

I

Moving In

1982–1984

Dear Vic,

Being a nanny is great. Not like a job really, just like living in someone else's life. Today before breakfast Sam had to empty the dishwasher and Will had to feed the cat.

Sam: I hate emptying the dishwasher.

MK: We all do, that's why we take turns.

Will: I hate the cat.

MK: We all do, that's why we take turns.

Sam: Anyway, Will, the cat hates you.

Will: Don't talk shit, Sam.

Sam: Don't say shit in front of the new nanny. (*Drops cutlery on to the floor and shouts, 'Trevor Brooking'*)

Will: Don't say Trevor Brooking in front of the new nanny.

Sam had porridge (made by me in a pan). Tea, no sugar. Pills.

Will had grilled tomatoes with garlic (he made it himself, except for lighting the grill) and tea, three sugars.

MK had hippy bread (not granary), toasted. Earl Grey, one eighth of a spoon of sugar.

Lucas had Go-Cat (chicken flavour), water.

We are very near the zoo, but they never go there. And nearish to Madame Tussaud's but they never go there either. They never do the things you'd imagine. Apparently only people who don't live in London do all that stuff. Real Londoners just go to secret places that tourists don't know about, like Hampstead Heath. Our closest, Monopoly-wise, would be Oxford Street (green) or Euston Road (blue). But the funny thing is, how near *everything* is. You could walk pretty much anywhere. Distances seem further on the underground because you go all round the houses and not just from A to B.

Hope all's well with you.

Love, Nina

PS Jez lives up the road in halls of residence and his college (UCL) is very close to MK's office on Gower Street, which is quite near Oxford Street.



Dear Vic,

Took Sam to Great Ormond Street Hospital for his regular check up with Dr Dillon. Sam gave his name to the receptionist as Willie Carson.

She said, 'Take a seat, Mr Carson.'

Just when I began to worry that we'd miss our turn – Sam having given the wrong name – Dr Dillon popped his head out and called Willie Carson.

Dr Dillon: So, Sam, how have you been?

Sam: Can't complain. You?

Dr Dillon: I'm well, thanks.

Sam: Jolly good.

On the way out of the consulting room:

Sam: By the way, I'm ditching the name Willie Carson.

Dr Dillon: Oh, I rather like Willie Carson.

Sam: You obviously don't watch *Question of Sport*, then.

Sam is excited to have found out Dr Dillon's first name (Michael). He can't wait to go back to Great Ormond Street. He's planning to say, 'How are you, Mike?'

Sam: I'm going to say 'How are you, *Mike*?'

MK: Sounds like a good plan.

(*Sam chuckles.*)

Me: It's three months away, you might forget.

MK: He won't.

After hospital, we had lunch in Boswell Street. Sam had Spaghetti Napoli. MK had pasta with butter and garlic. MK was annoyed that the napkins were bitty. Sam ate half of his napkin by accident. It matched his Napoli (red).

Tonight at supper:

Sam: I like people with higgledy faces.

Will: What, like Picasso?

Sam: I've never seen him.

That made Will think about a teacher at school, Miss X, who his mates all call 'Boss-eye'.

Will: All my friends say she's cross-eyed but I've never noticed her eyes.

AB: You must be a mouth-looker. We are all either an eye-looker or a mouth-looker.

Will: I'm an eye-looker.

AB: You can't be or you'd have noticed this woman's eyes.

Will: I'm an eye-looker, except when it comes to teachers. You never look them in the eye.

Sam: I'm an eye-looker.

MK: I'm a shoe-looker.

Love, Nina

PS I think I'm a mouth-looker.

Dear Vic,

Mary-Kay is skinny (not *too* skinny). And therefore is always a bit chilly and has to wear cardigans and socks. Her legs and even her feet are slim, and therefore she has to take care with shoe styles, or they can look clompy. Everything has a consequence.

The kitchen is where we are most of the time. It's a big room with a long table in one half and a sofa and telly in the other. Mary-Kay and Will like to sit on the back of the sofa with their feet on the seat bit. And me and Sam like to sit in the proper place. We watch *Coronation Street*, *The Young Ones*, *Question of Sport*, *University Challenge*, sports, snooker, football.

The walls are covered in ancient plates (blue and white mostly) and pictures – one of a cyclist, one of a man holding a fish by its tail, and a cutting of an old uncle of Mary-Kay's who was a conductor in the USA (music, not bus) and a woman from the olden days in the worst shoes and perfect squares for teeth. And a very nice one of a black ship on blue water.

