

**A
THOUSAND
WASTED
SUNDAYS**

A small, stylized illustration of a hand holding a pen, positioned as if writing on the rim of a martini glass. The glass is partially filled with a dark liquid. The illustration is rendered in a simple, graphic style with grey and black tones.

VICTORIA VANSTONE



**PANTERA
PRESS**

The Kid with Big Eyes

Reading, UK, early 1980s

‘Hasn’t she got big eyes. Is she all right?’

‘Yes, she has lovely big brown eyes ... What do you mean by “Is she all right?”’

We were waiting in the queue at the post office when a dribbly lipped old lady tapped Mum on the shoulder.

‘Well, you know what big eyes mean, don’t you, dear? Big eyes – small brain. You know, a bit slow.’

I hung onto Mum’s long flowery skirt as the old bat tried to convince my poor mother her daughter was backwards.

‘She’s fine. Mind your own bloody business!’ Mum grabbed my little hand and tugged me. I stuck out my tongue as I was pulled through the open door.

‘Come on, Victoria. Don’t worry, your eyes are beautiful. Let’s just go home and eat tomato soup and watch *The Sullivans*.’

A seatbelt was pulled across my chest and clipped into the black and red socket in the centre of the car. As I sat watching Mum get in the front seat without her big hair getting squashed, I thought, *My big eyes mean I’m not normal!*

I'd always felt a bit off. Thanks to the meddlesome lady at the local post office, I now had an explanation. I wasn't catching up with my siblings due to an unfortunate genetic disposition.

I was half relieved to know what I'd been thinking was true. I was half pissed off because no one in my family had bothered to tell me.

When we got home, I ran upstairs to the bathroom and locked the door. I stepped on my little green stool and stared at myself in the mirror. At first, I squinted to make my eyes narrower. It made me look like a Bond villain. I leaned closer and, with my nose squashed against the glass, used my thumb and index finger to stretch one eye open wide. My eyeball looked like the inside of a Scotch egg, all white and slimy. I don't know what I was looking for. I blinked and stepped down onto the damp bathroom mat. I clenched my fists by my sides and stood there holding my breath, squeezing my eyes shut, hoping to shrink them to a more socially acceptable size.

Thinking I had an undiagnosed syndrome of some sort was not the best start in life. I felt separated from the world very early on. Life seemed to go on above me, like in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon. I liaised with the bottom parts of people's legs that strode around me and got on with life. Trapped in a forest of loose-fitting tights and mucky Adidas trainers, in a world below the knee. I spent my days getting a glimpse of what was going on higher up, forever on my tiptoes peeking over things, using all my strength to pull my chin over tabletops and brick walls. I scrambled onto laps when I could, desperate to be more involved, to get a better view of the grown-up world and not feel so ... abnormal.

*

My world was Reading, in the south of England. A leafy town within stumbling distance of heaps of cosy pubs. I was born at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, not quite in a crossfire hurricane – it was more of a slight sideways drizzle that dribbled down the plate glass windowpanes of the Georgian building. When Mum pushed me out, Dad was still at the office, busy selling barcode scanning machines to men in grey suits that smelled of cheap coffee. Mum got the job done on her own, and was home in time for a Jaffa Cake and celebratory glass of Babycham.

She said the best thing about having a baby was the hot shower afterwards, but she wasn't the sentimental type. For the hallway, she favoured pictures of crying clowns over grinning school portraits and had sold all our family heirlooms at local carboot sales for 50p each.

'It's just a load of old tat,' she would say as she packed faux mink coats, gold-framed paintings and colourful glass vases into boxes in the back of her car.

'What day of the week was I born, Mum? Am I full of grace or woe?'

'All I know, Victoria, is my false eyelashes ended up halfway down my face and you had a massive head, a bit like you do now.'

I was a Friday child – loving and giving. The final member of our party of six. I had a brother and two sisters. Making me the last parcel of shit and tears to join the clan.

*

For the first few years before my inevitable introduction to alcohol, I slurped milk from a bottle and downed orange squash by the gallon. I saved mooching around in a pair

of stained tracksuit pants, and necking paracetamol over a dish-cluttered sink, until my teens. There was at least some innocence before the chaos.

When I was a kid, I often heard the term ‘a bit of a handful’ up there in the adult realm. I was a pest with a penchant for eating playdough, doing rainbow dumps and smearing the technicolour slop in my nappy onto walls. I stuck beads up my nose, gobbled slugs from the garden and spent my afternoons throwing rocks at windows. I was that kid. The one with the dirty knees and snotty nose. The one who ate fish food when no one was looking. I stole the shavings out of a metal tin that sat next to the aquarium and placed the large, salty flakes on my tongue. One by one, they melted like snowflakes.

