

Monday 1 January 2018

There's nothing quite like the first page of a new diary to make you feel vaguely inadequate, is there?

I say nothing, but trying on clothes in front of a fourteen-year-old girl is definitely up there in the 'top ten ways to make yourself want to cry into the fridge', as I proved last night when I tried to get Flo to have a look at my outfit before I went over to Cassie's '*it's super-casual, Frankie, darling, no need to bring anything as the wine cellar is well stocked*' New Year's Eve party.

I'd been feeling understandably anxious since hearing the words wine cellar. Who has a wine cellar? Downton Abbey in 1912, maybe. No one in Dorset in 2018. I'd given myself a good talking to, though, and compiled a new Pinterest board full of inspirational quotes about not comparing yourself to others.

'What do you think?' I said, swooshing down the stairs and into the lounge, feeling pretty good in my wide-leg trousers and velvet wrap-around top, thigh chub hidden successfully, drawing attention to my relatively small waist, as advised by Lorraine Kelly.

Flo sighed, looked up from her phone – and raised her eyebrows.

'Yeah,' she said, lifting her voice at the end of the word just a little. Not enough to make it a question exactly, but enough to make me question *myself* and how I dare to ever go out in public. She looked back down, addressing the next sentence to the screen, as though I had really

Jo Middleton

wasted enough of her time already. 'I mean it's fine – you just look a bit like a supply teacher.'

Hmm. Our regular supply teacher when I was at school was called Mrs Cartman and she had swollen feet that ballooned dangerously out of her orthopaedic shoes.

'In what way?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said dismissively. 'You look fine.'

I couldn't think of anything in my wardrobe that looked *less* supply teachery, and I didn't want to risk going back upstairs and waking Jess, so I switched my heels for turquoise Converse and hoped the effect would be suitably sassy.

I said goodbye, muttering things about how grateful I was and how her sister was asleep already and shouldn't be any trouble. She told me she'd put the trainers she wanted into my ASOS shopping basket.

I wish I could say that Cassie's New Year's Eve party turned out to be a defining moment in my optimistic fantasy of reinvention, but I'm not sure it was. When I arrived, Cassie wafted towards me in a cloud of Chanel N°5 and gave me two fake kisses and a glass of prosecco, which I fingered nervously – I'm never sure whether you're meant to hold it by the glass or the stem. I stood for a while with a couple of women who were talking about children's tutors, but given that all of Flo's homework support comes from me, via *BBC Bitesize*, I didn't feel I had much to contribute. Fortunately, I spotted one of the mums from Busy Beavers, the playgroup I take Jess to on Thursday afternoons, loitering by the drinks table.

Playgroups and Prosecco

She doesn't know, but I once saw her crouched behind the sand table, eating loose Wotsits out her handbag, so I recognised a kindred spirit.

Possibly a little *too* kindred, on reflection. I don't think Cassie appreciated our Boasty Parent Scotch Bingo. If anything, though, it was the other guests who were to blame. If they hadn't kept mentioning their children's achievements, then we wouldn't have had to do so many shots. My new BFF (surely?) is called Sierra, which is the sort of exotic name I always wish my mum had given me, rather than Frances, which makes me sound like a nun and is why I've always made people call me Frankie.

I'm slightly annoyed with myself for not making more of an effort to mingle, as I wanted my first new diary entry to be full of wit and charm and anecdotes from meetings with interesting strangers. New year, new me and all that jazz. Also, I really do need to make some proper friends. We've been in Dorset over a year now and yet I'm still clinging desperately to the idea of London. I guess mid-divorce isn't necessarily the time for meeting new people and making a positive first impression.

I thought about looking back through past diaries for inspiration, but I only have one diary from my childhood. It's from 1990 and has a picture of Garfield on the front. He's holding a pen but there's a thought bubble above him that says, 'I'd rather be eating lasagne', which is basically me, right now. I wrote every entry in a different coloured ink, which I think shows a decent amount of dedication, but the entries stop on 13 January. Perhaps I ran out of pens.

Jo Middleton

Reading over the thirteen days I did manage, I don't feel like it was any great loss to literature. The highlight is probably 6 January. 'Went to Sainsbury's with Mummy, even though I wanted to stay at home, and she let me get *two* packets of Jaffa Cakes!!!!' There's a little smiley face next to it. I do love Jaffa Cakes. On 8 January I 'went to Gran and Grandad's and had a mini milk. Grandad showed me how to do 3D lettering'.

It's pretty gripping stuff.

