



Secret Diary
of a
**Demented
Housewife**

'Hilariously written...
will keep you laughing
all the way' *Woman*



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Secret Diary of a Demented Housewife
by
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5 September

Have decided that summer is seriously overrated (unless you own a top-notch villa in the South of France and have a Swedish au pair on red alert 24/7).

After eight weeks, two days and three hours alone with Katie and Jack, I am practically a shadow of my former self. Well, not a shadow of my former self exactly. In cruel twist of cosmic irony, have actually put on six pounds due to excessive strawberry Cornetto consumption, but am definitely suffering from that serious celebrity affliction – mental exhaustion. In fact, feel very strongly that I may need to check myself into the Priory at any minute.

Luckily, Katie goes back to playschool (and to bona-fide child-care professionals who actually know what they are doing) tomorrow. I will now have lots of vital bonding time alone with Jack (crucial for second children so that they don't grow up to be axe-wielding mass murderers who slay all their co-workers in one fell swoop). Will also have lots of free time to pursue fulfilling hobbies, like Pilates (how hard can it be to move so slowly?) or knitting (hot new celebrity pastime).

Vow to resist temptation to devour *Heat* in one sitting, even if I am dying to read all about Britney and Kevin.

Also vow to spend endless carefree hours (well, at least an hour and a half while Jack is napping) doing

quality, life-affirming things to reclaim my spirit *à la* Oprah Winfrey. Will not resort to dawdling round shops in the Centre to fill in the time, like last year.

List of Things to Do to Reclaim Spirit and Find True Inner Self

- Resist temptation to lounge in new Starbucks in the Centre, drinking caramel lattes and eating muffins. Engage in productive, soul-enhancing activity instead. (Productive, soul-enhancing activity To Be Advised.)
- Resist temptation to trail round shops, buying unsuitable clothes I cannot afford. Engage in productive, soul-enhancing activity instead. (See above.)
- Ditto shoe shopping.
- Start reading quality literary fiction recommended in *Sunday Times*, instead of *Heat*, to improve intellect.
- Read Trinny and Susannah's *What Not to Wear* to focus on positive body image. Try not to be scared by pictures of them glaring out of pages at well-washed trackie bottoms and greasy hair.
- Buy Dr. Phil's *Relationship Rescue* to reconnect with Joe on a spiritual and sexual level. (Absolutely crucial to recapture romance ASAP – Joe has been picking his nose in front of me quite a lot lately. Who knows what lies ahead?)
- Investigate life-enhancing volunteer opportunities (something with elderly/poor/sick).

- Try to lose interest in Posh and Becks.
- Ditto Britney and Kevin.
- Accept, once and for all, that am no longer important public-relations assistant (with direct responsibility for ad-hoc administrative duties) but stay-at-home mother and honest-to-goodness housewife.
- Try to remember that being a stay-at-home mother and housewife is a noble profession, not a thankless job. (NB under no circumstances spend long periods of time staring vacantly into space and wondering if the selfless decision to leave the workplace after Jack was born was such a good idea. Also avoid engaging in selective-memory exercises, such as remembering what fun work lunches were or how talking to real adults was so fulfilling. Instead focus on recalling heartbreak of leaving child at crèche. Use of further memory aids such as electric-shock therapy, nettle vest, etc., may be necessary.)

6 September

Very draining day. May well need a bit of celebrity cupping like Gwyneth in order to cope.

Joe's mother rang at the crack of dawn. 'I'm just in the door from six o'clock Mass,' she wheezed (rather alarmingly). 'Poor Father John needs all the support he can get after all those scurrilous rumours about him.' Quickly decided the crack of dawn was way too early to hear sordid tales of fallen priests and loose women

so kept quiet. ‘Anyway, I’m just calling to wish Katie luck, dear,’ she continued, sounding a bit put out that I hadn’t begged her for juicy details. ‘Has she had her breakfast yet? A bowl of porridge would be just the trick – I always gave it to my Joe when he was going to school.’

Made fatal error of admitting that

- (a) We were all still in bed. Yes, even at 6.45 a.m.;
- (b) Katie wouldn’t touch porridge even if Barbie personally endorsed it and it came in a neon-pink box; and
- (c) Joe now prefers Coco Pops.

‘Not up yet?’ she shrieked in alarm. ‘You’d want to get a move on, Susie – the day will be half over. You don’t want the child late on her first day back.’