‘Stop eating fish food, Victoria. There’ll be none left for Steely Dan.’

Steely Dan was my brother’s fish. He won him at the local fair and brought him home in a transparent sandwich bag filled with water. When looking after me, Neale, a lanky Bowie fan, danced around the lounge room singing ‘Starman’ and quaffed whisky from bottles hidden under the stairs. His Bauhaus t-shirt slipped off his shoulder as he climbed over the sofa, screeching into a hairbrush. When he wasn’t all punky, throwing eggs at telephone boxes, spraying his hair green, he was inflicting painful punishments upon me. They all had names:

Camel Bites — a sharp knee grab.

The Typewriter — jabbing his finger into my chest.

Motorbikes — revving my ears like the throttle of a Triumph.

The Dutch Oven — holding my head under the quilt after a massive guff.

The Death Grip — shoulder blade squeeze.

The Fish Grip — under-chin pinch.

And, of course, the classic: the Chinese Burn — twisting the skin on my wrist in opposite directions. This one had me on my knees, begging for my life, while he rummaged in my pocket for my last Rolo.

But I idolised my brother, so forgave most of his affectionate torture.

*

My parents had both been married before. Neale and my oldest sister, Louise, were my half-siblings. I was too young to understand how this dynamic affected our daily life. All I knew was when they were with us, I loved them, and when they were with their mum, I missed them.

Louise was 13 years older than me, a teenager by the time I was born, and her life was enthralling. She was cool and aloof, always heading out the door to meet friends. When my sister *was* home, she stayed in her room, hunched over her bed, scribbling in a diary that had a tiny padlock. She read me a few lines once. I sat on the old piano stool with my hands tucked under my thighs, swinging my legs. I was eager to get an insight into the mystical world of boys.

She undid the padlock with a tiny key and flipped the diary open.

“‘Wednesday’,” she declared. “‘Today was the ending of the most beautiful thing in my life. At lunchtime, Steve told me he didn’t love me and is now going out with Camilla.’”

She then flicked over a page.

“‘Thursday — Still the living torment!’”

Her week at school was as dramatic as an episode of *Dallas*. It meant her diary was much more interesting than mine.

The only noteworthy entry from my own teenage jottings was: *Today I had toad in the hole for lunch and then saw a squashed frog on the road. Overall, a rather amphibious day!*

When Louise finished reading, I looked over her shoulder at the biro-filled pages. Pink love hearts surrounded boys' names. Steve was crossed out. But the names of Matt, Kevin and Tim, still objects of her affection, were written in big, bubbly handwriting with smiley faces in the Os.

There were also snog lists, and tatty little notes sellotaped to the hinge of each page.

'Whose telephone number is that?' I asked after noticing a row of numbers written in thick gold glitter pen.

'That's Danny Simpson's. He likes me. I know because Clare told me, and Clare knows his sister and she said he thinks I'm pretty.'

'Right,' I said.

Lou was madly in love one day, and the next promising to kick them in the gonads. Romances were dramatic and her heartbreaks painful. After ten plays of 'Tainted Love', some theatrical crying and intense winding of the telephone wire around her finger, her heart was repaired. Then she topped up her lip gloss and went down the park to snog the face off her next obsession. I watched her pull the front door closed with her hand inside the letterbox.

'See ya!'

Standing in the kitchen, I dreamed of the day I could go with her.

My other sister, Sarah, four years my senior, often got stuck with the 'handful' that was me. She was less affectionate than my other siblings, but as long as my toes never touched hers and I didn't interfere with her sticker collection (especially the ones with googly eyes, and the scratch and sniffs), we

got on pretty well. Even though she would eventually be shorter than me, I looked up to her. Everything she did was cool and trendy. If she wore a rah-rah skirt or beadle boppers, and played *Viva Hate* at full volume, I did too. On Sundays, Sarah religiously recorded the Top 40. I sat next to her, picking mud from under my fingernails, as she simultaneously pushed the play and record buttons on her stereo. Sometimes the cassettes got mangled. It was my job to manually rewind them, by sticking a biro in one of the holes and spinning it around my head like a clacker at a football match. Once our favourite songs were recorded, we shared our utter disgust that Renée and Renato's 'Save Your Love' still hogged the top spot. We used felt-tip pens to decorate the tape boxes until it was time for teeth and bed.

When I wasn't annoying Sarah in her bedroom, I was pacing behind her, asking stupid questions.

'Where do sausages grow, sis?'

'Why does grated cheese taste better than sliced?'

'Do pigs have teeth?'

'Why can't dogs speak?'