I was still feeling a little fragile by teatime and Flo had gone to her friend Sasha's house to watch videos on the internet of strangers take toys out of boxes, so Jess and I had Shreddies for tea and watched Flo's old *High School Musical* DVD. I feel it my duty to educate Jess in the classics.

(Question: how old *is* Zac Efron in the first *HSM*?)

Tuesday 2 January

Today I had a go at ironing.

Normally, I'm more of a careful drying-and-folding type of person, but I think I was trying to make up for the lingering shame of Boasty Parent Scotch Bingo. To give some ironing context: about six months ago I had to iron a dress for a hand-fasting ceremony – don't even ask – and when I got the iron out, Jess covered her ears and looked scared because she didn't know what it was. Is it OK to get to age three without ever having seen your mum iron?

Playgroups and Prosecco

I was putting out the recycling last night, though, and I could see down the steps and into the living room of the house that backs on to ours. They quite often have the lights on without closing the curtains – exhibitionists, my gran would have called them, although I'm not sure ironing in public is considered terribly saucy nowadays.

They clearly don't realise how often I sneak into the back garden after dark to escape the Disney Channel and scroll through Instagram. I know that @simple_dorset_life always makes me feel worse about my life, but I also can't stop looking. Every time I see a photo of some kind of organic avocado-based brunch she has rustled up between breastfeeds, I remember the time Jess threw a piece of avocado toast at that old woman in the café at the bottom of the hill and she sent me her dry-cleaning bill. The old woman, not Jess.

Anyway, the woman in the lights-on house was ironing. She was in a white robe with her hair pulled up in a messy ponytail and she was watching what looked like *EastEnders*. Her husband – I know they're married because I saw him in Tesco once, buying cat litter, and looked for a ring – was sitting on the sofa with their son, reading books. I watched them for quite a long time because it was such a nice, ordinary family scene. I mean, she *did* have her back to me, so I couldn't say for sure that she wasn't silently crying or anything, but it looked pleasant enough.

So, today I thought I would get myself a piece of that. I'm turning thirty-eight this year, after all, and ironing

Jo Middleton

feels like something I should be getting into as a woman in my late thirties. Like gardening. Or not eating as many Jaffa Cakes.

I set up the ironing board and got some books out for Jess. I tried to get Flo to read to her, but she gave the ironing board a funny look and told me she had homework to do. I'm pretty sure this was a lie, but I smiled anyway, said something suitably encouraging, and set about my task. Ten minutes in I realised why I never watch *EastEnders* – it's bloody miserable.

I looked over to Jess to get her to change the channel but she wasn't sitting happily on the sofa, browsing through her wholesome book selection, as I had pictured her in my mind. I looked back just in time to see her running into the living room with something slopping about in a bowl. She tripped over the iron lead and what looked like milk with bits in splashed into the basket of Flo's freshly pressed school uniform.

Jess immediately started to cry.

'Now my special relaxing drink is ruined!' she said, sobbing. 'I made it for you, Mummy,' she added, as she tried to pick bits of what looked like cheese out of the washing basket.

I checked. Zac Efron was eighteen when *High School Musical* came out. Not sure how I feel about myself.

Wednesday 3 January

Jaffa Cakes – 7. Times I was forced to watch a small child do a dance involving a dusty piece of ribbon found

Playgroups and Prosecco

under the sofa – 4. Inappropriate thoughts about Zac Efron – undisclosed.

Back to school for Flo this morning, but in their infinite wisdom Jess's nursery decided that we definitely would not have seen enough of our preschool children over the last two weeks and that we would probably want an extra few days to enjoy some quality bonding time, so I'm off work for the rest of the week. Given that the whole point of nursery is to provide childcare for working parents, it's not exactly *helpful*.

I've always been dubious about the term 'quality time'. It implies the presence of craft materials or cookery books. Whose idea of a quality way to spend time involves glitter?

I decided we'd spend *our* quality time going to Tesco to buy fruit and vegetables as I've mainly eaten Toblerone since mid-December, but Jess fell asleep in the car on the way. Clearly, she doesn't want to bond any more than I do. She hardly naps at all since turning three so I made good use of the time by catching up on some personal admin: i.e., looking at Instagram. Apparently @simple_dorset_life was on the beach this morning, doing yoga and drinking a home-made kale smoothie.

'I love the feel of the winter wind's icy fingers on my face as I move into downward dog,' the caption read. 'It's so cold, but I feel totally alive! I got home to find the twins happily snoozing while Daddy was in the kitchen making a batch of organic buckwheat pancakes. #blessed.'

