

THE
FIGHTS
THAT
MAKE US

ReadingZone

To Nancy, Mary and Sal

First published in the UK in 2024 by Usborne Publishing Limited., Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg,
Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781801315791 7699/1 FMAMJJASOND/24

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY.



“So much of our history is forgotten or just not told, but what even is history anyway? It’s this moment. Right now. Every second we live becomes history, and life continues.”

Closing words from Adam Zmith on The Log Books podcast

“There is joy, there is light, there is positivity in our community. Yes, there’s a fight we’re trying to win, but it doesn’t mean that everything has to be doom and gloom all the time [...] it can be fun. It’s not *all* rainbows and glitter – but it’s a *lot* of rainbows and glitter.”

Shivani Dave, non-binary producer and presenter (from the Pride and Progress podcast, April 2023)

LISA'S MIXTAPE

- 01 Heart and soul – T'Pau
- 02 Heaven is a place on earth – Belinda Carlisle
- 03 Lean on me – Club Nouveau
- 04 I still haven't found what I'm looking for – U2
- 05 Who's that girl? – Madonna
- 06 Respectable – Mel and Kim
- 07 Out with her – The Blow Monkeys
- 08 Causing a commotion – Madonna
- 09 Too good to be forgotten – Amazulu
- 10 Walking down your street – The Bangles
- 11 Turn back the clock – Johnny Hates Jazz
- 12 Crush on you – The Jets
- 13 Sing our own song – UB40
- 14 Never can say goodbye – The Communards
- 15 It doesn't have to be – Erasure
- 16 What have I done to deserve this? –
Dusty Springfield and Pet Shop Boys
- 17 Manic Monday – The Bangles
- 18 With or without you – U2
- 19 Don't forget me when I'm gone – Glass Tiger
- 20 Kiss – Prince
- 21 Somewhere out there –
Linda Ronstadt and James Ingram
- 22 Heartache – Pepsi and Shirlie
- 23 Stand by me – Ben E. King
- 24 Point of no return – Exposé
- 25 Shattered dreams – Johnny Hates Jazz
- 26 Alone – Heart
- 27 Don't leave me this way – The Communards
- 28 Respect yourself – Bruce Willis
- 29 Wishing I was lucky – Wet Wet Wet
- 30 Never gonna give you up – Rick Astley
- 31 Open your heart – Madonna
- 32 Victory – Kool and the Gang
- 33 Nothing's gonna stop us now – Starship
- 34 The final countdown – Europe
- 35 Holding back the years – Simply Red
- 36 Running in the family – Level 42
- 37 (I've had) The time of my life –
Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes

THIS DIARY BELONGS TO LISA SCOTT

STARTED ON MY 15TH BIRTHDAY

Monday 24 August 1987

KEEP OUT
PRIVATE

This includes you, Matthew Scott. If you dare even THINK about reading this, I'll find out and you'll be DEAD. I mean it. And I'll tell Mum about the you-know-what hidden under your bed and then she'll kill you and you'll be dead twice. And I will find out if you read it, you know I will.

01 HEART AND SOUL

“Oh,” says Mum, sitting down suddenly. “Oh, that *is* sad.”

There’s something about her voice which makes me stop what I’m doing – making my favourite breakfast of Cheerios, Rice Krispies and corn flakes mixed together, mashed up with a spoon and drowned in milk – and turn to see if she’s all right.

Mum is always exclaiming about something. Tutting over the news on her phone or laughing at some supposedly funny video that one of her friends has forwarded her. People who complain that teenagers are obsessed with social media haven’t met my mum. But this is different from the usual running commentary of sighs and groans and “here, Jesse, you’ll love this baby panda falling over”.

“What is it?” I ask, putting my bowl down on the table

next to my glass of orange juice.

“Oh,” she says again. “Well, I just opened this letter and, here, look... It was just a bit of a shock, that’s all.”

She hands me a sheet of paper.

I read it quickly. A few phrases jump out: “sorry to let you know”, “memorial service”, “donations to Cancer Research”. But I don’t recognize the name or the address.

“Who’s Lisa Scott?” I ask Mum.

“Lisa? Lisa’s my cousin.” She pauses. “*Was* my cousin now, I suppose.” She rubs her hands over her eyes. She looks tired.

“I didn’t know you had a cousin called Lisa,” I say, surprised. “You never talked about her. Have I ever met her?”

Mum leans back in her chair. “No, you haven’t. It’s years since I’ve seen her, she was quite a bit older than me, you see. I didn’t even—” She stops, takes a deep breath. “I didn’t even know she was sick. I should have known, I should have kept in contact... Oh, I don’t know.”

I look at the envelope. It isn’t addressed to Mum. Instead, it’s been forwarded to us from Gran’s old address.