'Because it's a bloody dog,' she'd say. 'Now, go and clean up my bedroom.'

I found it infuriating, though, that our dog Mitzie couldn't hold a decent conversation.

'Now's the time, Mitzie,' I'd whisper to her. 'I won't tell anyone. Say something, girl. Give me a sign!'

Mitzie tipped her little head to one side and looked at me with her shining black eyes.

'Come on, answer me,' I begged.

Then, one day, it happened!

Not really. Unfortunately, this isn't a tale about talking Yorkshire Terriers.

I think Mitzie was upset after I squeezed her into a Cabbage Patch Kid's dress and hurt her back leg.

Being the baby of the family meant I was destined to feel a bit left behind. I watched on from afar as my siblings rebelled. I desperately wanted to catch up, and soaked up some tactics for when my time came. I studied how to dodge chores, slam bedroom doors when told off, and avoid getting caught when stealing custard creams. Minor offences kept me entertained. Putting hair from Mum's brush in the bottom of hot cups of tea, changing around all the stickers on the Rubik's Cube, carefully undoing the clear tape from the Cadbury Roses tin, and scoffing all the Caramel Kegs.

On playdates, I was mischievous too. I pulled buttons off TVs, knocked over ornaments and punched my friends. I was as irritating as I could be without getting arrested or put up for adoption. I had a reputation for destroying everything in my path and ended up getting banned from people's houses.

'I'm sorry, Maureen. We can't have Victoria round here again. She's too disruptive.'

I *had* poked all the little plastic windows out of a brand-new doll house. Then I was caught in the dining room, with a cheeky smile plastered across my face, having picked the corners of the freshly laid wallpaper and torn it off in reams, floor to ceiling. Mum was horrified. From then on, she and I stayed home, lots.

Instead of hanging out with friends, we baked cupcakes, polished the silverware, and sat together on the brown sofa, singing 'Round and Round the Garden' as she traced circles around my palm.

'One step, two step, tickle-y under there.'

The inevitable tickle never ceased to surprise me, and she always added a big squeeze at the end.

‘Again, again!’

‘You cuddle those children too much,’ said my gran, peering over the top of her paper.

‘And doesn’t Victoria look like that stocky rugby player, Will something? You know, the one that was on the telly last night?’

‘Oh, stop it, Dora,’ Mum hissed.

Gran’s barb hurt my tubby heart, but I succumbed to a cheek kiss when she rolled down the window of her green Peugeot and handed me a flamboyantly signed three-pound cheque.

‘Spend it wisely,’ she said and clunked the gearstick into reverse, disappearing out of the drive. I ran upstairs and slid the rolled-up cheque into the slot of my piggy bank, saving it for a Slush Puppie at St Martins, the used-bandaid-infested local swimming pool.

*

Dad took me swimming most Saturday mornings. The pool smelled of wee. I had to wade through abandoned verucca socks and creep past naked ladies with big bushes to get to the showers. Once in the pool, I used Dad’s body like it was a diving board. He cupped his hands beneath my foot and propelled me high into the air. It was magic. Once my fingertips were sufficiently turned into prunes, he treated me to a paper cone of chips covered in tomato sauce from the greasy spoon next door. The chips were so hot, I had to hang my mouth open and breathe some cold air in over the top of them.

I called Dad 'The Silver Back' because he had a line of grey hair that ran from his neck all the way down his spine, and he ambled like an ape, legs far apart and arms bent at the elbows, perpendicular to his body. His mother said his legs were bowed because she'd carried him on her hip.

'You'll never stop a pig in an alley,' she said every time he wore shorts.

Dad always had a ball of blue fluff in his belly button. He used to pick it out as we watched *Grandstand* on Saturday afternoons, his round gut on display as he ate a steak and kidney pie.

He didn't cuddle much, not like Mum, he had more important stuff to do, Dad jobs. He sat on a dining room chair and trimmed his toenails, fixed the taps, mowed the lawn, and continually searched for socks, wallets and keys. Dad was away a lot, working, but when he came home from business trips, he always brought us mini Dairy Milks or giant bars of Toblerone. I hated it when he was away, but his black leather briefcase of chocolates and our trips to the pool made up for the time apart. One of my fondest memories of Dad is the time we went to London Zoo, and he chucked a Chewit in the chimpanzee enclosure. An inquisitive baby chimp, after a brief inspection, threw it into its mouth with the wrapper still on. When the chimp started to choke, Dad grabbed Sarah and me by the hands and whispered, 'Run.'

We legged it towards the ornate Art Deco gates, with a man shouting, 'Didn't you read the sign? Come back 'ere!' My dad hadn't run that quickly since the Surrey County Athletic Association's 100-metre dash in 1957.

