

# MUD

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ANDERSEN PRESS

This book is a fictional account based on the experiences and recollections of the author. Names of people, places, dates, sequences or the detail of events have been fictionalised to protect the privacy of others.

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by  
Andersen Press Limited  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road  
London SW1V 2SA  
[www.andersenpress.co.uk](http://www.andersenpress.co.uk)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 689 6



Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited,  
Bungay, Suffolk, NR35 1ED

For my brother, James.



# 1979

*Saturday 9th June*

This diary is the last birthday present Mum ever gave me, three years ago when I was ten. I didn't have to write in it every day, she said, just when a noteworthy event or feeling happened. At the time I thought my life mostly extremely boring, and I didn't know how to write about my feelings, which seemed to change every ten minutes.

Now I'm nearly thirteen and finally something noteworthy HAS happened. In fact, it's more of a bombshell, which the dictionary says is either 'a very attractive woman' or 'an unexpected and surprising event. *Especially an unpleasant one*'.

Yesterday at 6.00 p.m. my father appeared in our TV room, which my parents have described as a fleapit, or a slum or a scrap-metal yard. Only instead of old car doors and broken fridges, there are plates with half-eaten food on, peeling paint, pen drawings on the walls, bits of furniture that's falling apart, broken Airfix kits, old Lego under the sofa, and limbs that once belonged to dolls.

Mum said we could do what we liked in the TV room – but she wasn't cleaning up after us and it was up to us if we sat in squalor. My sister Elsa, who is eighteen and more responsible, used to make me help her remove old apple cores and bits of toast and biscuit from down the back of the sofa, but we began to notice that my older brothers Sam and Harry never lifted a finger. Elsa said that in the spirit of fairness we should not allow ourselves to become slaves to lazy boys, so we've given up bothering. Luckily we have

a cleaning lady called Alice, who sometimes sneaks into the TV room in the day and takes dirty plates away after she's had a sit-down in front of the one o'clock news.

I was already in my pyjamas on the sofa eating toast and watching telly when Dad's beard and nose appeared around the door.

'Hello, Lydia,' he said. 'May I interrupt for just two minutes?' He moved further into the room and examined himself in the mirror above the fireplace. Mum would often refer to Dad as 'Your Dandy Father', because he liked to wear flamboyant ties and interesting shirts and jackets. He hasn't bothered so much with all that sort of business over the past couple of years, but he does check his beard every so often.

'What is it?' I said, startled to see an adult had roamed into our domain and wondering if something terrible had happened to the cat. 'Has Bob been run over?'

'Bob?' said my father. 'No, no . . . that creature is immortal.' He hesitated, and then he said, 'But could you turn the TV off, I have some news.'

Loudly sighing I got up and turned the telly off. And then I turned it off again. You have to turn off our television twice before it properly turns off, as it was made in the 1960s and is like an old person who's hard of hearing and needs things repeating. When I returned to my spot on the sofa, Dad came and sat next to me, wincing as he perched on a loose spring.

He looked around the room. 'Big old house, isn't it?' he said, and I followed his gaze up to a decayed piece of

omelette that Sam had recently flung at the ceiling – just left of the hanging lampshade, where no one could reach it.

‘I suppose so,’ I said. ‘Is that your news, Dad?’

‘Well, no . . .’ he said, now staring at the fireplace. ‘What I mean is that, thinking about it, we don’t *really* need all this space, all these rooms . . . And also . . . I’m in a bit of trouble.’

You know when an adult has slipped up in front of you and forgotten you are not one? Well, this is typical of my father. Also, he starts off annoyingly unclear and then comes right out with it, without the tactful element in the middle.

‘What do you mean, “trouble”?’

‘Money trouble,’ he said. ‘Bit of an economic downturn. Life can be very expensive, you know, Lydia.’

‘Is this to do with income tax?’ I said, as I’ve often heard this talked about in our house as though it is the bane of all our lives.

‘In a way . . . Well, it’s really more to do with mortgages . . . and other things,’ he went on. ‘And what with Kate and her children . . .’

Kate is what Alice calls ‘your dad’s lady friend’, and who he’s known about a year and a half. Worse than this, Kate has three children – Sally who is nine and Erica who is seven, and a boy called Jake who is only a year older than me and a year younger than Sam. Sam is quite hostile to Jake for reasons I don’t completely understand and Elsa will hardly acknowledge that any of them are alive, but especially Kate. Harry is more pleasant about it all, but he’s the eldest

so he's more mature. And I am someone, Elsa says, who tends to be a people-pleaser and am super nice to everyone, only because I want them to like me back. I must admit I am a bit.

Anyway, it now appears that Kate and Dad's friendship has already got to the stage where her feelings are judged as important as mine, and Elsa's and Harry and Sam's.

'What do you mean . . . about Kate?' I asked, though not really wanting to know the answer.

'Well, she and— Well, they'll be living with us soon enough, and what with all the bills and inflation and things like that—'

'Hang on.' I held up my hand. 'You can't just say things like that suddenly.'

'What do you mean?' He looked genuinely puzzled.

'That you're in trouble and now Kate and her kids are coming to live with us . . . You can't just say things like that *suddenly*.'