A massive dresser, like a Welsh but bigger, all covered in trinkets and pretend fruit, little animals and people and little cups and in each little cup a little thing.

Most of the plates we use for food, and mugs, are antique. Some chipped, some nice, some spooky. I have a favourite plate, white with dark blue rim. If Mary-Kay gets that one she says, 'How did I get the hideous plate?'

The knives and forks are giant. Some are white-handled (not to go in dishwasher).

Our usual places at the table for supper: Will at 11. Sam at 12. MK at 1. AB at 9 and me at 3 (rectangle clock-face). AB tries to go in Will's place sometimes because he likes to be in the middle. Breakfast we all go wherever . . . apart from only Sam in Sam's place.

Mary-Kay and Sam have chairs they prefer. Sam's is a big square one with great curly arms and MK's has a bar underneath

that she can rest her feet on. I've got to admit, hers is nice foot-rest-wise, and once you've been in it nothing else feels as comfy. It's a well-designed chair.

There are two tall lamps. MK hates it if these aren't on and it's the first thing she does when she comes down, unless I've switched them on, which I try to. There's a plastic tablecloth which Sam hides food under and a great clanking bread bin.

The floor is planks of wood with gaps, so if you drop 50p it might go down (for ever). Sometimes slugs come up in the night. I've never seen this but MK says it's a horrible thing to come down to first thing. It's a common feature of this type of floor.

Wooden shutters at the window. You have to shut them or people walking past can look in. I don't always remember to and people do (look in). If that happens, we always look out at them and it's strange.

My rooms (two adjoining) are the nicest, I think. I have a giant mirror, like out of a posh pub. The surround is ornate and painted bright orangey-red. I've got a bed in my bedroom, but I like sleeping in the mirror room, so have got a mattress in there too. I have a window to the front that looks over the street and a window at the back which looks over the gardens.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Thanks for George Melly information. He sounds nice, but I'm sorry to tell you that he doesn't live here any more – he used to (before Mary-Kay did). But there are famous persons living in the street – inc. Jonathan Miller (ex-doctor, now opera singer).

Yesterday I cooked a stew (four hours – oven lowest). AB came for supper.

AB: Very nice, but you don't really want tinned tomatoes in a beef stew.

Me: It's a Hunter's Stew.

AB: You don't want tinned tomatoes in it, whoever's it is.

Who's more likely to know about beef stew – him (a bloke who can't be bothered to cook his own tea) or *The Good House-keeping Illustrated Cookbook*?

MK has shown me how to do stir-fried cabbage. Fry an onion and garlic (always garlic, garlic, garlic), add some fine shredded cabbage, fry and add soy sauce (at the end). It's lovely but you're always thirsty after.

Also, been cooking porridge for Sam. This morning, at breakfast, I dropped his porridge bowl ('Sam's porridge bowl' printed round rim). It smashed and he was very upset. I felt awful. It was a gift. If only it had been Will's (porridge bowl) – he doesn't like his bowl (or porridge). And Sam loves dwelling on that type of tragedy whereas Will doesn't.

Will: Don't worry, Sam, you can use my porridge bowl.

Sam: Don't be stupid – it's got 'Will's Bloody Porridge Bowl' written on it.

Me: No one will know.

Sam: I'm not using it. I'm going back to mashed potato.

Love, Nina

Dear Vic,

Shocked to hear that Sam and Will had never had Toffos, so I got some for after school and put them on the radiator to soften up (Sam doesn't like chewing chewy things).

Sam: (*suspicious*) Are they toffees? I don't like toffee.

Me: Not as such.

Sam: Why are they called Toffos, then?

Will: Cos they're for toffs.

Will: (*chewing, thinking*) Actually, they're just naked Rolos.

AB at supper again. He must get bored writing plays on his own all day and comes round for a laugh with Mary-Kay.

Will told us about his school-friend X.

Will: He's got a swimming pool. An Ink Spot.

Sam: What? Full of ink?

Will: No, the name refers to the shape.

Then Will began to tell us about food's journey through the human intestine 'from table to toilet'. AB said it wasn't an appropriate subject for suppertime. But when S&W went up, AB, still eating (rice pudding), began as follows:

AB: X has got crabs, apparently.

MK: Who has?

AB: X.

MK: Oh dear.

AB: He's been fucking the cleaner.

MK: Oh.

Neither of them seemed bothered – or surprised. AB just carried on eating rice pudding, and as soon as it was polite MK ground the coffee beans (noisy). Unfair that Will wasn't allowed

to discuss 'from table to toilet' when they can talk about crabs.
Typical AB.