The thought of it sent her into another fit of panicked wheezing. Took opportunity to stumble into Katie’s room and thrust the phone at her head. ‘Your granny wants to speak to you,’ I mumbled, trying to wipe the grit from my eyes. (NB Must purchase lavender-dipped eye mask with soothing chamomile extract advertised on Lifestyle TV ASAP.)

Katie scowled and promptly burrowed back under her Dora the Explorer duvet.

‘Not very excited, is she, dear?’ Mrs H tutted, as I stumbled back on to the landing and heard Jack screaming for his bottle. ‘I do hope she’s not going to find it difficult to settle back in. My Joe was so brave: he used to run in like a little trooper. Not even a backward

glance. Katie is probably more like *your* side of the family.'

Pretended Jack had fallen down the stairs so I could hang up.

Spent ages fiddling about making extra-special toast with smiley faces made of sugar and honey to give Katie a proper send-off in case she was feeling nervous. Getting the sugar/honey smile to look happy and not downright creepy was tricky, but persevered. Crucial to let Katie know that am here for her in case she has deep-seated issues of abandonment or rejection about the return to playschool. That sort of emotional scarring can take years of therapy (and quite possibly cupping) to get over.

Confided my fears to Joe as he gulped his Coco Pops while simultaneously trying to do his tie.

'She'll be fine, Susie,' he mumbled, chocolate milk dripping down his chin. 'She's a tough little nut.'

Was aghast that

- (a) Katie's own father seems to have very little insight into her very sensitive character, and
- (b) He thinks his daughter is some sort of Lil' Kim gangsta type

but was unable to pursue matter as conversation was cut short by bloodcurdling screams from upstairs.

Katie, on a mission to find the perfect back-to-school ensemble, had attacked Jack with Malibu Barbie for using her favourite pink T-shirt to wipe his snotty nose.

Had reassuring chat with Katie on way to school.

‘It’s OK if you feel a bit sad to be leaving Mummy and Jack,’ I ventured, feeling a little wobbly. ‘You’ll soon get used to playschool again, and remember that Mummy will pick you up at twelve o’clock. OK?’

Caught her looking at me in the rear-view mirror as if I needed special counselling, and then she almost jumped from the car while it was still moving, she was so anxious to get away. Am a bit concerned she seems so eager to get rid of me.

7 September

Fear I may be suffering from some sort of serious attachment-adjustment disorder. Was quite sniffly and traumatized all morning, but consoled myself with two cappuccinos and a double-chocolate-chip muffin in the Centre. Katie is apparently so overjoyed at returning to playschool that she has discarded me heartlessly by the wayside. At least Jack still has some interest in me. For once, he sat quite happily in his buggy without screaming the place down to get out, but only because I let him mush some of the muffin down his pants.

PS Came home to flashing light on answerphone – dove on it in case Katie had had some serious life-threatening mishap at playschool, but it was only VBF (Very Best Friend) Louise. Afraid to call back – can’t remember if she is still fighting with MOM (man of the moment) or not and don’t have energy for the whole commitment-phobe discussion. Again.

8 September

Jack seems to be pining for Katie now she has gone back to school. Caught him scratching her face out of the family photo in the playroom with a Magic Marker this morning. Think it was his sweet way of expressing his confusion and sorrow.

PS Just thought – maybe I'm suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder. May well need overseas holiday in plush Caribbean resort to restore my health and vitality. Or maybe I could dot a few UVA lamps around the living room.

9 September

Mum thinks I need to invest more time in Jack now that Katie is back at playschool. 'What sort of social activities are you involving him in?' she asked, in quite a serious tone, when I phoned to say hello.

'Em, he likes to talk to Play Along Barney in his playpen,' I said, instantly regretting calling her.

'Hmm . . . I think he may need extra mental stimulation,' she said. 'And you could do with getting out and about a bit more. Baby yoga is all the rage now – you should give it a go. I'm sure Jack would adore it.'

Am a bit annoyed. Baby yoga is obviously a blatant attempt to swindle the vulnerable out of their monthly child allowance. It's ridiculous to expect babies to contort themselves every which way at such a young age – Mum can be very unrealistic sometimes. Also, how am

I supposed to juggle a baby exercise class with my hectic schedule? *Dr. Phil* at eleven simply cannot be missed.

