

A heart-aching comedy
about mother–daughter love

GRETEL KILLEEN

my daughter's
wedding



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For the greatest loves of my life

IN MY APARTMENT

March 23
My Living Room
1.07 AM

Dear Diary,

Hello, do you remember me? My name is Nora Fawn.

You were given to me when I was a twenty-six-year-old mum of four-year-old Joy and a brand new baby called Hope. You might not recognise me nowadays. I looked much prettier then. Ageing makes us all look like we've melted.

I was married in those days too. To Leonard. We lived in the burbs, in a solid brick house with a bindi-pocked lawn that was more stimulating to walk on than the suburb was to live in. I secretly wanted to be an artist.

I found an injured bird on that lawn once. I used to love finding injured birds. I liked talking to them and singing to them and protecting them until they healed. Well, usually the birds healed. But that bird I found on the lawn didn't. Leonard threw it out with our dinner scraps when I fell asleep reading to our Joy. The next morning he told me he'd thrown the bird out after it died. But I knew that wasn't true. I remembered I'd heard it calling when I

woke in the night. It must have been calling from inside the bin. I still feel bad that I ignored it, but in my defence, in my half-awake daze, I thought the chirping was Leonard trying to seduce me.

Anyway, you probably never saw that lawn or that house, Dear Diary, because shortly after my friend Thilma gifted you to me, you got lost in the hospital laundry pile full of bloodied towels and pads and surgical gowns and then brought home in a plastic bag, with just a smudge of transparent red mucus on your top right-hand corner. After that my mother hid you in the garage in case the sight of you made me too sad. Turns out she was right. I found you in a bucket several years later and you did make me sad, but I still moved you safely to my Treasure Box.

Thilma, my independently wealthy/unemployed bird's-nest-haired friend, made you herself. So basically you're two exercise books sticky-taped together, with pink tissue paper stuck on the cover, and the words 'Baby's First Diary' written in dripping blue glitter-glue on the front. Thilma is one of those people who believes that anyone can be creative, and at the same time completely disproves it.

I love Thilma but I find it hard to show it. I find it hard to show my love for my other best friend, Soula, too. In fact I don't express my love for anyone very well. I had a therapist once who told me that I resent both loving and being loved because it makes me feel vulnerable. This comment also made me feel vulnerable, so I stopped going to the therapist. I can't afford to have strangers tell me my faults. I have children, that's their job.

When Hope was born, Soula, a 'semi-professional' bikini line waxer, gave my newborn daughter a voucher for 'a day of pampering' at the local beauty spa. I remember my mother,

Daphne, said, ‘What a stupid present to give to a sick baby,’ and then re-gifted the voucher to herself.

Anyway. I’m sorry I haven’t written in you before this moment, Dear Diary. I guess I’ve just been very busy for the past twenty-five years.

These days I’m a fifty-ish-year-old single mother of two adult daughters, Hope is aged twenty-five and Joy is twenty-nine. In dim lighting I still look like my twenty-nine-year-old self, but just a really, really tired version of her. Yes, I look like a younger me who’s been completely deflated of air, energy, spirit, soul and optimism and yet I somehow weigh the same, if not more. But even if I do weigh exactly the same, the weight has relocated from my face and my boobs to my bum. But not in a Kim Kardashian hourglass way, more like a reticulated python who’s swallowed a hippo, which is currently stuck in its colon.

I guess I should probably thank God that nowadays I’m invisible. When I was young I wasn’t particularly good looking, marginally above average apparently – my eldest brother’s best friend gave me a six out of ten, but now I’m probably a five, if not less. My hair is wiry and styled in a ‘just stuck a fork in a power socket’ bob. I dye my hair once a month and in between, when the grey roots come through, I colour them in with a Sharpie.

I’d do anything for someone to pay me attention now. Or just show some sign that they can see me at all – you know, in an elevator or a supermarket or when I’m crossing the street, just so I don’t get run over.

Not only has my face sagged with time but my boobs have also slid, drooped, flopped in a bizarre imitation of my attitude to life.

Come to think of it my neck has sagged as well, as have both my knees, the top of my arms and the arches in my feet. Oh, and my eyesight is also going. This makes me feel vulnerable, foolish and old, like I'm living way past my use-by date. I'm at the stage now where I can't even see what I'm writing in a text message, so ever crafty Thilma suggested I write my message in longhand, take a photo, and then text that.