Hope all well at The Pines. Bad news you're doing nights.

Love, Nina

PS What are crabs exactly? (I know roughly.)



Dear Vic,

Firstly, about your boss walking around in the nude . . . I don't think it's anything to do with him being Swedish or Norwegian (first you say he's Swedish, then you say he's Norwegian). They only do that for the sauna etc. They're quite reserved apart from in the sauna. I have heard that in the sauna they find the sight of bikini/trunks embarrassing whereas they don't even notice nudity. And, No, Mary-Kay would NEVER dream of walking round in the nude – she doesn't even use the downstairs toilet.

I'm trying to work out who it is (with the crabs). There are two Xs. X who comes round here a bit. And X from down the street. I just can't imagine X from down the street – he's so polite. I'm guessing it's the other X. But you never know.

Yesterday, X (the first X) came round to drop something off for MK and seemed completely normal (not a care in the world). He said he was starving and cooked himself a fried egg (in olive oil). Would someone with *crabs* go round to someone's house and cook a fried egg?

Now I'm wondering, maybe it's the polite X after all. Or a totally other X that I've not met. It's a common name.

Would it seem bad if I asked MK who it is? I think it would. She'd wonder why I wanted to know.

Glad to hear you're almost finished night-duty. I can imagine it. All those sleeping old people in that spooky old house with that ticking clock. Been telling S&W about it all. They love it (especially the ghostly ticking of the grandfather clock).

Love, Nina

PS Why watch horror films if you're scared? Why don't you read a funny book, or play chess?



Dear Vic,

Mary-Kay's favourite colour is a greeny-blue, not bright, but like a eucalyptus leaf.

Will likes blue in general, but red for Arsenal. Sam likes red, but not for Arsenal.

I like the same greeny-blue as MK, only brighter.

I dyed my plimsolls that exact colour. I mixed two Dylons together, one green, one blue. I did them in the washing machine (according to instructions) with a granddad shirt and some greyish T-shirts of Sam's. They all came out lovely. Then MK started to notice that everything was coming out of the wash a bit greeny-blue.

MK: How come everything's going green?

Me: You mean greeny-blue?

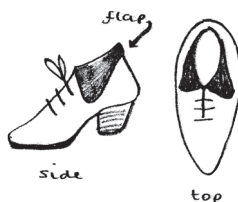
MK: Yes.

Me: I dyed a few things.

MK: Can it stop now?

AB suggested running the cycle through on hot to flush the dye out, which I'll do. I hope it won't put her off the colour.

I got new shoes (£10) but hate them (sketch below – you can have if you like, size 6). I can never find shoes that I like, only plimmies and they feel so flat and hot. Shoes embarrass me. I go barefoot a lot, which is better.



Had to go to Golders Green to get new shoes for Sam.

Me: Right, we're off to Brian's.

MK: Aren't you going to put some shoes on?

Me: No, I hate my shoes.

MK: Well, get some nice ones.

Me: I never see any.

MK: Have a look in Brian's.

Me: Brian's is only for kids.

MK: First bare feet, then kids' shoes, then adult shoes. One step at a time.

Hope all's well with you. Sorry to hear about the gum bite . . . good job she had no teeth, but horrible anyway. Told S&W and they were horrified and now quite scared of the old lady opposite.

Love, Nina

Dear Vic,

Great news about TB. Don't worry about the double-denim, it's just a phase.

Mary-Kay has a new boyfriend too. His name is D— but Sam calls him 'Floppy Hair' (because he has floppy hair) – or 'Floppy' for short. I find him (Floppy) embarrassing because he's so nice (all the time) but you can't just ignore him because he's always engaging you in conversation. He's tall and handsome with dark black shiny hair, like a horse's mane flopping over his eyes, and when he sits down he adjusts his trousers with a little upwards tug. But I don't think he's ever fully comfortable trouser-wise, he's forever at them. MK doesn't do the polite thing of pretending not to notice. She looks at him and says, 'Are you all right?' and he doesn't even know he's doing it.

He's ruining our Saturdays with gloomy Bob Dylan drowning out *World of Sport*. I can tell MK doesn't like him (Floppy) that much. Coming down into the kitchen on his first (public) visit, he stopped on the stairs and gazed out of the window into the garden (mossy slabs and two small trees).

Floppy: What kind of trees are those?

MK: They're just *trees*. (Which, in her language, is like calling someone a fucking twat. She ought to knock it on the head really.)

Last night they went out for dinner. Floppy hung around the kitchen while MK got ready. Sam and Will and me were quite excited about the date.