Jo Middleton

I thought about *my* kitchen at home, which distinctly lacks a daddy *or* any buckwheat – what even *is* buckwheat? – and I wondered if @simple_dorset_life ever eats cereal with her hands from the box when Daddy isn't there. I do want to *be* her, but also I quite want to watch her try to get a bra wire out of a washing-machine drainage pipe and see how she yogas her way out of that one.

Jess stayed asleep for ages, but I found half a bottle of strawberry Ribena on the floor of the car so #blessed for me, too.

Ian came round for Jess after he'd picked Flo up from school. She showed him a picture she'd drawn of what looked like weird egg people but which was apparently me sitting on the toilet holding a cat while she mixed a cake in the sink.

I know that I'm really lucky that Ian has both the girls every Wednesday night as well as every other weekend and that Flo still seems happy to go, even though she's fourteen, but I worry that I don't make the most of it. I feel as if I should be doing something *worthwhile*, like writing a novel or taking a ceramics class or doing some exercises on a ball to improve my core strength. With this in mind, I'd planned to spend this evening making a New Year strategic plan for making my life more interesting. Turned out, though, that I was actually quite tired so I watched *Pointless* in the dark with a gin and tonic and then fell asleep on the sofa for two and a half hours instead. Excellent start.

Playgroups and Prosecco

Thought I might try jazzing things up with the occasional daily summary? If only to highlight the need for hobbies.

Thursday 4 January

Awkward pyjama-based encounters – 1. Rich tea fingers smuggled from the juice table to me by Jess at playgroup – 7.

I forgot to set my alarm so was woken at 8.45 a.m. by Ian bringing Jess home after dropping Flo off at school. Rather embarrassing opening the door in pyjamas, squinting against the sunlight, as I like Ian to think I spend my child-free Thursday mornings doing Pilates in the garden or drinking coffee and reading the papers on the terrace. I don't *have* a terrace, but you know what I mean.

It still feels weird, months down the line, seeing Ian in the context of the house but not having him live here. In a way, I'm glad that we only lived here for six months together before deciding, once and for all, to separate. I think it would have been much harder if we'd still been in the house in London, where we lived together for years. That place had so many happy memories in it that I'm not sure I could have lived there without him and not been reminded of him everywhere I looked.

Busy Beavers playgroup this afternoon. I'd been in two minds, but without nursery over Christmas,

Jo Middleton

Jess has definitely been on the twitchy side, plus I was hoping to see Sierra to consolidate the New Year's Eve party bonding. Post-Christmas playgroup atmosphere decidedly tense – other parents looking more frazzled than usual and three children had to be physically separated after an incident with the rich tea fingers.

Sierra seemed genuinely pleased to see me, which seems promising for the whole 'new BFF' thing. She told me she hasn't spoken to another grown-up in forty-eight hours, so it could just have been desperation. She introduced me to her son, Fox, who was wearing a Cinderella costume. 'He's refused to take it off since Tuesday,' she told me, 'even to go to bed.'

'Fox as in *a* fox?' I asked. Sierra looked confused. God, I'm such a moron sometimes. Still, she gave me her number and said that maybe we could meet up sometime. I gave her mine. I felt about eight years old. Medicinal glass of leftover Christmas prosecco* after tea for stress.

*By 'leftover' I mean bought in Tesco yesterday.

Friday 5 January

Mild panic attacks induced by thoughts about meaning of self – 1. Interesting tableaux created with tiny woodland creatures – 3.

Ian weekend. Praise the lord. At 4 p.m. closed the door to everybody, poured a glass of yesterday's prosecco (don't

Playgroups and Prosecco

want to waste it), and settled down to make a sensible plan about goals.

I don't know where to start exactly, but I feel that at thirty-seven years old I should be *more*. I'm not sure more what. Just more together generally? Better at parenting? More Instagrammable? I don't know. I feel as though I should have a folder in the kitchen of tried-and-tested favourite family recipes that incorporate courgettes in ingenious ways. I feel that my underwear should match and that I should have a preferred skincare routine. I don't really understand what a skincare routine involves, but I want to be one of those women who says, 'Well, I always use blah de blah' and then other well-groomed women nod admiringly.

It's not even that I'm particularly unhappy. I have two lovely daughters, who really could be a lot worse. Jess is three, so mildly tedious, but also funny, and at least she isn't like the boy at playgroup who wees in the Lego box when he thinks no one is watching. Flo isn't especially communicative, but she's fourteen so I think she's *meant* to find me ridiculous. She seems to have plenty of friends and generally be quite normal. Between nursery four days a week and playgroup on Thursdays, Jess definitely has a better social life than me, though, so that's probably something to work on.