PS Called VBF Louise at work to relay hilarious baby-yoga conversation, but she was too busy to talk. Tried to tell Jack all about it instead, but he just eyed me with serious disinterest and waddled away in the other direction.

PPS Maybe Mum is right and I should do more activities with Jack. Am considering buying some Baby Mozart tapes to transform him into a child prodigy.

10 September

Joe in Very Good Mood.

'I really think Maurice is going to promote me, Susie,' he confided excitedly, over dinner. 'All the signs are there. This time next year I'm going to be a director and we'll be on the pig's back.' He whooped with glee, sending the dog cowering under the table with fright.

'That's great,' I said, trying desperately to chop all of Katie's spaghetti into exactly the same length and width as per her specific instructions. 'You deserve it – you work very hard.'

'Well, that's the thing, Susie,' he went on, looking a bit uncomfortable and less gleeful almost immediately. 'I'll have to put in extra hours for a while, just to guarantee the promotion. But it won't be for long, I promise.'

'How do you get on the pig's back, Daddy?' Katie piped up, her face and hair smeared with tomato sauce. 'Can you wear a cowboy hat and boots?'

PS Wonder how Joe can possibly put in extra hours

when he already commits so much time to the firm, but am keeping quiet. Must try to be supportive, loving wife.

11 September

Oprah did a very inspiring show on recycling and the environment today. It was really touching when she confided that since she visited Africa she always thinks of the poor, starving children and their dirty, insanitary water when she's having her power shower. Thought that was really kind and sensitive of her. From now on, will not run the taps for longer than necessary or use the washing-machine too much. This will teach Katie and Jack to be more environmentally conscious when they're brushing their teeth, etc. Crucial to show the next generation how to conserve the planet and so forth. Also, am sneakily quite happy to have an excuse at last to let the dirty laundry build up.

PS Rumours everywhere about Kevin sneaking out of seedy stripper joint. Lots of really good pics in *OK!* of poor Britney looking very sad. No wonder she's smoking even more than usual.

12 September

Joe wasn't home until midnight last night. Good thing I hadn't cooked him any dinner or it would have ended up in the bin.

'Is this the way it's going to be from now on?' I hissed, as he crawled into bed beside me, furious that

he had disturbed a fantastic dream I was having about Brad and Jude at a crucial moment.

‘Sorry, Susie,’ he mumbled, then immediately fell into a deep, snore-filled sleep. Am very worried. Joe could experience serious burnout in no time if this continues. Then he will be even more useless at getting up to Jack in the middle of the night. Must remember to buy him some multivitamins.

13 September

Think Katie is being subjected to some seriously bad influences at playschool.

Mrs H was aghast when she used the S-word today. ‘*What* did she say?’ she squeaked, spluttering her Barry’s Gold Blend tea all over her perfectly ironed blouse.

‘Spit?’ I volunteered, glaring at Katie and vowing to have a stern conversation with her when Mrs H vacated the premises.

‘No, Mummy, I said *shit*,’ Katie chimed, as clear as a bell.

‘Katie, that’s very naughty,’ I scolded, trying my best to look innocent and horrified at the same time.

‘Why? You say it all the time,’ she retorted, pirouetting prettily for Mrs H and smiling widely.

Mrs H looked at me through slitted eyes, obviously trying to decide whether or not to contact social services straight away.

‘She must be picking it up from the other children,’ I said, whipping a fresh packet of fig rolls out of the cupboard in an attempt to distract her. ‘I’ll have to have a word with her teachers tomorrow.’

PS Mum says all children use profanities and it's nothing to worry about. 'It's their way of exploring their boundaries and expressing themselves, darling,' she reassured me. 'Just ignore it, she'll soon get tired of it.'

Could hear Dad bellowing in the background – something about a two-finger salute.

PPS Am getting a bit sick of fig rolls – even if they are only one WeightWatcher point each. Have decided to allow myself custard creams on an ad-hoc basis.

14 September

Louise called to discuss latest developments with her MOM. 'The thing is, Susie,' she said, 'I don't have time to be playing games at my age. I need to know if we're going to get serious and I need to know it now. If I ever stand a chance of having a baby, we need to hit the ground running.'

Thought she should get to know MOM's middle name before she has a baby with him, but decided not to say anything. Louise can be a bit aggressive when she gets emotional, so mumbled something vague and supportive instead.