MK wasn't excited at all. She did wear her silky jumpsuit thing though and at least looked nice.

As they left the house and went into the street we called goodbye from the door.

Will: Have a nice time.

Me: Bye.

Sam: (*loud*) Get in there, Floppy!

Love, Nina

PS Could Mr T not watch horror films on his own? Anyway, I didn't think old people liked horror.



Dear Vic,

Went to a party last night with the helper from the 'Tomalins'. In a dark house in Mornington Crescent and grim-looking people all swigging from cans. I hung around in the kitchen (the only room with a light on). A fat boy called Colin suddenly tipped a packet of Trill (birdseed) into his mouth. He finished the pack, washed it down with a can of Long Life and burped. Everyone clapped and laughed. Then the boy threw up into the sink and everyone clapped again.

Told Sam and Will the birdseed story. I thought it might show them that you shouldn't perform degrading acts to get attention, even if you're fat. They thought it was excellent.

Will: I'm going to do that when I grow up, it's cool.

Sam: I am, but not with birdseed.

Will: It has to be birdseed, that's the point.

Sam: I'm going to do it with something nicer, like Quavers.

Will: You already do.

Will worries about nuclear war. Everyone's told him it'll never happen but, once it's mentioned, it sticks in his mind. He's

a bit like you in that respect. Mary-Kay has suggested we stop talking about it altogether (nuclear war). Not that we ever did talk about it much anyway – but it crops up on *The Young Ones* and other comedies. MK has Sellotaped some pages together in his encyclopaedia so he can't accidentally turn to that section (War, nuclear).

Sam is envious of all the attention Will's getting over the nuclear war anxiety. He says he's got an anxiety too, he can't say what it is, only that it's a lot worse than Will's.

MK: How can we reassure you if you won't say what it is?

Sam: It's been in the news.

Will: Is it to do with West Ham?

Sam: Fuck off, Will.

Will: Only trying to help.

Hope all well at The Pines. Congratulations re patio. It sounds great. Fresh air always good.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Had a v. nice time with Elspeth.

It's usually extremely embarrassing, mixing people like that. And it was, but it wore off quite quickly. Mary-Kay said Elspeth seemed like fun. Elspeth didn't say anything about MK seeming like fun (MK keeps that sort of thing hidden until you know her a bit better) but did say MK was pretty and that she had nice objects about the place. Elspeth loved the house (bookshelves and pictures and that it's in London).

Me: My mum thought you were pretty.

MK: Rubbish.

Me: She did, and she said you had nice objects around the place.

MK: That's nice of her.

Me: So?

MK: So what?

Me: What did you think of her?

MK: She seemed like fun.

On the negative side, I found out something about Elspeth that I didn't know before. She snores, not loud but piercing, and rolls about in bed all night like a Labrador trying to get comfy. In the morning she remarked that she'd had a great night's sleep and I told her that she'd snored and rolled around all night and therefore I hadn't (had a great night's sleep) and she laughed and asked if AJA had told me to say that.

Me: Why would he tell me to say that?

E: Because he says that every morning.

Me: He says it because it's true.

She hadn't thought of that.

Anyway, we had a great time and E was nostalgic about London and took me to an old marketplace that used to be better than it is now and a park where she used to walk you in your pram. We were going to visit an old neighbour of hers in Hamilton Terrace but Elspeth decided against it at the last minute due to suddenly remembering something.

Went to National Gallery instead. E got the giggles at a painting of a few nudes having a classical/ancient picnic (grapes and goblets). It wasn't the nakedness but the fact that they looked so stupid (the nudes) having the picnic (in the nude). And in trying to explain why it was funny, she set me off. We had to leave because we were spoiling it for everyone else who didn't find it funny. People hate it when other people laugh in a gallery.

Make sure you tell her you know all about the gallery thing and the snoring.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

I'll be in Leics on 24th December.

Saturday: Mary-Kay came home with an eight-foot-tall Xmas tree. She'd carried it up from Inverness Street with one of the market blokes. We had a lot of problems getting it up. MK thought the stem was too long (she called it a stem, it was actually a *trunk*).

MK: Someone will have to go to the Millers' and borrow their saw. (*We ignore her.*)

MK: Who's going? I've just lugged the tree home.

Will: Not me.

Sam: I'm not going.

MK: (*to me*) Looks like it's you, Nanny.

I said I'd go if Sam came with me. When we got there (only a few doors up) we had a scuffle on the doorstep. When Jonathan Miller answered the door, I pushed Sam in front of me and he blurted out, 'The nanny wants to borrow the saw.'