We live in a nice house in a nice town in a nice part of the country. It's all very *nice*. We have the beach and the girls are settled and I have a job. I mean sure, when I was a child I didn't think to myself, 'when I grow up what I absolutely definitely want to do is to

Jo Middleton

manage volunteers at a medium-sized fossil museum', but it pays the bills and fits around the girls, so I can't complain too much.

Obviously, there is the tiny matter of a husband. I didn't exactly *plan* to be in my late thirties and divorced with two children. When Ian and I moved down to Barnmouth at the end of 2016 for our 'fresh start', I think we both really knew that it wasn't going to work, but I guess it would still have been nice to have had that happily-ever-after with family walks on the beach in the evenings rather than a quick, amicable divorce.

I don't think it's that, though. I think it's more internal. What is it? What's missing?

Close examination of life slightly overwhelming so had another glass of prosecco and spent the evening sitting on the floor in Jess's bedroom, arranging her Sylvania Families into funny scenes for when she gets home on Sunday evening.

No message from Sierra.

Saturday 6 January

*Courgette cakes admired but not baked – 19. Jaffa cakes
– 8. (Bad.)*

I went online this evening to look up courgette cakes for my imaginary folder of family recipes but got distracted by a thread on Mumsnet. 'Am I being unreasonable,'

Playgroups and Prosecco

asked MilkThreeSugars, ‘to be upset that DH doesn’t want to wash baby clothes?’

What the actual? Who doesn’t wash baby clothes? I was outraged on MilkThreeSugars’ behalf. I’m not the most conscientious of parents, but at least I never made my babies just loll around all day in shit-stained Babygros. Christ.

But then I read more and it turns out she wanted to wash the baby’s clothes *before he had even worn them*. As in when they were brand new and quite probably the cleanest they will ever be. Apparently, this is a ‘thing’ that parents do and she was very upset that her husband thought it was unnecessary. There was a flood of sympathy for her. ‘What’s the matter with him?’ asked femidom13. ‘Was he raised in a barn?’

Brushing over the name ‘femidom13’ because I just can’t even *fathom* – had twelve people already claimed the name? – who *are* all these people washing brand-new clothes? Talk about making work for yourself.

Wondered for a while about all the things that other parents might be doing that no one has told me about. Honestly, I really do try to do my best for my kids, but someone needs to *tell* me if there are things like this that I’m meant to be doing.

Scrolled back through @simple_dorset_life’s feed until I found a courgette cake – I knew she wouldn’t let me down. ‘*My boys were worried at first that this cake might be naughty*,’ she wrote, ‘*but when I told them about the courgettes they tucked right in!*’

Good grief.

Jo Middleton

Sunday 7 January

Number of times I've checked phone for a message from Sierra – too many. Hours of Netflix watched by Flo unregulated by me – all of them.

Here's a thing I don't understand about parenting: you spend days, weeks, longing for a bit of time on your own, counting the hours down until someone else can take over the responsibility. And then they're gone and you miss them and find yourself burying your face in their pillows to breathe in their smell. You know that thing when you look at your sleeping baby and are suddenly overwhelmed by love? It's like that, only you have to just stand in their rooms and *imagine* them asleep.

I watched all three of them out of my bedroom window this afternoon when Ian brought them home. Jess was on Ian's shoulders and she had her head thrown back, laughing. Flo was more animated than she ever seems to be with me and was walking hand in hand with Ian, their arms swinging between them. My breath caught in my chest and I ducked out of the way before they saw me behind the glass.

Flo let them in and I heard the noise of their laughter move into the kitchen as I came slowly down the stairs. I stopped in the doorway and Ian noticed me before the girls did and smiled at me over their heads. I smelt the smell of him, soaked up by our children, and for a second I longed to be able to love him in the way he once wanted me to. Or perhaps still does.

Playgroups and Prosecco

Jess turned and saw me and started to tell me about how she'd beaten everyone at bowling and the spell was broken.

'You did have the sides up *and* you used the ramp,' Flo pointed out, but as she said it she bent and prodded Jess's tummy fondly. 'Plus you ate all those chips, which definitely gave you extra powers.' I looked at them there in the kitchen, two sisters, and wondered how I had made such beautiful girls.

I offered Ian a cup of tea. He looked a bit sad and said no. He kissed the girls goodbye and I stood at the front door and watched him go.