'Oh. Yes,' he said. 'Well, we – Kate and I . . .' He paused to push his glasses further up his nose. 'The thing is, it's not just the bills. We've actually *completely* run out of money . . .'

At this point I began to get that tight anxious feeling I get when I'm about to go to the dentist.

'Anyway,' he went on, more cheerily. 'The point is . . . I've sold this house, and I've bought a big boat. A lovely old Thames Barge. They had an important part to play in Dunkirk . . . you know, on D-Day and all that.' Dad patted my knee.



'I don't care about Dunkirk and D-Day,' I said rudely.

'Well . . .' He looked disappointed. 'What I mean is she's a piece of history. Her name is *Lady Beatrice*, and we're all going to go and live on her, hopefully in a few weeks. Just in time for the summer!'

For a long time there was silence, except for a bird chirruping outside the window. I'll always remember that bird.

'Gosh . . .' I said finally, as calmly as I could. 'I hope this is one of your jokes, as this will absolutely, completely, ruin my life. Sorry. No.'

'Lydia, I'm afraid there is no other choice,' he said. 'I've thought of all the alternatives. It hasn't been an easy decision.' He rubbed my shoulder. 'Sam and Harry are actually quite pleased, and Elsa . . . well, I'm sure she'll come round to the idea . . . eventually.'

Of course Sam and Harry are quite pleased, I thought. They're boys, who find discomfort somehow enjoyable.

'This *is* actually as bad as Bob being run over,' I told my father. 'It might even be worse.'

He sighed. 'Perhaps one day you'll understand . . . Being a parent is not very easy, and one doesn't always get it right.'

No, I thought. One does not. And actually being a child isn't that easy either.

'What about school?' I said.

'I'm afraid you'll have to go to a new school,' he said. 'As the barge is moored in Maling-on-Sea, near the coast. But Oaks in Maling is a jolly good school, and you'll make new friends. Better friends, even . . .'

Dad was referring to Donna Taylor, who is my friend

and my enemy at the same time, as she is spoilt and bossy and often mean.

‘Hmmm.’ I glowered at him, only very slightly cheered by the thought of getting away from Donna.

‘It’s a new start,’ said Dad, getting up off the sofa. ‘I know change is worrying, Lydia, but sometimes it really is for the best. Silver linings and all that.’

‘I’m switching the telly back on now,’ I said, not wanting to hear any more of his wisdom and annoyed that he was trying to turn this around as though he was actually doing me a favour.

Of course, as soon as Dad had gone, I went straight upstairs to find Elsa.

‘Leave me alone!’ I heard her yell as I pushed open her bedroom door and had to duck underneath a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* being flung at the wall.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said, flustered. Then she caught sight of my expression. ‘Has he told you?’

‘I just can’t believe it, Elsa.’

‘It’s unspeakably selfish.’ Elsa released her hair from its band so that it fell like a wild, dark, curly halo around her head. She stood there in her pyjamas, with her baggy Inca socks and her pretty face furious.

‘A boat though?’ I went to sit on her bed. ‘What will become of us?’

‘Lord knows,’ she said tetchily. ‘Thankfully, I’m off to university soon, though you may end up getting put into Care.’

‘Thanks very much,’ I said glumly. Sometimes Elsa says

spiteful things like that just to scare me. I know deep down she doesn't actually mean them.

Elsa sighed, looking a bit guilty.

'The thing is, how can Dad have spent all his money?' I went on. 'Aren't adults supposed to know about things like that?'

'I think Mum was in charge of the finances,' said Elsa, coming to sit down next to me. 'You know how useless Dad is at practical things.' She shook her head. 'But also that *woman* has clearly bewitched him. It's like living with someone who has joined a cult, or has mild brain damage.'

'Well,' I said doubtfully, not sure that Kate was really at the bottom of this. 'Maybe she'll change her mind and chuck him, once she realises about the poverty and deprivation that is coming.'

'Or with any luck she'll accidentally fall overboard,' Elsa said. 'And get swallowed up whole by the stinking mud.'

'Yes,' I said, eager to join in. 'She is slowly sucked down to the sea bed whilst at the same time being devoured by flesh-eating piranhas.'

'The piranhas are rather unlikely,' said Elsa, wrinkling her nose. 'Which is unfortunate.'

We looked at each other then, and I suddenly felt hysterical and started to laugh, and then Elsa started, and we couldn't stop. We were making so much noise that Dad stuck his head round the door and smiled warily at us.

'Oh good,' he said brightly. 'You're OK.' And then he disappeared in case he'd got that wrong.



Elsa and I must have worn ourselves out with all our hysterics, because I woke up much later on her bed with her asleep beside me, one arm wrapped around my stomach. It was very dark and the house was silent, and I thought I might possibly have dreamed everything. But then I saw the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lying splayed on the floor and I knew I hadn't.

I got up then, and went back to my bedroom, which is where I am writing everything down, because doing that does make it slightly less overwhelming. Also, though I do love Dad, and would never want to hurt him, one day I may be very reluctantly forced to take him to court and sue him for wilful damages to a minor. Or something like that.