Mum nods. “Yes, it was sent to Gran. She was always one for keeping in touch with everyone, wasn’t she?”

She smiles, but she looks sad underneath. Maybe this is why Mum’s so upset about someone it sounds like she

hardly knew. Because it reminds her of last year, when Gran died.

Gran said that she wanted us to think about her after she’d gone, but she didn’t want us to be sad when we did. She wanted us to remember the happy times and how she made us laugh. Although she wouldn’t have said it like that – she didn’t say “gone” or “passed away” or that sort of thing, she just said “when I’m dead”. Everything dies in time, she used to say, flowers and leaves and birds, people too. No point pretending they don’t. That’s part of what makes them so precious. Death is just a natural part of life, she told us, that’s why you have to cherish being alive, and live the best you can, every single day.

But when you feel sad, you can’t just decide not to feel sad any more. At least, that doesn’t work for me. But I can try not to think about it, or to hide it so that no one notices.

I don’t know what to say, so I lean over and rest my head on Mum’s shoulder, just for a moment. She squeezes my hand in reply.

“Well,” says Mum firmly. Her voice is calmer now. “We must go to the funeral, of course. I’ll have to book tickets to London, find somewhere to stay, ask for the time off work... 20th February, that’s in half-term, isn’t it?”

“Would Dad and I have to go too?” I ask.

“It depends if he can get the time off,” says Mum. “You wouldn’t *have* to go, but...I’d like it if you came, Jesse. Gran would have wanted to go. As she can’t, I think we should be there to represent the family, don’t you? For all I know, we might be the only family there.”

Mum’s right. Gran would have wanted us to be there.

But that doesn’t mean that *I* want to go. There are so many reasons not to. I hate dressing up and formal stuff and having to be polite to people I don’t know. I know Lisa is part of our family, but I’ve never even met her. And Simran and I have got our joint history project to do together over half-term. And...

“Would I have to wear a dress for the funeral?” I ask, feeling breathless at the thought.

Mum snorts. “Where did you get that idea? When was the last time anyone got you to wear a dress? Don’t be daft. You just need to look smart, that’s all. Well, smartish.”

I breathe normally again. I knew she’d say that. I knew it would be okay. But that didn’t stop me from worrying.

Even thinking about wearing a dress, or a skirt, makes me feel uncomfortable. Maybe I’ll want to one day, but right now, I tense up and it makes my chest feel tight. Like when someone uses my full first name or like when I used to have long hair and could feel it on the back of my neck. It just feels wrong. I know the opposite feeling too. When

someone listens to me and takes me as I am, without any fuss, then my whole body relaxes.

“Actually, this could be a good thing,” continues Mum. “We’ve been talking about making a trip to London for a while, haven’t we? We could stay a bit longer, see the sights, maybe go to some museums and get ideas for this history project you keep talking about. What do you think?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say. I’m still not that keen.

“It would be some time together, just you and me, g—” She pauses, swallowing back her words. I can tell she was just about to say “girl time” before she stopped herself. “Together time,” she says firmly.

Since I told Mum and Dad I’m non-binary, they’ve both been trying so hard to say and do the right things. To be fair, they usually do okay. Once, when I borrowed Mum’s laptop for something, I saw she had a website open, with blogs from parents of non-binary kids. It was nice to know she was trying to understand it better, but kind of embarrassing too.

I’m not sure they totally get it though – that it’s not just about clothes or using the right words or any of the outside stuff – it’s about how I feel on the inside. Not like a boy or a girl, not totally anyway, just like me. Jesse. Those labels are fine for some people, I guess, but they don’t make sense

for me. And when I realized that I didn't have to accept the labels – that some other people choose not to either – then I could show people the person I was but had kept hidden away. Right now, changing my hair or what I wear is one part of feeling more comfortable in who I am, and in showing that to the world, but it's not the only way.

“So, what do you think – a trip to London, you and me?” asks Mum.

Maybe she's right. About the museums anyway. I'm in dire need of inspiration for our history project. Ms Grant says that each pair can do whatever we like, as long as we investigate something that matters to us and use our history skills to examine evidence and sources. It's exciting, but hard too. Especially when Simran and I have zero ideas so far. But I want Ms Grant to think our project is the best in the class, the best ever. She's only taught us for a term and a bit but she's totally different to any teacher I've had before.

She came striding into that first lesson back in September, her red skirt swishing and huge hoop earrings swinging. Everyone was chatting and messing around as usual; it was the first week of Year Eight and no one was used to being back in school yet. The noise in the classroom made my ears ache. Even so, we all paid attention when she slammed a large pile of textbooks on her desk with a bang.

“Right, Year Eight, are we ready?” Everyone shuffled slowly back to their seats. My best friend Simran and I were sitting together as always.