'Can I watch Netflix?' shouted Flo from the lounge.

'As long as it's not vampires,' I shouted back, closing the door and going back into the kitchen to put the kettle on. Jess has been having vampire-related nightmares since she accidentally walked in on Flo watching a particularly gory scene involving a fight over an amulet.

I made a cup of tea and Jess went upstairs and put all of her Sylvanians in a carrier bag to 'take them on holidays' without so much as a mention of the attention to detail in my rustic farmers' market scene.

I thought quite a lot about Ian this evening. I know that the separation was the right thing to do, that we were always better as friends than as lovers, but sometimes I can't help but wonder if we did the right thing, especially when I see him with the girls and how happy they all are together. Am I chasing a dream of something that doesn't exist? Should I be settling for something simpler?

Jo Middleton

Not that it's my decision to make. Although it was me who said it out loud, Ian knew it wasn't working either and I don't think he would want to get back together, not really. For the girls, maybe, but that would hardly be fair.

The worst part of the break-up, of course, was telling my parents. They've always been amazingly supportive and I couldn't have asked for more from them, but when I married Ian you could tell that they were just so *relieved*. They'd felt responsible for me for a long time, especially after Cam left, and at last there was someone else that they felt they could trust to look after me.

They tried for years to have a baby and were in their early forties when I came along – that much-longed-for only child – so they were retired then by the time Flo was a toddler. They were a massive help when she was young and I was on my own with her, and I never felt as though I was imposing, exactly, but I knew, too, that they'd always had a dream of moving to France when they retired, and I couldn't help but feel as if they were putting their life on hold for me.

When Ian and I got married, they finally felt able to make that step, and so for a long time after we separated I didn't tell them – I didn't want them to feel as if they had to come back and take care of me again. It was difficult, but they seem OK with it now, especially knowing Ian is so close by. I know they'd be happier if we got back together. Hardly a reason, though, I guess.

Nothing from Sierra. I keep replaying the ridiculous Fox comment over and over in my head. Decided I was being ridiculous and messaged her instead.

Monday 8 January

Boring-looking work emails moved to 'TO ACTION' folder, likely never to be seen again – 127. Baby beavers missing presumed dead – 1.

Back to work today. Jess decided, just as we were leaving for nursery, that she wanted to take the carrier bag of Sylvanians with her. I said no. No way did I want them getting mixed up with the communal nursery toys – those critters are pricey.

Negotiations ensued.

By 'negotiations' I mean that Jess screamed and refused to let me put on her shoes until I agreed to her taking the beaver family in a leftover takeaway box. There were further discussions when we arrived at nursery and I suggested she leave them safely in the car for the day. Jess screeched. I was now late for work so I had to give in.

'I'll look after them, darling,' she assured me, sounding like a fifty-two-year-old ladies' golf club member. No idea where she picked up 'darling'.

Ten minutes late for work. Steve asked if I'd enjoyed my holiday and managed to say 'holiday' in a way that implied I'd been lying alone on a beach for two weeks being brought pina coladas by a stream of eligible bachelors.

As payback, I chose to forget to remind him that his meeting with the museum's board of trustees had been

Jo Middleton

brought forward by half an hour. I loitered near his office to listen for the angry call from the chair ten minutes after the meeting start time.

Seven emails from Cecilia about the volunteer rota for the summer exhibition.

Drafted a reply: 'For Christ's sake, Cecilia, it's 4 January. We're a fossil museum. It's not exactly a fast-paced industry, the fossils aren't going anywhere. Do you not have any other hobbies?'

Indulged briefly in a fantasy where I actually sent the email and Cecilia resigned her position as volunteer summer exhibition co-ordinator and I never had to hear another story about her cocker spaniel's bowel condition.

One baby beaver was conspicuously missing from the takeaway box when I collected Jess from nursery. Her bag did contain a note, though, informing me that liqueur chocolates are not allowed in packed lunches and could I please refrain from sending Jess in with Grand Marnier in the future.

Must have got those muddled up with the Christmas Quality Street.

Tuesday 9 January

Fruitlessly battled with Flo to try to get her to wear a coat to school this morning, what with there being actual frost on the ground, but she assured me she wasn't cold. I could see her breath coming out in clouds as she spoke, so I wasn't convinced. She pushed her hands into her blazer pockets so I wouldn't see them turning blue

Playgroups and Prosecco

and reminded me that *no one* wears coats and that, even if she did, what was she meant to do with it exactly, just carry it round with her all day?

I said yes and she looked at me pityingly, as if she understood *life* and I didn't. Sometimes I think she could be right.