Soula and Thilma say your fifties are the best time of life because you really don't give a fuck about anything. Neither of them actually needs to verbalise their belief in this philosophy because you can tell straight away just by looking at them. Soula, who is my best friend from school, dresses as if she's auditioning for the part of 'slutty cougar' on *The Jerry Springer Show*. And Thilma, who we found in our taxi in the late 1980s, is in her early sixties and dresses like a dreamcatcher.

Soula and Thilma don't speak as kindly of my dress sense. I think I dress for comfort. Thilma says I dress like a walnut.

Soula says I dress like I want to repel men. And you know what? She's kind of right. But this has nothing to do with avoiding sex; I just don't want to get my heart smashed again. My heart is already like an old worn vase that's been broken so many times it's more craft glue than ceramic. I fear that even one more very slight jolt will cause it to crash from the mantle and only be remembered as that unsightly stain that can't be removed from the carpet.

So, anyway, I'm no longer young, nor brave, nor good looking and I no longer live in the barren burbs. Instead, I live in the inner city now. I've lived here for many years, working as an executive assistant to a fabulously successful contemporary artist called

Eduardo, who dresses like a pimp from the seventies and whose most famous work is a self-portrait sculpture in which his head is a prune that looks more like a testicle. To be fair, it's actually pretty accurate.

Contemporary art, as it turns out, is the easiest industry in which to be fabulously successful if you have no real talent. It also helps if you have an internationally famous opera-singing father, a WBD clientele (Wealthy But Dumb), and the name Eduardo (which makes people think you're both Italian and artistic even though you're actually named after your mother's favourite vibrator).

Anyway it's really quite amazing I found you, Dear Diary. I was looking for my second daughter's birth certificate and there you were, still in my Treasure Box along with all the things I've kept from the day Hope was born – my hospital wristband, her hospital wristband, and some photos of her father looking like he was the one on pain-killing drugs.

I'm sorry for neglecting you for all these years, Dear Diary. If you'd been given to me after the birth of my first daughter, Joy, who was born 'perfect', then I would have started writing in you straight away. I would have celebrated with you and filled you, and perhaps many more diaries, with heartfelt poems of my dreams for her future mingled with assorted glued keepsakes: her first fingernail clipping, a locket of her hair and the 'parking fine' four-year-old perfect Joy gave to herself (after realising she'd inadvertently left her scooter in the driveway).

But you were given to me to celebrate my *second* daughter's birth and, as it turned out, her arrival was not a celebration. Hope was born three months early in Aisle 9 at our local Woolies under

circumstances that were so humiliating I've been forced to shop at Coles ever since.

Hope was also born with lung problems that left her on the brink of death for the first six months of her life. I was with her at the hospital, throughout that six months, night and day. I woke and slept sitting upright in a chair next to the humidicrib, with my hand poked through a hole in its hard plastic side. I stroked Hope's tiny tummy and talked to her and sang to her and protected her, just like she was an injured baby bird.

I told her all my secrets too. I wonder if she remembers them. I wonder if that's why she's so angry with me now. Yes, Hope's been angry with me for a long time. She's avoided all contact with me for four years. But I don't know why.

What does she have to be angry about?

When Hope was a baby Leonard, my husband, only 'popped' in to the hospital to tell me I 'should get some rest', and I've *never* been angry about that. In fact years later he told me he couldn't stay for longer or visit more often because 'that horrible place wasn't easy to cope with' and no one paid him any attention once he got there so 'it really wasn't worth the effort'. And I'm not even still angry about *that!*

My mother with her two best friends, Vera and Babs, looked after little Joy night and day so she wouldn't be neglected while I was at the hospital. And neither Joy nor my mother nor my mother's friends have *ever* been angry about that.

So what is Hope angry about? And why is she angry with *me*?

I used to wonder what Leonard was doing when he'd finished work for the day, yet wasn't with us at the hospital, and wasn't

helping Mum with Joy. This question was answered when he moved out on the day I brought Hope home. He said he'd waited until then 'out of respect for the situation' and then he moved in with some woman that afternoon. I guess she must have been what he was 'doing'. She had a big apartment and no children and an uncanny understanding of family law and business structures that allowed Leonard to take me to the cleaners when he divorced me. Coincidentally he left her too, as soon as our divorce came through.