She waited for silence. Dylan and Conor were the last to stop whispering. “Good. I'm Ms Grant, I'm looking forward to getting to know all of you this year. Let's begin.”

She picked up one of the books from the pile and waved it at us.

“This is our textbook for the year. Who's this on the cover?”

I watched a surprising number of hands go up.

“To help me get to know you, when you answer a question, please tell me your name too.” She looked round the class and pointed at Ella.

“Ella – it's Henry VIII,” Ella said, looking pleased with herself.

“Exactly, Ella, Henry VIII. We've all heard of Henry VIII, haven't we?” Lots of nods. “So, this is a bit harder, how many people were living in England and Wales when Henry was on the throne?”

Everyone stopped nodding and looked at her blankly.

I don't usually put my hand up, but there was something about Ms Grant, the way she *expected* us to know things and to *want* to know things, that already made me want her to notice me.

I did a rough calculation in my head, then I put up my hand, but not too high, so it looked like I could just be stretching.

When she nodded in my direction, I checked behind me in case she meant someone else before saying, “The population’s about seventy million now, and there were a lot less people then, what with plagues and no proper healthcare and everything, so maybe half that?”

Simran stared at me. She was surprised to hear me say so much in class.

“Good deduction, er...?” said Ms Grant, nodding.

“Jesse,” I said.

“Well done, Jesse. Not quite that many though, but thanks for starting us off and for giving us your reasons. That kind of analytical thinking is really important for a historian.” She smiled at me and I couldn’t help smiling back. “It was actually more like 2.5 to 3.5 million.” My smile disappeared. I was way off, she must think I’m really stupid. “So, why, when there were millions of people living in Britain, do we only ever hear about one man?”

It was a real question, but no one knew how we were supposed to answer it. Of course, Dylan had a go. Whether he knows the answer or not, Dylan always has something to say. It’s like the contents of his head just pours straight out of his mouth.

“It’s not just Henry VIII though, is it? There’s his wives. You learn about them too, Miss. Oh, I’m Dylan, Miss.”

“Exactly, Dylan, we do. We hear about women who die, get cast aside or killed. But that’s not *all* that women did in Tudor Britain. Or what women do today. At that time, out of those two to three million people, only a few of them had the power to make decisions which affected the whole country – only the men who owned land, no one else...”

“What?” said Jasmine. “That’s so unfair.”

“Exactly,” Ms Grant acknowledged, before continuing, “which means that those men *wrote* the history, and that, even today, we forget that other people, other histories ever existed. But they did.

“So, we *will* be learning about Henry VIII,” she sighed, “and his wives. But we’ll also be learning about influential women like Margaret Beaufort, who had a huge impact on education at the time. We’ll look at the range of roles, from sailors to seamstresses, that Black people took in Tudor society. And uncover queer history too, like the relationship between royal musician Arabella Hunt and her ‘husband’ Amy Poulter.”

Jasmine made a face when Ms Grant said “queer”, then she nudged Ella, stared at me and Simran and whispered something. Just like always.

“We’ll be looking at who writes history and why, how it affects us now, and whose voices are missing. We’ll discover how we’re all part of making and recording history.” Ms Grant paused and looked around again, making sure everyone was watching her. We all were. “Who keeps a diary?”

I kept my hand down this time, but a few hands did go up. One of them was Simran’s. I glanced over at her. I didn’t know she wrote a diary. I wondered what she wrote about me.

“Or writes a blog? Or emails or messages on social media? That’s all history, it’s you recording history, what matters to you, what changes you see, the details of what your lives are really like.”

A list of sentences appeared on the whiteboard. I scanned them quickly.

History is boring.

History is all about the past.

History is about kings and queens.

History is about power.

History is about facts.

History depends on who tells the story.

History affects my life now.

History is written by the winners.

“In pairs,” said Ms Grant, “I want you to discuss these

statements and pick one you agree with and one you disagree with and why. You have five minutes, go.”

Simran turned to me. “Wow,” she said after a moment. “She’s awesome, isn’t she? And a bit scary too. Did she really say we’d be studying queer history?”

“Yeah,” I said, not really listening to Simran.

I wasn’t worried about whether Ms Grant thought I was stupid any more. I was thinking about what she had said and how it made me feel – that the people and events that everyone said were so important weren’t the only ones that mattered. So maybe there was a place in history for people like me, not on the edges of the story, but right in the centre.

Thanks to Ms Grant, history lessons soon became the best part of the whole week. But that’s all going to change soon.

A few weeks ago, when we were all excited about the projects, she told us that she’ll be going on maternity leave after Easter. I can’t imagine having an ordinary teacher for history again, not after how brilliant the last few months have been with her.

Ms Grant says we’ll put on an exhibition to display all our projects before she goes. We’ll make the school hall into a gallery, like a real museum, so that our families can come in and see what we’ve researched. Maybe looking