anonymous enemy! My love was secretly filmed in conversation with

Peter Mandelson is at a restaurant in Notting Hill. There was no sound, but the enemy had employed the services of an expert lip-reader and the following transcript was shown on the screen as 'Pandy' and 'Mandy' stuffed themselves on Tex-Mex delicacies.

MANDY: You know how much I love Tony, Pandy. I'd do anything for him. Anything.

PANDY: Yeah, yeah, but you can't expect him to have to choose between you and Gordon, can you? Wow! The salsa is sublime.

MANDY: I've tried to like Gordon but...Is that Robin Cook in the corner with Gaynor?

pandy: No, relax, it's just another ugly bearded git with a young girl.

MANDY: Talking of ugly bearded things, I caught you on the news on Saturday night. You know, that whelk thing.

PANDY: You're thinking of oysters, Mandy darling. They have beards. Whelks are those revolting things that look like diseased genitals. How anybody could put one in their mouth! (Laughter.)

MANDY: Anyway, Pandy, you were magnificent. Are you happy at Ag and Fish?

PANDY: No. I want Robin's job. I speak Serbo-Croat, v Russian, Mandarin, French, Italian and Spanish. I'm made for the Foreign Office. And I'd look great addressing the United Nations. In Vivienne Westwood.

MANDY: I'll put a word in Tony's ear, Pandy.

PANDY: Shall we have a pudding?

MANDY: Not for me, just a decaff.

### Wednesday April 29<sub>th</sub>

The headline in the Sun said, 'WHELKS--'DISEASED GENITALS', SAYS PAN'

### Thursday April 30<sub>th</sub>

#### WHELK STORM GROWS

Pandora Braithwaite MP has denied saying that whelks remind her of diseased genitals. She said in a statement today, 'Lip-reading is not an exact science.'

The Whelk Association Trust have called for Braithwaite's resignation. 'Her position is untenable,' said a TWAT spokesman.

Independent

The British Association of Lip Readers has joined others in calling for Dr Pandora Braithwaite's resignation. A spokeswoman for the Society for the Deaf said today, 'She has put us back in the Dark Ages.'

Rick Stein, renowned fish chef, has commented, 'When I look at a whelk, sex is not the first thing that springs to mind.'

Brutus--Express

My mother said that Pandora has been summoned to an emergency meeting of the Ashby-de-la-Zouch Labour Party tonight. Their first-anniversary celebration, where she was to have been a guest of honour, is to go ahead without her.

### Friday May 1<sub>st</sub>

6.30 a.m. Pandora has just left my bed! She turned up at midnight last night, totally distraught after resigning from her job at Ag and Fish. She said, 'I don't know why I'm here,' and fell into my arms on the doorstep. I led her inside and said that it was a tragedy that a few stinking whelks had led to her downfall. We sat by the fire; she took a bottle of Stolichnaya from her briefcase and asked me to fetch two glasses. I went into the kitchen, I arranged some Twiglets in a bowl, cut some cheese up into chunks, added ice to two glasses and found a bottle of tonic. I put everything on a tray and took it through.

'I want to get drunk,' she said, as I came in.

She had kicked off her shoes and was curled up in Archie's manky armchair. A portrait of Beatrice Webb gazed sternly down on her as she lit a cigarette. 'Whelks bloody well do look like clapped-out genitals,' she said, defiantly. Then, 'Why should I have to lose my job for simply telling the truth?'

It was a naive question from an elected MP. I knelt by her side and took her wrist in my hand. She said, 'Why are you taking my pulse?' Then burst into tears and said, 'You've always been there for me, Aidy.'

We finished the vodka, and I opened a bottle of champagne I'd been keeping for Millennium Night. After that had been drunk I searched Archie's pantry and found a half-bottle of Martell brandy. Andrew spat at me as I slopped some into Pandora's glass.

At 2.30 a.m. the telephone rang, but there was only the faint sound of shallow breathing.

Shortly afterwards Pandora and I struggled up the stairs to bed. She slept in my arms all night. We both kept our underwear on (hers was disappointingly functional). I had been looking forward to making love to her in the morning, when we were both sober, and had bolted the door from the inside to prevent interruption, but at 6.15 a.m. her pager bleeped and she leaped out of bed to check it.

She was on message again.

She dressed hurriedly, mumbled, 'Thanks,' unbolted the door and ran downstairs. I heard her Saab turn the corner a moment later. She telephoned at 7 a.m. from her car on the M1. 'I must know, Aidy, did we do it?'

I assured her that we were no further forward in our carnal knowledge of each other than we had ever been. I asked her where she was going in such a hurry. She said, 'I've got a meeting with Alastair, to plan my comeback. Then we're lunching at Wilton's, the fish restaurant, with a photographer.'

I can guess what she'll choose from the menu.

9.30 a.m. An extraordinary outburst from Eleanor tonight! I must say, she did look rather wild when she arrived and swept past me through the front door without a word. After Glenn's lesson was over, I offered her a cup of tea. She nodded, biting her lip and looking a bit like Anna, in *The King and I*, when she tells Yul Brynner she is going back to England. I made the tea to complete silence, apart from the thwack of the football on the yard wall. I handed her the mug, which said, 'Having a bad hair day?' (Picture of a stick woman with hair on end.) She looked at the mug and said tersely, 'Why this mug?'

I said, 'No reason. It was chosen off the mug tree quite at random.'