'You're so lucky to have met Joe when you were both young, Susie,' she went on.

'Yes, I suppose we have kind of grown up together,' I said, filled with a warm, fuzzy feeling at thought of secure and happy home life.

'Yeah, *and* you don't even have to bother trying to look good any more,' she sighed, 'he just accepts you the way you are.'

Felt a bit uncomfortable at this so tried to change the subject and talk about Katie's latest obsession with potty language and whether it reflects some sort of deep-rooted unhappiness at return to playschool.

Suddenly, Louise had to deal with some high-level emergency. Have sneaking suspicion my children may bore her, just a teeny bit.

15 September

Have decided to take up power walking and sculpt my sagging body into a lean, mean sexy machine ASAP. Just need to invest in a serious-looking three-wheel jogging-type buggy that will mow down all other pedestrians at a flick of my wrist. Also need proper walking gear – such as new trainers, breathable Lycra leggings, wraparound shades, etc.

Joe thinks it's a great idea. 'It would be good for you to get into shape again,' he said, when I told him my grand plan. 'Power walking will tone you up in no time.'

Was furious he didn't reassure me that I'm firm, fit and fabulous just the way I am. Bet Becks always says the right thing to Posh when she's feeling fat and unattractive. Or buys her a Range Rover or some such.

16 September

Have discovered that power walking is not all it's cracked up to be. Tried to push Jack at a brisk pace through the park this morning, and felt quite dizzy and disoriented.

Luckily, he insisted on stopping to look at grass, dog poo and litter every five minutes so I could catch my breath. Even luckier, new fitness survey just issued says that four minutes of intense exercise every day is enough to keep you aerobically fit and lean. Feel very smug. I am probably at my physical peak, what with all the carrying of children, lugging of vacuum cleaners, etc.

17 September

According to theperfectparent.com, Katie could be hiding any anxiety she feels about returning to school. Makes complete sense – she seems thrilled to be back, but inside she could be insecure and confused. Suspect that Mum thinks I'm right, even though she's trying not to alarm me.

'Just keep an eye on her, darling,' she breezed down the phone. 'I'm sure she's fine. Now, must dash, love. Your dad has a lunch reservation for that fabulous new Italian restaurant in town.'

Am sure I detected a note of concern in her voice, but it was hard to make out with Dad bellowing in the background – something about pesto being good for the heart.

'For God's sake, chill out.' Joe laughed when I told him how worried I was. 'Katie's delighted with herself. She loves school.'

Am very annoyed with him – who are we to argue with qualified, on-line American paediatricians? Will have to keep close eye on situation. May even have to draw up PR-type plan of action. With graphs. And pie charts.

18 September

Evil Anna, former co-worker and Official Office Gossip, called on fake pretence of general chit-chat/a.k.a. blatant mission to uncover sad details of life in the suburbs. 'How. Are. Things. Susie?' she asked slowly, in the fake-sympathy voice she reserves especially for me, and for Danny who works in the mail room and may have a few mental-health issues. 'How. Are. You. Coping?'

Panicked a bit, trying to remember what lie I had fed her last time to get her off the phone. Had quite possibly invented the fake death of close family member. 'Em, I'm fine, Anna,' I mumbled noncommittally, trying to sound sad but not overwrought in case I'd picked a *distant* relative instead.

'Really?' She sounded disappointed that I wasn't on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown.

'But you were so *down* the last time we went out for lunch.'

Could hear her tapping on her keyboard as she spoke, probably making notes for her 'Sad Housewives Dossier'.

'You said the kids were driving you *crazy*, remember? You were practically going to murder What's-his-name. So, how are things now?'

Could almost see her holding her breath expectantly, hoping for lots of juicy details about Valium-taking and secret-drinking binges she could email to everyone later.

In creepy flashback, suddenly remembered why I have been avoiding Anna even more of late. May have

admitted, in drunken moment of weakness after guzzling half a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc at a work reunion lunch, that staying at home to nurture and care for children may not be bliss 100 per cent of the time. Damn that wine and its evil, tongue-loosening devil ways.

‘Really? I can’t remember that,’ I lied, picking some dried-in snot off my sleeve and making a mental note to try to teach Jack to wipe it on his *own* sleeves from now on. ‘Things are great, never better, in fact. How are things with you?’ Tried very hard to sound casual and just a tad perplexed as to why I would have painted a less than apple-pie-perfect picture of my life. Not quite sure I pulled it off.