With the zoo no longer an option, our monthly visit to the dump became my favourite excursion with him. We

bonded over bin bags and demolition. We sang all the way there, with the car windows wound down.

‘To the dump, to the dump, to the dump, dump, dump.’

When we arrived, I clambered over the back seat and handed crumpled notes to the scruffy bloke who operated the boom gate. As Dad emptied the boot, I threw bricks at sheets of glass and watched them shatter. I always fell asleep on the way home, spread along the back seat with seatbelt buckles digging into my ribs.

I liked to stay very close to Dad whenever we had guests over, because I never wanted to miss out on his hilarious, underhanded comments. They were said quietly, subtle remarks that weren’t for everyone’s ears. Often crude and distasteful, but always funny. I thought my dad was the wittiest person in the world, and was proud he was so offensive.

Some afternoons, I joined him next to his record player, listening to old recordings of Derek and Clive, and Spike Milligan. I sat at his feet, laughing when he laughed, copying his movements, mimicking his posture. His whole body jiggled when he chuckled, and as his head tipped backwards, I could see up his hairy nostrils. It wasn’t the jokes that made me happy, it was the sight of Dad wiping tears of joy from his eyes.

Those long, hot summers of the early 1980s all rolled into one long, sunny day, spent getting grubby, making muddy concoctions, and mixing putrid-smelling perfumes out of twigs and rose petals. I stepped in dog shit a lot and forever dragged my plimsolls along kerbs, trying to remove the offensive canine paste from the thin lines in the soles. I played kiss chase, climbed trees. I also loved to kick the inflatable silver inserts from wine boxes left over from my

parents' parties. I heard liquid splashing inside. By pressing hard on the plastic button on the little tap, I let out the vinegary fumes. It smelled delicious. Those space-age wine bags are one of my first memories of alcohol. I understood there was wine inside and I wasn't allowed to drink it.

I'd seen booze; it was around me from a young age. It was piled up in the garage or sticking out of a silver ice bucket. But I had no interest in it then. I was too busy being a kid. A kid watching on, learning from afar. Waiting.

Our house was chaotic at times. There was shouting, arguments, tears and tantrums, all of which were soaked up with kisses, bedtime stories and lots of 'I love you's'.

I was lucky, happy. I loved my crazy family to Swindon and back.

*

Before I started school, my mum dragged me to the hairdresser and I got the most dreadful cut. Nowadays, if this haircut existed, the authorities would step in. Hair-massacre day is wedged in my memory like a doorstep. The cold, sharp scissors scratching across my forehead, the rancid breath of the lady as she cut a perfect line from one ear to the other, the locks of lovely long hair dropping on the ground around me. My new fringe was as straight as the top of a page, with the back section spiked up with a gel like the slime out of Ghostbusters. When I looked in the mirror, I burst into tears. I went from a pretty (wide-eyed, large-headed, rugby-player-faced) girl to an unattractive boy. My fingernails dug into my palms, my bottom lip folded over, and I bowed my head, chin touching the silky gown tied around my neck. Mum put her hand on the back of my

neck and said, ‘Don’t worry, Victoria, the bog-brush look is all the rage.’

I glanced sideways and saw my sisters hide giggles behind their *Bunty* Annuals.

As fireworks went off in the dark sky above our house, I began the new year as an overweight, bug-eyed, straight-fringed lad. The comments about me quickly changed focus from the eyes to ‘Gosh, isn’t he a handsome little fella.’ And accompanied by a painful cheek pinch.

The haircut was the first time I ever hated something about myself. No matter how much I tried to flatten the spike and part the fringe, I looked ugly. Resembling a petrified hedgehog caused me to retreat behind Mum’s long skirt, where I felt safe, where the world couldn’t see me. I was too young to know any feelings of self-doubt could be drowned out by bucketloads of booze. Until I made that discovery, I withdrew into my little world where I was happiest – below the knee, with the ants, the flowers and the tic-tac-toe.

Raising Sea Monkeys

It said on the packet to hold the white stick in the stream of urine for 30 seconds. Until that moment, I believed I knew where wee comes from. Turned out I didn't. It was like chasing a pig. When I thought I had it, off it trotted in the opposite direction. Where the stick went, the wee didn't.

The box came with two tests. I drank a pint of water, washed my hands, and prepared for round two. This time, relaxed, I held the stick in position. My plan was to hold it in one location, and hope for the best. I felt the stick fill with the weight of liquid flowing over it. There was no way this stick was getting 30 seconds. I brought the test up to eye level when I was done. It was damp in all the right places. Score.