Eleanor said, 'Why have you stopped gazing at my wrists?' She then told me, in a choked-up voice, that she'd waited outside my house all night and witnessed Pandora leaving at 6.20 a.m. What could I say, dear Diary? Caught in the act! Unfortunately I slurped noisily on my tea, then tried to disguise it by coughing. I inhaled some of the liquid, which went down my windpipe. This led to a protracted and messy coughing fit, complete with snot and running eyes and a slight leak of urine from my full bladder.

Glenn came in and said, 'Why are you cryin', Dad?'

I was still unable to speak.

Eleanor said, 'The world is a sad place, Glenn.'

This was a gross misrepresentation of the reason for my tears. Glenn said, 'I think the world's all right.'

To think I once fantasized about lying on top of Eleanor and covering her pale body with kisses!

When I'd recovered and Glenn had gone upstairs to have a bath, I said to Eleanor, 'I'd rather you didn't give Glenn the impression that I'm in the habit of weeping for the world.'

She said, 'Everything looks black to me now.'

I said, 'Everything about you is black. Why don't you introduce a bit of colour into your life? A pink shirt or a white jumper might cheer you up.'

She said, 'My numerologist warned me that I would meet a new lover through my work, and that it would end in tears.'

I said, 'Eleanor, you are constantly adding up two and two and making five. We've never been lovers.'

She looked me in the eyes and said, 'Do you want to be lovers?'

I explained that, like Stephen Fry, I had taken a vow of chastity.

She said, 'I don't believe you. The real reason is that you've been talking to Roger Patience and the police.'

'What about?' I said, alarmed at the turn the conversation had taken.

She ignored my question and said, 'You're in love with that MP tart. You had her in our bed.'

I said, 'Pandora and I slept together. However, nothing of a sexual nature took place. We kept our underwear on at all times.'

She then dropped the bombshell that Stephen Fry had renounced chastity and was going about saying that sex was 'absolutely marvellous'.

Glenn shouted from the bathroom that William had run off with the World Cup soap-on-a-rope. I went upstairs to sort the boys out. When I came downstairs I noticed that Eleanor had opened a button on her black silk shirt. I asked her casually about the rather worrying police reference she had made earlier.

She said, 'If you really must know I have a police record, though why it should impact on my effectiveness as a teacher--'

I cut her off. 'What kind of police record?' I asked.

She shook her head and said, 'Why does this happen to me over and over and over again? Why can't I find a man who would walk through fire for me, as I would for him?' She lifted the hem of her long black dress and dabbed at her eyes.

I saw that she had a tattoo on her left knee, a phoenix with wings outstretched. She obviously never wears miniskirts.

She said, 'My father rejected me when I was thirteen years old and men have been casting me aside ever since.'

I said, 'Just because your father ran away doesn't mean...'

She rose from her chair. 'He didn't run away,' she said, 'he died, in an accident.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Was it a car crash?'

She gave a bitter smile. 'Oh no, that would have been acceptable.' She looked defiantly at me. 'A small dog fell on his head from a balcony, in Torremolinos.'

Diary, I tried not to laugh. And for at least five seconds I kept my composure but then I cracked. I turned my head away but she obviously saw my shoulders shaking and said, 'Yes, laugh, laugh at the most tragic event in my life.' I struggled to control myself and blurted out, 'Was it a pedigree?'

Why? Why? I knew perfectly well that there are no pedigree dogs in Torremolinos. I was there five years ago.

I paid her PS9, then asked her to leave and not come back.

Before she slammed the door she said, 'I will be back!'



If she does come back I won't open the door to her.

## **Saturday May 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Lawns**

11.59. I have nothing left. No house, no money, no car, no manuscripts. Eleanor burned the lot. William's insects. Glenn's trainers. The BP bloke apologized for selling her the petrol. He had joined the crowd of excited onlookers as they watched my house burn down.

We stayed and watched until the flames had been extinguished. Then a Chief Inspector Baron told me that Eleanor Flood had been arrested and that in his opinion she should never have been 'let out of that secure unit'. Apparently her career as an arsonist started at teacher training college with a small fire in the bar after she'd been refused a late-night drink.

My mother turned up in her towelling bathrobe and the grey socks she wears in bed. She leaped out of Ian's car and ran towards where we stood behind the police barrier at the end of the street. The excitement and the reflective glow from the fire made her look ten years younger.

'Adrian, please tell me you were insured!' were her first words.

I couldn't bring myself to reply. Eventually Glenn said, 'Dad kept forgettin' to buy any, didn't you, Dad?' He clumsily patted my shoulder. I patted his.

A fireman came out of the house carrying something carefully in his helmet. I hoped it was some of my fifty-pound notes, but it turned out to be Andrew. He is quite thin when his fur is wet and flattened down.

My father tried to comfort me by saying, 'Houses and possessions can tie you down, lad.'

Things are undoubtedly bad. However, I have William and Glenn and Andrew and a smoke-damaged diary that a fireman found under the mattress of Glenn's bed. On the cover are the words: 'The Top Secret Diary of Glenn Mole (13').

On the first page is written: 'When I grow up I wood like to be my dad.'

I have often wondered how I would stand up against fire, flood and tempest. Would I run in panic and try to save my own life? Until tonight I suspected that I would do exactly that. But when I woke to the exploding glass and the choking smoke and the sharp flames on the stairs, I found that my own life was unimportant to me. Nothing else mattered apart from removing my sons from danger.

I expect that by tomorrow I will have embellished the story and given myself a heroic status I do not deserve, but all the same, on this night at this hour, I am pleased to record that I acquitted myself well.

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