I mentioned the baby beaver when I dropped off Jess at nursery and her key worker smiled over-enthusiastically and said they would 'hunt high and low!' Do nurseries train their staff to be so annoyingly jolly or do they purposely pick people who have it about them already?

No reply from Sierra. She clearly hates me.

Wednesday 10 January

Minutes of life wasted in pursuit of the perfect body, as prescribed to me by society/Heat magazine – 8. Glasses of wine drunk and Jaffa Cakes eaten in a bid to prove to self that I am happy with body as is and don't need to be thin to be content – 3 + 9. (Point well made.)

In the spirit of 2018 being the year I embrace change, get fit and thin and tanned etc., etc., I decided to use my child-free evening this week to have my first-ever sunbed. I'm thinking that if I have a 'just got back from a sexy winter sun holiday' tan then at least people might be distracted from the chub while I gather the motivation to join a gym.

I felt weirdly nervous parking the car and did a shifty look around me to make sure no one I knew was about before I opened the door. Inside, I was greeted by a

Jo Middleton

woman whose face reminded me of a leather handbag I bought during my honeymoon with Ian in Mykonos. Her name badge said 'Sandra'.

Sandra helped me set up my 'membership', which made me feel a bit like perhaps I was as good as joining a gym after all, and I topped up my tan credit using my fingerprint. While Sandra was distracted by another customer, I accidentally used the touchscreen to buy three pairs of safety goggles.

Sandra then showed me into the tanning room and demonstrated how I should wipe down the bed with the provided spray before using it. Once inside, I was to pull the lid of the bed down over me. I made a joke about panini. She didn't laugh.

'Is there a start button or something?' I asked, feeling a bit stupid.

'No,' she said, 'it starts automatically, so you've got about ninety seconds now to get sorted.' I looked panicked. 'You'd best get going,' she added helpfully, and left the room.

I scrambled out of my clothes, in two minds as to whether or not I was meant to keep on my pants. I thought probably not, but then what if you actually *were* and I turned it into one of those 'accidentally naked in a sauna' moments? I'd locked the door, but you never knew in places like this.

I decided to risk it, took off my pants and lay down on the bed, wondering how many other bums had been in exactly the same spot. I pulled the sandwich toaster top down over me, ready to become Jennifer Aniston.

Playgroups and Prosecco

The safety goggles were like black swimming goggles, designed to be strung together and fixed around the back of your head. Sandra had made me nervous with her countdown, though, so I skipped fiddling about with the string and went for just balancing them on my eyes. This was fine until I turned my head to the side to check my positioning and the left goggle fell off on to the bed next to my head. I fumbled for it, trying at the same time to keep the right goggle in place, worried that at any moment the tanning would start and I would be immediately blinded.

I found it just as the bed lit up and a robot voice welcomed me to what turned out to be possibly the longest and hottest eight minutes of my life.

Sandra had shown me some buttons, but with my eyes closed behind the goggles (are you meant to do this? Not sure ...) I couldn't figure out how to switch on the fans. I felt as if I might actually be being toasted, cheese-and-tuna panini-style. When I finally escaped I noticed a sign on the wall informing me (too late) – that the facial tanners are extremely powerful and can be turned down from the console. Fantastic.

I'd expected afterwards to feel kind of glowing and lustrous. Instead, I just felt sweaty. And I mean really sweaty. I stopped at little Tesco on the way home for a few essentials – bread, wine, Jaffa Cakes – and I could feel sweat pooling around my bum and rolling down the back of my thighs.

Spotted Flo's physics teacher so hid behind the coffee machine to avoid any kind of sweaty encounter. He had

Jo Middleton

eight cans of cider and a meat feast pizza in his basket, so clearly enjoying the start of term.

Thursday 11 January

Busy Beavers this afternoon and Sierra brought me in a bag of mini chocolate-chip cookies to apologise for not being in touch. She told me that Fox had buried her phone in the garden and then watered it to see if it would grow into a phone tree. (It didn't).

Apparently, mini-cookie bags are ideal for stealth snacking as the smaller-than-normal cookie size means you can put a whole one in your mouth at once, thus minimising the risk that a small child will spot you daring to enjoy yourself.

I think she might be my soulmate.