The instructions said to wait five minutes for the results. I balanced the stick on top of the toilet roll holder, and waited, my knickers and trousers around my ankles. It was a funny way to approach a life-altering moment – my bum hanging in a toilet. It wasn't like getting a handshake after passing my driving test or a rosette pinned to my jumper after winning a donkey derby (the Newbury Show, 1987).

I stared at the stick next to me. *One line or two?* I wondered.

Parenting or freedom? Stuck at home singing silly songs about mashed potatoes or bumming around the world like I'd been doing for the past ten years?

I leaned uncomfortably towards the latter.

The timer on my phone chimed.

I stood, pulled up my trousers and knickers in one tug, picked up the stick and took a casual glance at the result.

I expected myself to be saying, 'Thank fuck for that.' Then chucking it in the bin and carrying on with my life.

But there were two lines: positive.

'I'm going to have a baby, for God's sake!'

I felt faint and held onto the wall for support.

Come to think of it, I was more tired than usual, but put it down to a monumental two-day hangover. It *had* been a huge weekend. A pre-wedding get-together. My usual spectacular bout of alcohol poisoning in all its bruised-knee, lost-wallet glory. I had few memories of the sordid affair, apart from being on all fours, shouting, 'Human Podium!' Then allowing everybody in the nightclub to climb onto my back for a dance. A tray of dropped shots. Waking up on the floor of a mate's spare room, wedged between the bed and a wardrobe, with sore boobs, dirty hands, and footprints on the back of my tank top.

I must be getting old, I thought as I downed a pint of water. I had hoped to sleep off the worst of it, but my reckless drinks-mixing rumbled in my gut.

I can't be pregnant ... Can I?

I looked at the stick again. The lines got clearer by the second. Two bright blue bars.

I flicked the stick, shook it to see if it might change its mind.

The packet had been sliding around the bottom of the bathroom drawer for a while. I bought it at Woolies the previous year after a scare (also known as an "Oh, fuck it" moment'), so perhaps it was out of date? I picked the

wrapper out of the rubbish basket and scanned it. I squinted at the numbers on the plastic seam but, without my glasses on, I could only make out the year: 2013. It hadn't expired. I flipped it over and read the back, hoping there was such a thing as a false positive. Maybe I had eaten too many eggs and that was mucking about with the result. The front read *First Response – The early result. Over 99 per cent accurate.*

I walked into the kitchen, perched half my bum on a stool, took a deep breath, and cried. Big, blobby tears streamed down my face. I didn't know if I was crying from sadness or happiness. It was overwhelming.

A mother, a parent. Me?

Ridiculous.

I blew my nose and tried to pull myself together. In highly emotional moments like these, I usually reached for wine but this was more of a cheese-and-pickle moment. I went to the fridge and grabbed the Red Leicester and the jar of Branston pickle. My knife tapped the side of the glass jar as I lifted the sweet chutney out towards a slice of buttered white bread, the noise making a question enter my head: *Can you eat pickle when you're pregnant?* It was the first time I had ever questioned my pickle consumption.

I carried my plate out onto the deck to get some fresh air. The sound of the ocean breeze passing through the gum trees soothed my world of worry. I sat and watched boats chug across the bay, hulls cutting through the dark, flat water. I pondered if my journey was going to be plain sailing too.

People have babies all the time, I thought. I'll be fine.

I wanted this, I wanted a bit of normality, but I had no idea if I'd be a good mum. All I'd ever done was party.

I sat on the deck all afternoon, rubbing my forehead with my thumb and forefinger, a nervous habit. It made me look

like someone who might have just scrawled *Mummy never loved me* on the bathroom wall in their own excrement.

I went over everything that needed to change.

We'd have to move house, earn more money, get a cot, a baby monitor, nappies, one of those toys that goes *ping* and makes babies laugh. We'd have to look like we knew what we were doing, be organised, remember to feed it, make sure it slept, and didn't choke on sliced apple. We'd have to teach it to behave, not swear at strangers or bite its friends at day care. We'd have to attend birthday parties, talk to other parents about football training and ballet, sing nursery rhymes and push swings. We'd have to be the sort of human beings people look up to. Currently, I only looked up to people when they reached down to retrieve me from the gutter.

What sort of mum would I be? Stressed? Laid-back? A mum who smoked ciggies and talked too loudly in shopping centres? Like the Pied Piper, followed by a line of feral brats? Perhaps an Earth Mother, who excreted bliss balls, wore a felt floppy hat, recycled toilet paper, sipped kombucha from a jam jar? A mum who posted pictures on Instagram of her family, all smiling, wearing matching pyjamas? Or a gym-junkie mum doing lunges as she wiped kale-flavoured vomit off her Lorna Jane leggings? I had so many options.