We've never actually talked about that. But I guess that's why I haven't written in you, Dear Diary. I've been too busy swallowing life's hippos *and* all the elephants in the room.

So why am I writing in you now? I will explain, but I just need to lie down for a minute first. It's been a very big night and it's been extra exhausting trying to write coherently while I'm still a bit drunk.

5 hours later
6.41 AM

Dear Diary,

OK, I'm sober now and I'm lying on the lower level of the kitchen. Other people might call it the floor.

All is quiet, save for the gentle throbbing in my head and my menopausal fridge that sometimes just hums loudly for no apparent reason and then goes quiet as soon as I call the repairman.

If I look up and tilt my head (without touching the dead little cockroach I just spotted squished in a nook under the relatively new cupboards, which cost far too much in comparison to everything

else in the entire universe since the dawn of time ...) Yes, if I force my eyes both upwards and around, then toward the kitchen window, I can see the city skyline bathed in the brilliance of a full moon. Its brightness hurts my bloodshot eyes. Could someone turn the moon down please?

I'm alone in my apartment now. Everyone ended up at my place last night, but they've all gone home now. They were unsure whether to commiserate or celebrate over the news that after four years Hope had finally called me. So they all got pissed as newts and left just after midnight.

My mother arrived first. She thinks she knows everything there is to know about life because she's given birth to a lot of children, though clearly she knows nothing about contraception. She also knows nothing about when she's not invited. Which was last night. Nonetheless, she arrived first.

Actually, if truth be told, she was already at my house when Hope rang. She'd 'dropped in' for a Double Wine, i.e. a whine with a wine. My mother regularly comes to my place for a Double Wine because her nursing home, Happy Days, no longer lets its residents drink even a drop of alcohol on the premises. So Mum starts every Double Wine whingeing about that. She conveniently forgets that the reason why no one at Happy Days is permitted to drink is because of the sexual harassment case that was brought against both Mum and Happy Days, by Santa after last year's Christmas party.

My mother says Happy Days should be sued for false advertising because there is 'nothing happy about it'. I'm actually surprised my mother hasn't started legal proceedings herself, because she comes from a line of very litigious women. Legend has it that Mum's Aunt

Cynthia once tried to sue herself after she hit a golf ball so badly the ball wacked her in her own head.

Anyway, Mum also says Happy Days ‘is a bloody – excuse the French – shithole.’ But the truth is Mum’s nursing home is actually very comfortable. The food is beige, but the staff are kind. In fact, there are only two problems with the Happy Days Nursing Home: 1. It’s too close to my place, and 2. It’s too close to my place.

I don’t want to sound mean. I love my mother, but our relationship works better in theory than in practice. What does that mean? Well, I often feel like I could kill my mother but the eulogy I’ll give at her funeral will be fantastic.

I don’t know why this is so but I suspect she feels the same about me. Thilma says she felt this way about her mum too, but now that she’s dead she misses her terribly. Soula says I should be grateful that I have a mum at all.

My ex-husband, Leonard, says that my mother and I are very similar. I think that is a rude thing to say.

In her will Mum’s bequeathed me our ancestors’ chamber pot, because she says it reminds her of me.

6.43 AM

Anyway, as soon as the phone started ringing last night, Mum groaned. Mum makes this groaning sound every time a phone rings. Sorry, I should correct that. Mum makes this sound every time *my* phone rings. She groans as though whoever’s ringing is no doubt calling for an insignificant reason and in the process interrupting the sanctity, profundity and import of the much more

significant activity that we're partaking in. (Which, may I point out, at the time the phone rang last night, was discussing whether it's possible that people really do have sex with horses and also if carrots have souls.) It's worth noting, too, that when any of my seven brothers is visiting and *his* phone rings, Mum makes a completely different sound; a 'Sssssshh!' sound that demands we all respect the fact that the caller is probably God wanting my brother's advice.

So, when my phone rang last night, Mum of course immediately groaned in her Pavlovian way. But when she realised the caller was Hope, Mum quickly hushed and held her breath like an excited little girl watching a magic trick.