Saturday 13 January

*Changing room number tags accidentally shoplifted –
1. Strangers traumatised – at least 1. New ideas for
ways to use bunting to bring a 'splash of colour' to a
child's bedroom – more than necessary.*

If anyone from Marks & Spencer ever reads this, I have a genius idea for you – paid childcare for changing rooms. I'm thinking something like one pound per three minutes? You'd hardly have them for any time at all, so you wouldn't even have to think up decent activities: you could literally just sit them in a corner

Playgroups and Prosecco

with a mini fudge from the food hall or something. Seriously, wouldn't it be nice to *not* have to take a small child in with you while you try on swimming costumes? I can't say it was exactly a boost for my self-confidence to have Jess outright *laugh* when I took off my bra.

'Do a dance, Mummy!' she shrieked with glee. 'Make your boobies wobble!' I refused. She looked cross. 'Do a dance!' she shouted again, slightly less gleefully. I told her that I really didn't want to do a dance, I just wanted to try on some swimming costumes, but she didn't seem to be on board with that. She started slapping at my legs and crying, which I thought probably didn't sound great through the curtain.

I tried to ignore her and took the first costume off the hanger. I wrestled the Lycra over my thighs, the straps somehow becoming more twisted the more I tried to straighten them out. I looked in the mirror, my face red and shiny, thighs puckered, a stark V-shaped tan line on my increasingly wrinkly chest. I was *sure* I was younger and thinner last time I looked. When did my cleavage start to look like that of a sixty-four-year-old woman who likes to wear a lot of gold jewellery and lives for half the year in Spain?

I looked down for Jess, just in time to hear a startled gasp from the changing room next door and a 'Hello, lady!' from Jess. I yanked her back in, shouted apologies and kept my eyes fixed on her as I changed back into my clothes, nudging her into a corner with my feet whenever she tried to make a break for it.

Jo Middleton

Came out of the changing rooms and bumped into a pushchair containing a smiley toddler eating a carrot stick. It was being pushed by a serene-looking woman with the shiniest hair I have ever seen. I mumbled sorry and dragged Jess outside. I took her into the toyshop, thinking that might calm her down, but instead she had a tantrum because I wouldn't buy her a set of Sylvanian Family bunkbeds for her baby beavers. *Ten pounds* they wanted for them. Whoever invented Sylvanian Families must be chuckling to themselves as they recline on a lounge on the deck of their yacht.

Flo was in one of her lovely moods when we got home, where she decides Jess is her best friend ever, so I was able to recover quietly from the changing-room ordeal with a cup of tea and a scroll through Instagram. Way too many New Year-inspired smoothies for my liking, so I made myself feel bad by looking at kids' bedroom makeovers on Pinterest instead. Who are these parents with the time and inclination to build wigwams and hand-stitch bunting?

The girls disappeared upstairs again after tea and at about seven o'clock they came downstairs for the sofa cushions, saying they were having a sleepover in Flo's room and I mustn't come in. I happily agreed and moved to the beanbag. A small price to pay.

Poured a glass of wine and WhatsApped Sierra my tale of changing-room woe. She sympathised with a story about Fox involving a shoe fitting with a female shop assistant with an unfortunate amount of facial hair.

Playgroups and Prosecco

At about eight I heard Jess tiptoe downstairs and into the kitchen. She rummaged noisily in the snack cupboard and I used my phone as a sort of periscope to watch her run back up the stairs with two bags of Frazzles.

(Question: does anyone actually *like* bunting or are we all just too scared to be the first one to say we think it's shit?)

Sunday 14 January

I dreamed last night that I was at a soft play centre with the shiny-haired mum from M&S. She was stuck in the ball pit and I was just watching and laughing and holding a glass of prosecco in each hand.

To make up for yesterday I spent the afternoon with Jess, making our own versions of Sylvanian Family furniture. I made some bunk beds with two matchboxes, four cocktail sticks and some masking tape, which I was *very* pleased with. I also upcycled a Müller rice pot into a hot tub and made a mini firepit with an empty Petite Filous one and some twigs from the garden. I think I might have had more fun than Jess did. Bit worrying.

Monday 15 January

Jess's key worker, Millie, handed me one of the plastic changing-room tags from M&S when I got to nursery this afternoon. It had a number three on it. Apparently they'd had a 'what we did at the weekend' session and Jess had got it out of her backpack to illustrate her story about me 'taking my clothes off in the shops'.

I questioned Jess about it on the way home. She said she'd wanted to tell everyone about it because she thought it was funny that my bottom was so hairy but that the lady in the other changing room didn't have any hair at all.

'She looked just like my Tiny Tears dolly, Mummy,' she said.

Drove the rest of the way home in silence, wondering how I will ever look Millie in the eye again.