‘Reeeaaaally?’ Anna didn’t sound convinced. ‘Oh, you know us, always busy, busy, busy. Not that you *would* know about that any more. Ha! Ha! Ha!’

She laughed in that horrible braying way that reminded me of why I had always wanted to beat her over the head with the office stapler.

‘Well, they do keep me on my toes,’ I countered, watching What’s-his-name try to prise open the oven door and crawl in.

‘Yes, we were just saying the other day,’ Anna battled on, ignoring me as usual, ‘what *does* Susie do with all her free time? You are *sooooo* lucky. Mind you, I couldn’t do it. I need the mental stimulation of work to keep me sane. Do you know what I mean?’

‘Oh, yes,’ I replied, catching Jack just before he lost the use of his right hand in a horrible disfiguring oven-related accident. ‘Mental stimulation is key. Absolutely.’ Hung up, very annoyed with Anna and her devious mind games. It’s nearly two years since I left the office.

Surely she should be getting on with forgetting that I ever existed – everyone else has.

PS Have decided to take up Sudoku to keep mentally active and challenged.

PPS On second thoughts, may start watching *Countdown* on Channel 4 instead. That annoying tick-tock music is very off-putting, but it's got quite sexed up since that nice Carol Vorderman lost the weight and started showing off her cleavage more.

19 September

Starbucks in the Centre seems to be going downhill. The waitress was quite snappy with me today when I asked if Jack could have a few empty paper cups to play with. (He loves to rip them up and chuck them about, bless him.) *And* I'm sure the caramel lattes used to be frothier.

PS Got a text message from Louise. Her and MOM are going on a loved-up mid-week break to Prague. Does she *never* get bored with rampant sex in five-star luxury surroundings?

20 September

Katie is being bullied at school! I *knew* something was bothering her. Nearly rear-ended a granny in an Opel Astra when she told me on the way home in the car. Joe said it's probably all a storm in a teacup, but I'm taking it very seriously. The *Sunday Independent* had a

special supplement on bullying last week. It's a serious epidemic and it can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on children. Some of the most notorious serial murderers in history were bullied as kids.

Joe fell about the place when I told him. 'They probably had a fight over a doll or something.' He snorted. Well, he can snigger all he likes, but it will be his fault if our little princess ends up in Mountjoy Prison or some other ghastly correctional facility in twenty years' time. I watch *Bad Girls* – I know what goes on in those women's lock-ups. She could end up with badly bleached hair, a prison warder as a lesbian lover and a harrowing crack addiction. As a parent you have to be vigilant about these things. I'm going in to Little Angels Playschool to kick ass tomorrow.

21 September

Reconnaissance mission has been completed.

Bully's name: Zoe.

Age: Three and a half.

Height: Three feet two inches.

Address: Unknown.

The head teacher's watered-down version of events is that new-girl Zoe is muscling in on Katie and her VBF – Amy. Meanwhile Amy, the little turncoat, has dropped my darling daughter for the new kid on the block and poor Katie is friendless.

Am racked with guilt. The whole situation is quite obviously due to bad cosmic karma from that time in playschool when I told Jenny Kelly that I didn't want

to be her best friend any more. Keep getting horrible flashbacks to poor Jenny crying brokenheartedly into the sandbox.

Joe reckons Katie will tough it out and make new friends in no time, but it's all I can do to stop myself slapping the two little monsters. And their mothers.

Have taken an instant dislike to Zoe's mother – a hippie type in baggy trousers who's always smiling in a superior way. No one can be that happy all the time. Especially not a stay-at-home mother. (Unless she owns a 4x4 and has a Filipina nanny on standby.) Eco-mother walks to and from playschool every day, pushing a freakishly smiling baby in a pram, and spends ages at the school gates trying to convert other mothers to using sunflower oil instead of petrol. All highly suspicious behaviour.

Told the head teacher, in no uncertain terms, that I wanted the situation monitored. I will not have my child victimized.

PS Have just thought – Zoe's mother could be on drugs. All those eco-warrior types are into pot and happy pills. That could be why she looks so damn cheery all the time. My God, now Katie will be exposed to drugs as well as harassment.

22 September

VBF Louise called for a pre-romantic-break pow-wow.