Before that moment it hadn't occurred to me that, for the past four years, Mum has been missing Hope too. But of course she has. She thinks my daughters are hers. In fact, with the help of her pals Vera and Babs, Mum actually raised my daughters better than her own. So, in a totally instinctive gesture, that was possibly more practical than kind, I held the phone between the two of us and shared this precious call with my mum.

When the call ended, Mum stared at me long and silently, with a schadenfreude grin and 'I told you so' eyes, until I uttered the single syllable.

'What?'

'Oh nothing, Nora.'

'What?'

'Well,' said Mum. 'It's just that being a mother of a son is like passing a camel through the eye of a needle and then looking after it for the rest of your life. But being a mother of a daughter is like

giving birth to a boa constrictor and never knowing, for the rest of your life, if it's trying to crush you or give you a hug.'

I really should have expected nothing less than such remarkable un wisdom from the mother who raised her children on adages like 'people in glass houses shouldn't run around in the nude' and 'a bird in the hand probably has avian lice'. Mum's big on demotivational quotations. When I found out at the ultrasound that my second baby was to be a girl, Mum said, 'Having one daughter is like having a hobby, having a second daughter is a full-time shit of a job that you can never quit'. Whether or not this is true, it isn't a thoughtful thing to say, because I too am a second daughter. Allegedly.

I say 'allegedly' because, until recently, I'd never heard of the existence or otherwise of some other first daughter. This doesn't necessarily make it untrue, however, because Mum has always had a somewhat flexible relationship with the truth.

Growing up with Mum's tales of heroic ancestors, fictitious lovers and falsified statistics re the nutritional value of burnt chops and why it's a good thing if your shoes are too small, has of course affected me. The upside is that anything can seem possible in a fantastic world without the limitation of, um, facts. The downside is I tend to believe anything that suits me. I also tend to exaggerate. Once on a plane I told the man next to me that I'd been bitten by a shark in Tahiti. I hadn't of course. I've never been there. I just said it to spice up the conversation.

Over the years Mum's fibbed, exaggerated and fabricated a lot but lately I've begun to suspect that she's doing it because she's forgotten the truth.

So Mum's announcement, two months ago, that she had a daughter before me, really wasn't surprising. Since then Mum's changed the story of my alleged sister's birth *and* death according to her audience, her sugar level and the weather. In fact the only consistency in the whole story is that she loves the 'other daughter' more than me. And you know what, I understand. Sometimes I like myself so little that I like my non-existent sister more than I like me too.

But anyway, yes, *I* have two daughters. The eldest, Joy, is as I said, 'perfect'. She was even conceived during the only time I enjoyed sex with my husband (and hadn't yet started using the missionary position to check the ceiling for cobwebs).

Joy is tallish and remains slender. Though she always says she eats as much as she likes, she doesn't actually like to eat too much. Her hair is glossy light brown and long and straight and never, ever frizzes. Joy's hair is tame, just like Joy. Her voice is pleasant, her laugh is polite, and if you met her you'd describe her as 'nice'.

After Joy I had a late miscarriage and lost my twin boys. My girls don't know about that. My mum does, and Leonard does and Soula and Hope and Eduardo do too. But we don't ever talk about it, we prefer to discuss subjects like 'would you rather be a cockroach or a snail'.

And then came Hope. She was an accident. She's not at all like Joy. Hope's shape is rounder. She loves to talk and laughs like a tuba. Her skin is fair and freckled. Her rust-coloured mop is thick, curly and wild. If you were to meet my dear beautiful Hope you couldn't describe her with one word. Though when I finally brought Hope

home from the hospital at six months of age, her father nicknamed her 'Hopeless', just before he left us.

I shared a bed with both my daughters for the first two years after Leonard left. Leonard, as I mentioned, had taken all my savings, so the semi-detached house that we could afford to live in was a much-loved two-bedroom dilapidated dump. Truth be told it didn't really have a second bedroom. In retrospect it didn't really have a first. But even if we'd had a mansion with a million bedrooms I would have wanted Hope to sleep next to me. I needed to hear her little breaths in the night, I needed to see her little chest rising. If I'd lost Hope I don't think I could have lived. For those two years Joy slept beside me like an angelic log, while Hope slept in the shape of a starfish and farted and giggled through the night.

Hope spoke early, when she was one and a half. Her very first sentence was 'ope lub bum'. In contrast, perfectly perfect Joy didn't speak until she was nearly four. She later explained that this delay was because she was waiting until she had something constructive to add to the conversation. So Joy's first sentence was, 'Can I offer you a glass of wine?'