What about the wedding? I was getting married in three months' time. How on earth was I getting married without drinking champagne?

Surely a couple of cheeky wines?

I got up, went inside, and googled *How many glasses of champagne can you have when pregnant?*

The first article stated even a sip of alcohol wasn't advisable. I kept scrolling. There had to be something saying

that downing chardonnay once a week was acceptable. My hand on the mouse was clammy. Scroll, click, scroll, click. Nothing. Just loads of articles about the damage to the baby from drinking.

I slapped down the lid of my laptop and promised myself never to search the internet for any pregnancy-related material ever again.

Some bleak months were in store and another 18 years of winging it.

It was going to be hard work, but I was in love with my fiancé and had always wanted to have a family. This baby was made with love; deep down within me, even though I was scared, I knew that was enough.

A mum. Me. Bloody hell!

No matter what, though, this baby wouldn't get in the way of me having fun.

'This baby won't change me,' I said aloud.

I would still dance on speakers, say 'fuck' all the time and down buckets of cheap wine at weekends.

I can do this!

Then the back door slammed.

'Helloooo?'

My smiling future husband bounded into the kitchen.

'Are you all right, Vic? Have you been crying?'

I handed him the pregnancy test.

'We're going to have a baby,' I said with an awkward smile.

His knees buckled, and his eyes brimmed with tears. I hadn't seen him this happy since he found out about hot Ribena. In fact, I'd never in my life seen anyone look so delighted. He put his arms around me, and we both sobbed. He cried with joy, I cried because seeing people cry made me cry.

Then I blurted out, 'I won't be able to get sloshed at our wedding. Maybe we should postpone?'

He laughed, told me not to be so ridiculous, and put the kettle on.

We spent the rest of the evening sitting outside in uncomfortable deckchairs, chatting, as the sun descended behind the scribbly gum trees.

'I'm nervous,' I told him. 'I've never pushed a bowling ball out of my vagina before.'

It wasn't just the bowling ball; I was worried about the pregnancy, and having to raise a human. I wasn't very good at looking after myself, let alone a baby. I'd drop it. Leave frying pan handles within reach. Leave it at home. Accidentally put it in the washing machine.

'Keeping things alive' wasn't my forte. I killed all my stick insects when I was nine. They dried up and their legs fell off. Hamsters never lasted more than a month in my care. They were found stiff, stuck behind the radiator, or, months after going missing, tiny bones were uncovered in the airing cupboard, in a mound of fuzzy rodent hair. Our dog, as I said, had a gammy-trolley leg and I couldn't even keep my shrimp-like sea monkeys alive. The packet had said: *The Easiest Pets to Have*. Ignoring them since Boxing Day had something to do with their sad demise. I discovered them (in June) floating on the surface of the tank, entombed in their novelty aquarium.

'Do children come with instructions ... like sea monkeys?' I asked without thinking.

'What?'

'Oh, nothing.'

I decided not to mention my 'pet hit list' to John. Best not to taint his view of my well-rounded, non-serial-killer-like personality.

‘Do you think I’ll be a good mum?’ I asked him after dinner.

‘You’ll be amazing,’ he said without hesitation. ‘But let’s just get the pregnant bit out of the way and then worry about the mum bit later.’

‘Okay,’ I agreed.

We curled up next to each other on the couch, to watch a movie.

‘Can you pass me an extra pillow, please?’ I asked.

‘Here you go.’

‘Can you get one for my back too?’

‘Here you go, lean forward.’

‘Thanks. Can you rub my feet for a bit?’

‘Sure.’

‘The foot moisturiser is in the bathroom cabinet,’ I said, glancing at him.

‘Okay.’

‘Oh, can you plug my phone in too?’

‘Yep.’

‘And get my glasses? And I need a drink and a chocolate biscuit.’

‘Yes. Anything else, Your Ladyship?’

‘Yes. While you’re up, can you do the dishwasher, and take the bins out?’

Maybe being pregnant won’t be too bad after all.

Champion Napkin Folder

Age 6

‘Rogerrr!’ Mum shouted Dad’s name from the kitchen. ‘Can you get the punch ready? And change your shirt, there’s a stain on the front.’

‘Yes, dear. Doing it now.’

My parents were having a party. Pots bubbled on the stove, and plates were piled on top of the heater trolley. The dining room table was covered in a waxy cloth and nibbles in brown wooden bowls. Standing on my tippy toes, chin on the table, I plucked out a cheese and pineapple stick protruding from a foil-covered orange and grabbed hold of a couple of warm sausage rolls. I kneeled under the table, surrounded by the shapely legs of the mahogany chairs, shoving the snacks into my face. I picked fallen flakes of pastry from deep inside the shagpile carpet, to hide any evidence of my feast.