'What type of underwear do you think I should bring, Susie?' she mused, in a very serious voice (i.e., she was not being ironic).

‘Em, matching?’ I ventured, unsure where this was headed.

‘Well, of course matching.’ She guffawed. ‘What other kind is there? No, what I mean is, should I go for the demure look with ruffles and cotton or the more vampy look with silk and leather? I don’t want to scare him off, but I do want to impress him, if you know what I mean.’ She laughed coyly.

Didn’t want to admit that had no idea what she meant and that any kind of underwear featuring leather sounded vaguely obscene. And extremely uncomfortable. ‘You don’t wear matching undies all the time, do you, Lou?’ I asked, peering down my T-shirt to see what I’d pulled on that morning.

‘Of course I do! Don’t you remember the golden rule of underwear?’ She sounded genuinely shocked.

‘Em, wear some?’

‘No, Susie, always wear underwear that you wouldn’t be embarrassed to be seen in if the man of your dreams suddenly wanted to sweep you off your feet and have mad, passionate sex with you. So, what will I go for?’

‘Demure cotton, I think,’ I said, aghast that if Brad suddenly wanted to roll in the hay with me he would be revolted by my grey maternity bra that sags at the nipples (boobs sadly deflated from being quite perky pre-pregnancy to saggy and droopy post-birth) and pinkish (verging on tie-dyed) pants that most definitely did not match, unless you were extremely short-sighted and quite possibly colour-blind. Which I don’t think Brad is. Although he did wear those very sexy glasses in *Ocean’s Eleven*.

‘Yes,’ I went on, ‘cotton is probably best. Save the

crotchless knickers for next time.’ Laughed at my own little joke, but it seemed to go over her head a bit.

‘Oh, crotchless are so last year, Susie.’ She tutted. ‘It’s all about the Virgin Look this year. Anyway, must go. I have a bloody board meeting in ten minutes.’

Hung up, resolving to bin all under-par smalls and only wear sexy matching sets from now on. Hope G-strings have gone out of fashion with the crotchless type. Brad might be even more revolted by my droopy cellulite bum hanging out than anything else.

PS Sense Louise and I are growing apart a bit. Very worrying.

23 September

Have discovered that I do not possess one single set of matching, sexy underwear. Not even an emergency, in-case-of-surprise-five-star-hotel-weekend-away pair. Am quite shaken by the revelation that I no longer value myself enough to invest in something other than well-washed mammy pants. Also, have ominous feeling this reflects very badly on the state of my marriage. Am afraid to look it up on drphil.com in case he says Joe and I have passed the point of no return and may as well proceed straight to Judge Judy’s divorce court.

Asked Joe if he was concerned that I was still wearing a sagging grey maternity bra eighteen months after giving birth.

‘I never really think about it, Susie,’ he said, munching a second bowl of Coco Pops and looking completely unconcerned that our marriage may be on the rocks.

‘But don’t you remember, when we first started going out together,’ I said, ‘you used to buy me lots of sexy stuff in Marks & Spencer?’ (Back in the nineties, when Kylie and Elle hadn’t even thought of making teeny tiny pants held together by minuscule pieces of ribbon and Marks & Spencer was the height of sophistication.)

‘That was years ago, Susie.’ Joe laughed, apparently not the least bit worried that we could be headed for a bitter divorce any day now. ‘Anyway, from what I remember, they were no sooner on you than I had them off.’

‘Yes, but you *never* buy sexy underwear for me any more,’ I said, trying to remember the last time he’d ripped anything off me, bar the TV remote control. ‘Doesn’t that worry you?’

‘Why would it worry me?’ he answered, looking surprised. ‘Sure everyone grows out of that lovey-dovey stuff.’

Have decided not to confide all this to Louise. It’s bad enough that she probably thinks I’m a sad, frumpy housewife – no need to confirm it for her.

24 September

Katie shook me awake this morning to remind me that I had promised this day last year to buy her a bikini for swimming lessons. How she remembers this stuff is beyond me. Cannot remember what I did yesterday (washing, changing nappies and vacuuming probably), let alone a conversation from this time last year. Should seriously consider getting her IQ tested – she might be gifted. Or have a photographic memory at the very least.

‘I don’t know, darling,’ I muttered, trying to hide under the pillow and grab another five minutes’ sleep. ‘I don’t think you’re old enough for a bikini just yet.’