When Hope was four she held my face in her little hands and said, 'Will you marry me?'

But on the cusp of adolescence, Hope suddenly stopped speaking to me. Her last words were 'You know from the side you look like Grandma.' And after that instead of rolling chats and laughter Hope just rolled her eyes at me.

I learnt of her decision to stop speaking via a note she wrote on the bathroom mirror using my favourite and only expensive lipstick. It was a long note that used up all the mirror space, part of

the tiled wall, and all of my lipstick. There was no particular feud with Hope at the time. No more than the usual mother–daughter nipping. Nothing stands out. I did ask her to empty the dishwasher, so maybe that was it? And besides, Hope couldn't control herself and did end up speaking to me. She was such a little chatterbox, her vow of silence really only lasted a little over an hour.

But the disappearance when Hope was just about to turn twenty? Well that lasted. There was no fight, I know of no catalyst. One morning she rose early as usual, went to work at the local café and simply didn't come home. I rang her work. I rang all her friends. And I rang the police to report her missing even though I knew Hope had planned her departure because she'd taken all of her favourite clothes with her, along with my favourite suitcase.

I rang Hope's phone a thousand times. But she never answered my calls. Over the last four years I kept trying and have rung at least two thousand times more. Sometimes I've hidden my number when I ring to trick her into answering. But then the minute I speak Hope always hangs up.

During those four years I lost my little pal's companionship and gained the shame of my failure as a mum. I have been very sad ever since. And I've also been very scared.

I know she's OK. Joy tells me she is. Joy and Hope send each other little videos. Very occasionally Joy tells me about them, not with relish but with dread, knowing that her contact with Hope is a double-edged sword reassuring me on one hand and wound-salting on the other.

So, anyway, for four long, heart-aching years I've heard nothing directly from Hope. She fills my dreams when I sleep at night,

and in the daytime I often think I see her: sometimes in the street, sometimes in the mirror, sometimes when I'm shopping at Coles. Often when I hear a child call out 'Mum!' I turn, thinking that it's Hope calling for me.

I worry about her safety. I worry about her health. I worry that she won't be able to afford the medication for her lungs. I worry that she isn't taking it. I worry that Hope is a sucker to every no-hoper male in town because her dad has been a no-hoper in her life, and the hole that's left in her heart might be the shape that only a no-hoper can fill.

I don't know how to explain the ache of Hope's silent absence. I do shit yoga and distracted meditation to ease it. I also eat a lot. I very occasionally go on a date, and if it's too boring I'll have sex with the bloke just so we don't have to talk.

I also drink more now. My friends, Soula and Thilma, worry a lot about my drinking and often invite me out to discuss it, over drinks.

I love Thilma and Soula. I point out when they do stupid things and they both just laugh and laugh. And they point out when I'm stupid too, like when I'm clearly not mentally present because I'm thinking of Hope.

Anyway, the phone conversation last night wasn't long. Hope was brief and to the point, 'I'm coming home, I'm getting married in one week and, as the mother of the bride, I expect you to help.' And then she added, 'I know it's rushed. Don't ask me any questions. You won't understand.' And hung up.

Ah yes, I cannot tell you how this call confused the cockles of my heart. I was delighted to hear from Hope, thrilled to be in her

thoughts, reassured to know she is OK, happy to hear she is in love, fearful she is about to make a huge mistake with this rushed marriage and offended by the belittling assumption that I would not understand love, that I have never been in love, never aspired to be in love, never succeeded or even failed at love! In summary, that I am simply loveless.

Oh, I have to go now. I can hear a loud banging sound. The apartment is either being broken into or my heart is trying to finally come home.

7.03 AM

Dear Diary,

I'm back. The banging sound was Soula knocking at the door, escorted by the new concierge. The concierge didn't actually know that Soula is my friend, but he found her in the elevator and knew to bring her to my place because last night a clearly drunk, yet forward-thinking, Thilma stuck a post-it note on Soula's forehead that read, 'If found please return to Apt 707'. All praise to Thilma for this forethought, even if it did make Soula look a bit like a lost raffle-ticket prize.

Anyway Soula wasn't at the door for long. She just needed me to help her book an Uber. She'd unfortunately misplaced her glasses again and couldn't read the details on the app because she'd made the font on her phone so enormous that only one letter fitted on the screen at a time.