‘Roger, can you put my rollers on when you go upstairs?’ I heard Mum shout again. ‘And put the nice glasses out. The mayor’s coming tonight.’

I was surprised by this news. The last time the mayor paid us a visit, our dog shagged her shin. Our ratty little pooch drilled her crotch against the mayor’s wrinkled brown

stocking like she was a jackhammer. Dad had to prise her off, paw by paw, and make amends with an awkward apology and a strong Scotch. But my parents' parties were so good that the nice lady mayor had decided to risk another pair of tights and attend. To be on the safe side, I locked the dog in the laundry with a Meaty Chew.

My parents made a great team. Dad was the boss of setting up, Mum oversaw the cooking. He hurried around with stacks of chairs and trays of glasses, while she put sprigs of parsley on chunks of pâté and covered hot dishes in swathes of aluminium foil.

Mum was in her element when in the kitchen. With fogged-up windows, clattering pans, slippery lino floors, she swirled from hob to cupboard to sink, like a ballerina gliding on ice. She wore a shiny plastic apron with a naked female body on the front. It had a clover-leaf flap covering the private parts. I used to get the apron out and show it to my mates when they came over. Mum had got it from Dad for Christmas. We all cheered her on when she slipped the apron on and danced around the living room.

Mum could whip up a meal for 60 guests without an ounce of panic. My three older siblings and I helped, folding napkins into fan shapes, or rolling them up tight to slide into gold rings. We placed plastic parrot-topped stirring sticks in long-stemmed cocktail glasses, sliced up squashy boiled eggs, put peanuts into little bowls, and folded bacon around stumpy cocktail sausages. We took turns popping our heads through the serving hatch for any leftovers, or mixing bowls to lick.

Now I watched on as she leaned over the stove, bending her plastic apron-tits in two, inhaling the smells, then stirring hard with a big wooden spoon. She noticed me and smiled. I smiled too.

Her kitchen smelled of warm soup and garlic bread. There were *pings* from the microwave and the chimes of timers as party pies rose in the oven. Her index finger dragged along the inside edge of huge ceramic mixing bowls, as she tasted her concoctions. She paused for thought as she decided what the dish needed, and then grabbed a giant salt grinder, twisting it over the pot.

‘How is it now, Mum?’

She brought the spoon to her lips and nodded.

‘Yep! It’s bloody cordon bleu, Victoria. I will be awarded five stars in the *Michelin Guide* before long! Now, go and ask Dad to get me a glass of sparkly and tie some balloons to the letterbox. People won’t know we’re having a party otherwise.’

With everything prepped, she retreated to the bedroom to get ready. I crept in, sat on the bed, waiting for her to finish her hot bath. With a towel wrapped around her midriff and one on her head, folded like she was a Bedouin, she drifted into the bedroom. I liked her face without make-up. Seeing her fresh out of the bath was like seeing her for the first time. Her skin radiated warmth and she smelled of Imperial Leather soap.

At her little dressing table, perched on the low stool, Mum began her transformation. After a twist of the blue top of her Nivea face cream, she spread a dollop under each eye, like Adam Ant with his white stripe, and let it soak into her skin. With her head upside down, she blow-dried her red hair. She was renowned for ‘big hair’ – it seemed to arrive five minutes before her and skimmed the top of the door frame when she entered a room. Getting it to full volume took time and effort.

Once her hair was dry and fluffy, the hot rollers went in. Mum held the pins in her mouth and, with both hands,

collected a chunk of hair and rotated the rollers until the hair caught in its little claws. When secured, using a U-shaped pin from between her lips, she expertly fastened the tuft into place.

While Mum's hair curled, she got a see-through plastic case out of her top drawer and started on her nails. I inhaled the smell of the nail polish remover as she rubbed off the cracked varnish. Each nail was painted bright red, with three swift upward movements. She held her nails near her mouth and blew, up and down, like she was playing a harmonica, until they were dry. She pulled the rollers out, frantically back combing each curled clump.

A flute of champagne sat untouched atop her dresser. Tiny bubbles skimmed the edge of the glass as they floated to the surface.

I moved from my spot on the bed when she grabbed a tall golden can of hairspray. She pushed down with her finger on the white plastic trigger, and her arm moved around the top of her head, spraying until I couldn't see her through the mist. Hair complete, she applied layers of foundation, blue eye shadow and a pair of false eyelashes. With her face stretched and distorted like a Dr Seuss character's, she blinked frantically until the glue dried.

'Can you go into the bottom of my cupboard and find my gold shoes, please, Victoria.'