There was a deathly five-second silence, followed by a roar loud enough to rival the Lion King on acid. ‘You promiiiiised,’ she sobbed. ‘You *said* I could get a bikini this year. I’m the Only One who doesn’t have a bikini now.’ Cue more uncontrollable shaking and sobbing.

The ‘Only One’ comment clinched it. Cannot have her feeling polarized from her peers. Bad enough that she’s the victim of institutionalized bullying in play-school. ‘OK, OK.’ I caved. ‘We’ll go look for one this morning, all right?’

‘OK.’ She sniffed suspiciously. ‘A pink one.’

‘All right.’

‘With love hearts.’

‘OK.’

‘Nice parenting,’ Joe said, laughing, under the duvet, as Katie marched off to watch *The Little Mermaid* for inspiration. ‘Very impressive the way you stuck to your guns.’

No point trying to explain the critical importance of fitting in with peer group, so I just poked him in the back with Jack’s Action Man instead.

Spent entire morning battling through vicious crowds at the Centre, half of them seemingly intent on buying a girl’s pink bikini. Had to undergo several to-the-death stare-downs with other frazzled mothers but eventually found one that met all the criteria:

- Pink, but not shiny pink (i.e., a ruling on the perfect colour will rest with Katie and Katie alone. The judge’s decision is final).

- No ‘lumpy’ bits (i.e., no embroidery or logos of any kind – unless Barbie-related).
- No ‘boy’ pants (i.e., only totally inappropriate skimpy, pole-dancing-type bottoms considered).

Exhausted after all the searching, we skidded up to the swimming-pool in the nick of time and bolted into the dressing rooms – where all the little girls were sporting this year’s new look: miniature wet-suits and goggles.

25 September

Louise back from romantic break with MOM. ‘It was fab, Susie,’ she gushed down the phone. ‘You and Joe really should go.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed, watching Joe pick his ear and wipe the wax on the Sunday supplement.

‘The food was amazing, and the hotel was just *divine*. We got on so well – it’s like we’ve known each other for ever. I really think this could be going somewhere.’

‘That’s great, Lou,’ I agreed, trying to loosen Jack’s grip on my leg while motioning to Katie that pouring Fairy Liquid on the TV to ‘clean it’ would not be appropriate. Didn’t like to break it to Louise that knowing someone for ever is not all it’s cracked up to be. Wonder if Posh has this problem? Can’t imagine Becks would ever fart under the duvet or trim his nose hair in the living room, but you never know.

26 September

Joe's mother popped round at 9.30 a.m., waving a jumbo pack of acid-green dishcloths: 'It was buy one, get one free in Lidl,' she crowed triumphantly, 'so I said to myself, "Who do I know who could do with a few extra dishcloths?"' And *then* I thought, Susie, of course! You can never have enough dishcloths – isn't that right, dear?

'Absolutely,' I agreed forlornly, trailing after her as she marched into the kitchen, where the remains of breakfast (and, OK, last night's dinner) were strewn all over the place.

'What's that smell, Susie?' she asked, stopping in her tracks and sniffing the air in disgust.

'Toast?' I ventured, cursing myself for having a second cup of instant coffee instead of changing Jack's stinky nappy straight away.

'*Poo-Poo!*' Jack roared, appearing out of nowhere and flinging himself on Mrs H's legs like a mini Sumo wrestler.

'You poor little mite,' Mrs H crooned, scooping him up and sniffing his bottom suspiciously. 'Did Mummy let you sit in a stinky nappy? Bad Mummy. Doesn't she know you could get a nasty infection on your poor bum-bum?'

Jack smiled at me over her shoulder as she marched him off to inspect his bottom for any signs of maltreatment. 'Bum-bum!' he lisped, an evil glint in his eye.

Once she had gone, called Joe to put him straight. Am not doormat that she can just trample all over and

wear down with her overbearing opinions. She's lucky she brings those homemade scones with her every time she drops by or I wouldn't even let her set foot inside the house. 'She has to learn that she must call before she pops in, Joe,' I grumbled. 'I could have had something on this morning. I could have been up to my eyes. I can't abandon my entire daily schedule at the drop of a hat to suit her, you know.'

'Did you have anything else on this morning, Susie?' Joe asked, sounding amused.

'That's hardly the point,' I snapped. 'I might have been busy.'