So Soula's gone now and I'm alone again; with only my thoughts, my fears, my hangover and you, Dear Diary.

So, where was I? Oh yes. I was telling you about last night. Well, with Mum already at my place, Soula was the first to actually enter my apartment after the phone call last night. Though to be fair she was already in the building too. For the past two months she says she's been giving a blow job to the concierge every Tuesday in the hope she'll finally accrue enough Blow Job Credits to be allowed to park in this building when she visits. I tell Soula that the building already provides free visitor parking, but she doesn't want to listen.

I also don't believe that Soula really is giving blow jobs to the concierge. I think it's a story she tells to make herself sound special. I wish she knew she already is.

I think Soula is looking for love. And I also think there's no way Soula could give a blow job – her lips are so enormously collaged that her mouth is kind of stuck open in the shape of a quail egg.

Oh. Yes, now I see that could be a good thing.

Blow jobs are clearly not my area of expertise. The last time I gave one I had a blocked nose, and of course nearly died of suffocation.

Anyway, the good news is that Hope rang on a Tuesday night so Soula was in the building, and coincidentally already on her way to my apartment, because she's made it a habit to pop in after 'blowing the concierge'. To be honest, I find this routine kind of awkward, though I should be used to Soula's behaviour by now. I mean, Soula is one of those women who men send dick pics to. And she's also one of those women who shares the dick pics with her girlfriends. I've often thought that if I were to meet any of Soula's boyfriends I'd only recognise them if they dropped their pants. In fact, maybe I *have* met them and just didn't realise.

Anyway, Thilma arrived about five minutes after Soula, because Soula rang her and said, ‘Oh my Gawd, come to Nora’s, I’m not fucking joking you.’

And my eldest daughter, perfect Joy, arrived moments after that, purely by coincidence. She was heading to her apartment where she lives alone. It’s just around the corner from me and also conveniently located near Joy’s public service job where she works as an auditor.

Joy said that on her way home last night she ‘just felt like’ giving me a hug. Joy says delightfully perfect things like this a lot but I never feel comfortable when she does. Maybe that’s because ‘I just feel like giving you a hug’ is exactly what my brothers used to say before they hid dead prawns in my pockets.

I should cross that last bit out. Joy would hate to be likened to my brothers. Joy is sensitive about how much I love her. In fact Joy is sensitive about everything when it comes to our relationship. No mother has a favourite child. But I know Joy thinks she’s not mine. Perhaps because Hope’s health dictated that Joy received less attention. Perhaps because Joy thinks she looks like Leonard which is weird because Leonard looks like a potato.

Sometimes I find myself insensitive to Joy’s sensitivity. Thilma says it’s because I’m so obsessed with my own. But after last night I can completely understand if Joy’s currently in more pain than usual. I know she’s loved having me to herself for the past four years, so I can imagine – actually what am I talking about, I don’t need to imagine at all. Joy was so obviously discombobulated at the news of Hope’s phone call that her behaviour became unnaturally wild and irrational, causing her to do uncharacteristic illogical things like ring her father for emotional support.

Actually, to be fair, Leonard has become more compassionate and less ‘all about Leonard’ with his recent marriage to Booby, his Bosnokian wife. Booby is her real Bosnokistan name and yes, she does have big Bosnockers. Booby’s brave and tough and has no idea how fabulous she is so she overcompensates with abundant gifts of food that always look like stewed shoe.

Booby herself can look like either Jessica Rabbit or Mrs Doubtfire. It depends on the light. But, no matter what the light, she always looks like she loves Leonard.

I don’t still love Leonard but I increasingly tolerate him. I think part of me believes that if I forgive and make amends with Leonard then the world might forgive me and bring Hope back.

Anyway, Leonard and Booby arrived, and the final guest to arrive last night was my boss, Eduardo, specially attired in a hot pink velvet onesie tucked into matching velveteen cowboy boots. He lives in an apartment that’s one removed from mine. Well actually it’s not ‘an’ apartment per se. We call it The North West Wing and it consists of five apartments all joined together, with walls removed and ‘pizazz’ added in the form of his genitalia-oriented art (no it’s not a genre) and elaborately patterned psychedelic wallpaper ‘feature walls’ that are identical to the carpet.