I crawled into the cupboard and threw shoes from the dark, unidentifiable pile so they landed where she could see them.

'How about these?'

'No, the heel is broken. I'm going to take them back to Marks.'

'These?'

‘No, not high enough.’

I dug deeper into the pile, until I found a matching pair. The cupboard was warm and smelled musty like the inside of an old hat. I felt quite comfortable in there, at home almost. A favourite hiding spot, that cupboard reminded me I wouldn’t be a kid forever. One day, the shoes would fit me.

Mum put on her black dress with the fringe around the bottom and slipped on the pair of stilettos I selected. They had an opening where her knobbly toes squashed through. She picked up her drink and tottered out of the room in a haze of Chanel No. 5. The heel on her shoes made little holes in our thick white carpet, a trail for me to follow downstairs.

People arrived, bottles were handed over, hands were shaken. I stood near our front door, arms outstretched, collecting the coats. When the pile got too heavy, I dumped them on the bed in the spare room.

When I returned, people were at the nibbles, talking loudly. The men stood close to each other, their brown flares almost touching, and looking like black paper silhouettes against the textured red wallpaper. Standing in a row, they swayed to and fro, heel to toe, discussing cars and computers. My brother talked of his new Commodore 64 and how he managed, after three weeks, to write a program where a weird pixilated mouse danced across the screen. The men were impressed, which made my brother’s eyes sparkle. They swilled amber whisky and water in thick tumblers. The wives stood in a circle, sucking Tia Maria through stripy bent straws from tall glasses. I carried my beanbag over to the corner of the room and watched the night unfold.

The 1970s were late leaving Reading and spilled over into my parents living room. The guests swanned around like film stars. The women in floaty dresses, eyelashes like

llamas', platform shoes like a glam rocker's, with flicked hair and shimmering lipstick. The men were like members of ABBA, with thick hair, furry sideburns, and huge pointed shirt collars. Some held cigarettes near their mouths, taking strong pulls between sentences. The tobacco burned bright and crackled with each inhale. Lines of white smoke twisted together above heads, and disappeared when more people arrived and the front door let in a gust of cold night air.

Dad appeared in the living room every couple of minutes, carrying bottles or upside-down wine glasses slotted between each of his stubby fingers. His hands reminded me of bunches of small bananas, thick skinned and curved. He handed out the glasses, filled them to the rim, and moved around the guests, topping them up, until the bottle was empty. With a quick trip to the garage, he replenished his stash.

A man I didn't know pushed a high-wheeled silver tray into the centre of the room. Multi-coloured bottles shook and banged into one another as the tray moved along the floor. People gathered around and the man handed out tiny glasses filled with a clear liquid. Lips met glasses, heads snapped back, and bodies quivered as the shots hit their systems. I watched as guests got floppy. Earth, Wind & Fire blared from the huge speakers behind me.

For hours, I flipped through records that leaned against the wall. I pulled waxy discs out of scuffed cardboard sleeves, placed them on the turntable with care, dropping the needle onto the first groove without letting it slip or jump. I played Barbra Streisand, Bread, Simon & Garfunkel and Fleetwood Mac for the happy revellers.

As it got later, the music got louder, and people danced around me. Hands reached down for me to join them. I blushed and shook my head, content to take it all in from

the ground. I should have been in bed, tucked up with my Mr. Men books and blanket. I worked out that if I stayed quiet and kept on playing good tunes, no one would notice me. I helped myself to white plastic cups of lemonade, and passed the time pulling apart discarded cocktail umbrellas with mysterious Chinese writing inside.

Drinks kept flowing and, as the clock ticked past midnight, elegance descended into disorder. A big-haired glamazonian vomited into the punch bowl and got carried off for a lie-down. A gatecrasher shoved his hand down Auntie Silvi's diamanté top, and a lady cried in the downstairs toilet.

My arm was yanked when one inebriated partygoer decided it was funny to run around the room with his willy hanging out. It looked like one of the uncooked pork sausages I'd wrapped in bacon earlier in the day, all pasty and droopy. He got shoved out the front door as I was pulled up the stairs and told to go to bed.

I didn't sleep. The music was too loud. I stayed awake for hours, listening. There was laughing, shouting and glasses being smashed. The police arrived; the volume was turned down. The sound from the party moved around the house as people found their coats and passed-out partners. The noise spilled into our stone driveway. I peeked out of my window as guests stumbled into flowerbeds and staggered onto the main road. A group swayed in a huddle, singing *woo woo* from 'Sympathy for the Devil', while a man teetered on the kerb, thumbing for a cab. I turned the handle of my blind to block out the light from the streetlamps and grabbed my teddy.

I can't wait to be a grown-up, I thought before falling asleep.