'Yes, but you weren't,' he went on. 'Give her a break. She's lonely since Dad died.'

Hung up in annoyance. Was almost tempted to remind Joe that his father has been dead for ten years and that his mother had had very little time for him when he was alive. Seemed a bit disrespectful to bring that up, though. Wonder how Joe would like it if his mother arrived at his office unannounced. Have a good mind to take up Pilates to spite them both.

27 September

Katie is acting up terribly and I'm worried sick. She's hyper all the time and is constantly baiting Jack with her toys and reducing him to tears. Last night she ran round the kitchen in her Sleeping Beauty pants, laughing like a hyena and roaring at the top of her voice. I was quite scared. Definitely think it's a reaction to the situation at school. She's obviously traumatized because her

friend has deserted her and she's 'acting out' as a consequence. Tried to get advice from theperfectparent.com, but bloody computer on the blink. Meanwhile Jack has started whacking the furniture, his head and anything that moves with his favourite red truck. Am at wit's end – nails chewed to quick.

PS Called Louise for advice but only got her voicemail. No doubt at some high-powered, high-level meeting wearing Armani and too busy to talk to boring, frumpy housewife friend.

28 September

Joe sent Katie to bed with no story tonight. He also threw all the Smarties and Monster Munch crisps in the bin. I pleaded with him not to be so harsh (I love those Monster Munch – they are so addictive), but he said he had to take a stand. 'She's just being a brat, and she has to learn that she can't get away with it,' he huffed, as he dragged the black bin-liner packed with goodies out to the gate and started stuffing them manically into the wheelie-bin, a funny don't-mess-with-me glint in his eye. (Quite sexy, actually.)

He has no time for my acting-out theory. As far as he's concerned, she's just being naughty and eating too many sugary snacks. For once, suspect he may be right because Katie cried for twenty minutes in her bed, then crept downstairs to say sorry for tying Jack to the kitchen table with her skipping-rope. Tucked her back in, then snuck outside to rescue some of the Monster Munch and smuggle them in under cover of darkness.

Spent rest of night sneaking out to kitchen to have one at a time so Joe wouldn't see. Thrill of imminent discovery, coupled with pickled-onion flavour, gave me a bit of a rush, actually.

PS Louise called, but I had to let it go to voicemail – *Portland Babies* was just about to start. Screaming women in the throes of labour is addictive viewing.

29 September

Mrs H wants me to go to her bingo morning with her. 'It's great fun, Susie,' she said gleefully, as she settled herself (unannounced) at the kitchen table for another quick coffee.

Mumbled something noncommittal. Going to bingo with Jack and Mrs H is not my idea of a hot morning's entertainment. In fact, it rates just above ironing and scrubbing the toilet.

'It's very important to keep active in the community,' she went on, managing to devour all the biscuits I was saving for my date with Oprah *and* make a sly dig at my lack of involvement in any community-related events in one go. 'And, you can make a few euro as well. Oh, yes, it can be quite the little earner.' She nodded knowingly, clasping her PVC handbag a bit tighter to her chest as if one of her blue-rinse bingo cronies was about to leap through the open window and wrestle her winnings from her hands.

'Really?' I pushed another biscuit across the table, intrigued by this unexpected revelation. Could definitely do with a bit of black-market cash to invest in certain

consumer items, which, strictly speaking, may not be absolute necessities but which add a little sunshine to my day, such as

- (a) *Heat*
- (b) *OK!*
- (c) *Hello!* (especially if am in the mood for the carryings-on of Danish royal family)

‘Oh, yes,’ she went on, and leaned in to confide in a low whisper, ‘I won two euro today.’

Wasn’t sure I had heard her properly – the biscuits stuck to her dentures were making her lisp a bit. ‘Did you say twenty euro, Mrs H?’ I asked, quite excited that I could indulge my secret trashy-mag addiction without Joe being any the wiser.

‘Twenty euro, Susie?’ she gasped, looking scandalized. ‘We only play for twenty cents at a time. If you’re looking for the big-time you’d better take yourself off to that heathen Las Vegas. Twenty euro, indeed.’

PS Hot off the presses. Amy has dumped Zoe and wants to be Katie’s VBF again. I advised Katie to play it cool for a while and be emotionally unavailable. But Katie has no pride and immediately started sorting out her favourite play dresses to bring into school – one for her and one for her turncoat buddy.