Eduardo also owns the apartment between The North West Wing and mine, apartment 708, which we call the Buffer Zone. The Buffer Zone is filled with all the creations that don’t fit in The North West Wing. Eduardo bought it to serve as a kind of demilitarised zone to protect himself from all of the female comings and goings of my place. He arrived at my place last night asking us to keep the noise down, as usual. And then hung out with us all night ... as usual.

So everyone was here, and everyone screamed ‘What?!’ when I told them that Hope had rung and wanted my help with her wedding.

‘But who’s she marrying?’ Thilma asked.

‘A guy called Aspen,’ my mother blurted with a gusto fuelled by savvy blanc.

‘And?’ said Joy.

‘Well,’ continued my mother, finishing her wine, standing on the coffee table and falling onto the couch with the satisfied grin of an Olympic gymnast who’d just completed a perfect 10. ‘The conversation between Hope and Nora went like this. Hi Mum, it’s me. I’m just ringing to tell you that I’m getting married. Oh darling I’m so happy for you. Hello? Hello? Hello? Are you there, darling? I’m so happy for you. And then Hope said, Oh for God’s sake, Mum, it doesn’t matter how happy *you* are, this is not about you! And then Nora said, OK, yes, yes, you’re right, are *you* happy? Of course I am, said Hope, I’m getting married! Yes, yes, of course you are, yay! What do you mean “yay”?’ said Hope. And Nora said, I mean hoorah, isn’t that fabulous! And Hope said, I think you and I both know that isn’t what you meant. And Nora said, Isn’t it? And Hope said, I have to go I don’t want to talk anymore. And Nora said, Oh OK, do you mind if I ask you one question before you go? And Hope said, What? And Nora said, Could you tell me anything about who it is you’re marrying? And Hope said, I don’t know why you want to know about this person, because it’s not like you’ve bothered to get to know any of my previous partners. And then she hung up.’

While most of this reiteration is surprisingly accurate, considering the emotion and adrenaline that were pumping at the time of the

incident, plus the fact that Mum was retelling it pissed. But the last bit, the bit about me not ever ‘bothering’ to get to know Hope’s partners, is absolutely not true. I mean it’s true it was said. But it’s not true that it was true, because even before Hope disappeared I have *always* wanted to get to know Hope’s partners but was forbidden on the grounds I was ‘too embarrassing’. And besides this I did in fact meet several! I met one when he fell from our drainpipe, and one when I caught him stealing my jewellery and one at a friend’s funeral where Hope’s ‘boyfriend’ was delivering the sermon.

I needed to nip this ‘I’ve never bothered to get to know Hope’s partners’ fib in the bud and get the truth inserted into the family almanac – because like all families ours has to be careful that any slight deviation, more interesting than the truth, does not become fact simply through repetition.

So I seized the proverbial talking stick from my mother. ‘Actually I said I would like to get to know more about the man you’ll be marrying because you’re going to spend the rest of your lives together. And Hope said, Yes, Mum, Aspen and I are spending the rest of our lives together. Not you. And I said, OK, well thank you for asking me to help with the wedding. And Hope said, Well to be honest it’s the least you could do after all that you’ve done.’

‘And then?’ asked Joy, interrupting me in a tone that some might consider to be curious and others might assess as suppressed jealousy verging on hysterical.

‘And then she hung up,’ I said sadly. And that’s when Joy grabbed her phone from the ‘made by Thilma’ little felt pouch that always hangs around Joy’s neck and began tapping furiously while muttering, ‘Maybe there’s evidence of Aspen on Facebook.’

‘Any sign?’ Soula asked after waiting an agonised second.

‘No,’ replied Joy, shaking her head in disbelief. ‘I’ve found a photo of her first puppy, her first car, her first older man, her first younger man, her first guru, an African love, a Jewish love, a Muslim love, a Buddhist love, a tall love, a short love and the first person she loved who had a job. There are Alfonsos, Pierres, Omars, Nikolais, Bruces, Garys, Waynes, Christophes, and even a Whopper Burger – but there are no shots of anyone called Aspen.’

It was at that point that my mother who, for no apparent reason, suddenly became remarkably broadminded, perhaps in the way that a flyscreen door is accidentally blown open by the wind, only to be slammed shut by that very same gust. ‘You do realise that the name Aspen could also be the name of a woman.’