Tuesday 16 January

FaceTimed Mum and Dad this evening. Jess started to tell them about the woman in the changing room but I managed to change the subject by suggesting she show them her Sylvanians. Jess ran off to get her beavers and Mum started to ask me about Ian.

'Have you had any more thoughts about giving things another go?' she asked.

'Mum,' I said, 'it's been nine months now, and we're both much happier with how things are.'

Playgroups and Prosecco

‘Are you, though?’ she asked.

Jess ran back in then and snatched the laptop away so I was spared having to think about it.

Thursday 18 January

Norwegian cruise fantasies – 7. Potential Daddy Saddle-based nightmares – tbc. Jaffa Cakes – 4. (Pre-empting trauma of Daddy Saddle dreams.)

Cassie arrived at Busy Beavers today in a fur coat.

Aside from the whole animal cruelty thing, obviously, can you imagine anything less suitable to wear while carrying around a small child? If I wore a fur coat on a day out with Jess I’m pretty sure it would look like roadkill within about half an hour. When I got into work on Monday, Angela, who does fundraising and sits next to me, had to pick an actual piece of cheese out of my hair.

Sierra and I encouraged Jess and Fox towards the home corner so we could follow Cassie and the coat. We heard her tell Yvonne, who fawns around her like she’s the bloody Queen or something, that her husband bought it for her as a surprise Christmas gift and that she felt awful about it. She didn’t *look* like she felt awful.

‘We’d promised we were only getting each other token gifts,’ she told Yvonne, ‘because of the Norwegian Fjord cruise, and then he goes and gets me this! I felt terrible as I only got him a Daddy Saddle!’

I was so busy thinking about the casualness of the cruise comment that for a second my brain didn’t process

Jo Middleton

Daddy Saddle. Then I realised Sierra was choking on her rich tea finger. Cassie shot us a look as I escorted Sierra to the opposite side of the room, where she collapsed into mild hysterics.

She wanted to google Daddy Saddle there and then but I pointed out that if it was some kind of sex aid then I didn't want it showing up on the church hall Wi-Fi and God having another excuse to turn me away. Not that I believe in him, but you need to keep your options open.

Looked up Daddy Saddle when I got home. I think I'd have had more respect for Cassie if it *had* been a sex aid. Ian and I have both given plenty of horsey rides to the girls when they were small, letting them ride on our backs, but we never felt the need to use an *actual* saddle. I wonder if Cassie's husband is also made to wear a bit in his mouth?

Friday 19 January

Steve announced this morning that as I've been working at the museum for a year now, I'm due an appraisal and that he's putting it in the diary for 9 a.m. next Friday. I asked if perhaps we could make it 9.30, just to give me chance to arrive and get sorted but he said he was going to be very busy with other meetings and it had to be 9. I checked his diary while he was in the toilet and the only other thing in it on Friday was 'dental hygienist' at 3. He does it on purpose – jealousy, I think, because of my part-time hours. He likes testing me.

Playgroups and Prosecco

Maggie, my very favourite volunteer, came in to do her Friday afternoon exhibition tours and brought me a piece of home-made lemon drizzle cake. She told me not to mind Steve. She said she's pretty sure he lives at home with his mother as she saw them in Sainsbury's last week arguing over crunchy versus smooth peanut butter. She said Steve's mother won.

Sunday 21 January

Weekend too tedious to write about.

Monday 22 January

Message from Sierra at lunchtime.

‘When do you work?’ she said. I gave her the schedule: Monday 9–3, Tuesday until midday, Wednesday 9–6 because Ian picks up the girls and has them to stay and Friday 9–3.

‘I have Thursdays off,’ I told her, ‘and Tuesday afternoons, and sometimes I work later on Fridays if it’s an Ian weekend.’

‘Blimey,’ she replied, ‘what a faff.’ It really is. It’s one of the main reasons I took the museum job when we moved down to Barnmouth, because the board of trustees agreed to be flexible around school hours so I can do nursery pick up three days a week.

Sierra said that Fox had insisted on wearing a leotard all weekend and did I want to go to toddler gymnastics with them tomorrow afternoon. I could feel my shoulders tense at the thought of an echoey hall full of toddlers almost literally bouncing off the walls but couldn’t make an excuse about work as now she knew I was free – clever.

‘I know it sounds shit,’ she said, reading my mind, ‘but if Fox attempts another cartwheel near the open kitchen shelving then I’m going to have a breakdown. It’s only £2.50 a session and I will bring Jaffa Cakes.’

I dug out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt with a ballerina on the front for Jess – my best approximation at a gymnastics kit.