‘Oh, that’s arousing,’ said Eduardo.

‘I think,’ chimed Booby in her deep mellifluous voice, ‘That ignore you gender preference should, what matters our daughter Hope hoppy is.’

“‘Our daughter?’” I bristled territorially at the mere thought, then recovered and joined the others as we all paused to process the dual carriage notions of whether Booby had totally mastered the art of speaking English backwards, and why Eduardo was such a dick.

Our thoughts were interrupted by dear perfect Joy. ‘Well, I think you should ignore the entire wedding, Mum. I think the whole thing is a minefield and a trap. Don’t fall for it. This is the kind of thing psychopaths plan before they murder you. And besides, who the hell is going to pay for it?’

Thilma then dragged me to the corner of the room and, whispering over a schooner of emergency Pinot Grigio, the preferred medication of the middle-aged femme, suggested I find a believable way to be unavailable for the next week, ‘You know, like a car accident or amnesia. You can’t stop the wedding per se but you also cannot go! You are being set up to fail! You’ll have to pay for everything, it’ll rain on the day, the food will be off, the grog will dry up, Hope will think she looks fat, your mother will be there, so will your seven or eight siblings who, by the way, all hate you, and someone will steal the wishing-well cash, and that someone will possibly be Soula. There’ll probably be a fight, the fiancé’s parents will be there, and they’ll be crooks or communists or members of some sort of weird cult ’cause Hope will be desperate to make a point about something that none of us has ever understood and, nightmare of nightmares, you’ll have to book me as the celebrant because I’m your friend. And because I’m your friend I’ll feel obliged to do it – even though we both know I’m a shit celebrant.’

‘Isn’t it possible,’ I asked, ‘that Hope is reaching out to me to build a bridge so that we can walk over it together?’

‘Yes,’ Thilma said, ‘and it’s also possible she’s building a bridge so the two of you can jump off it.’

Soula, who’d surreptitiously joined the conversation by offering us hors d’oeuvres from a plate that was empty, then whispered, ‘For heaven’s sake, Thilma, I have seen a vision of the future and you are being ridiculous.’

Soula is a self-confessed unreliable psychic – and the chance that her psychic visions will be wrong is pretty much the only reliable

thing about them. Over time this has meant that her visions are now really only pronounced once they've actually happened. But last night she went out on a limb and said, 'I have seen a vision and no one is going to kill *themselves*.'

'Oh,' I replied. 'Thank you, Soula, that's a huge relief.'

'Well, not really,' Soula said, 'I do have a strong sense of "tragic death" around these nuptials but, I don't know if it's a person or just the outfit you'll be wearing.'

As profound, eye-opening and prescient as this may have been – though not as eye-opening as the time a date told me that he liked passionfruits stuck up his bum – it was not at this moment that I decided to keep a diary, Dear Diary.

So, when was it, you may ask.

Well we all sat and drank for hours and hours and I decided to keep a diary just *after* the final drunk guest had left – after drunk Mum had been collected and taken 'home' by the nursing home charity bus (which she calls 'the hearse'); after drunk Joy had finished playing Bach using the recorder Thilma carries in her hand-woven backpack at all times ('just in case of emergencies'); after my drunk ex-husband and his drunk Booby left (armed with more food and crockery than they actually arrived with); after drunk Thilma had departed to realign her chakras by weaving a love blanket out of oxygen; after drunk Soula had left to pass out in the spare room (i.e. the elevator); and after I'd rolled my faux Italian piss-head boss, Eduardo, down the hall to The North West Wing that he bought after his famous opera-singing father dropped dead while having sex with Eduardo's girlfriend, and Eduardo's mother subsequently killed herself.

Yes, it was after all that, when I was looking for Hope's birth certificate in preparation for registering her wedding, that I found you, Dear Diary. And it was then that I decided to quietly start writing in you over the forthcoming wedding week as evidence of how perfectly I've behaved should anything untoward come to pass and anyone/everyone try to blame me.

7.17 AM

Actually, that's not quite true. The real reason why I want to record things, Dear Diary? I want to discover what I'm doing wrong, so I can make things right with Hope.

But I have to go now. Hope has just texted. Her plane homeward bound is about to take off from wherever she is and she wants me to pick her up from the airport.