When we got home, MK asked what JM had said. I said he'd said, 'Don't forget to bring it back.' MK looked at the ceiling (which in her language means 'fucking idiot').

And I felt bad because JM hadn't actually said, 'Don't forget to bring it back.' He'd said something like, 'Well, good luck, take care' – something friendly and supportive and really didn't deserve

the ceiling look. I said he'd said, 'Don't forget etc.,' to make sure we *would* actually give it back – seeing as I'd been the borrower. I know what it's like when you borrow a thing on behalf of someone else.

Anyway it's up now all covered with little angels and balls and beads and lights (the Xmas tree). It looks brilliant. The best I've ever seen in real life.

See you on the 24th.

Love, Nina

PS Great that you're having lessons, but not sure Mr T is the best instructor. He never sleeps and he's eighty-nine.



Dear Vic,

Sam and me are bickering a lot at the moment. Yesterday I pranged the car on England's Lane – only slightly and decided not to mention it to MK. I said to Sam, 'I'm not going to say anything about it to Mary-Kay – so don't you mention it, OK?' And he agreed.

MK grilled lamb chops for supper and Sam found them too chewy but MK wouldn't let him off them. So, because he was mardy about that, he snitched on me about the car prang.

Sam: Nina crashed the car on the way back from the Lahrs'.

MK: (*surprised face*).

Me: It was just a tiny bump.

Sam: She told us not to tell you.

Me: It was a slight bump on the bumper.

Will: Whatever happened to 'honesty is the best policy'?

Me: That's what bumpers are for anyway – bumping.

AB: Bumpers *were*, probably, originally designed to take bumps.

MK: Well, how bad is it? Do we need to get it fixed?

Me: No, it's nothing.

AB went outside to look and came back saying it was 'liveable with'.

Got my own back on Sam a bit later. I could see a lump under the tablecloth where he'd hidden his chewy chops (usually I'd ignore it). 'What's that lump there, Sam?'

Sam not allowed any pudding (banana custard) due to hiding the chops.

Checked the car this morning, just a few black lines like it's been clawed by someone with mascara on their fingernails. That makes it sound bad – it's not that bad. I know you're going to make a joke about me needing driving lessons. But London's crammed with parked cars and sometimes you have to nudge them gently out of the way when you drive off.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

I have promised I'll feed Lucas the cat every day and clean out the crusty food bowl if we can change his name (to Jack). I'm not keen on the name Lucas. It reminds me of Mrs Lucas. You might not remember her. She was that nice, but quiet teacher at Gwendolyn Junior School.

She taught us how to draw a detailed map of Great Britain by drawing a woman in a bonnet riding a pig. I'll never forget the

awful picture she drew on the board as an example. The woman's face represented North Wales and had to be quite contorted to give the right contours, and the pig she was riding (South Wales) had to be equally so. Both with mouths open as if shouting. Devon was the pig's knobbly leg and Cornwall its trotter. The South-east, inc. London, was its back leg and bum.

She didn't seem to have a plan for Scotland at all.

She also told us to remember Italy as a boot, America a turtle and France a homemade biscuit. Says a lot about her homemade biscuits. My homemade biscuits are more like Poland.

Anyway, I used to notice Mrs Lucas driving to school in the morning. She was a nervous driver, chest up to the steering wheel, face at the windscreen, in second gear the whole way. I used to feel sorry for her when we overtook her as she waited too long at junctions with cars queuing up behind, bibbing.

Anyway, that's why I don't like the name Lucas. I hate having to feel sorry for people. So the cat is now called Jack.

Saw Joan Thirkettle (newsreader) the other day (short fringe) and the posh bloke from *Rising Damp* (handsome black bloke) – he has this really slow walk.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

I've made friends with two nannies nearby. Pippa and Amanda.

Pippa calls herself an 'au pair' as opposed to nanny – don't know why. It could be that 'au pair' sounds younger and her being a bit older (about twenty-four). You can tell Pippa spends ages choosing what to wear and has an endless supply of

different-coloured trousers (including a striped pair and a pair with flowers embroidered down one leg.)

Amanda is nice and funny (and thinks I'm nice and funny) and she loves Sam and Will and thinks they're nice and funny too and they like her – plus she always wears the same old jeans.

If Amanda pops round here without Pippa, she tries not to sit near the window. I think this might be because Pippa is a bit tyrannical and doesn't want Amanda popping round here on her own (without Pippa). One day though, Pippa popped round on *her* own (except for a small baby called Julian). It was unplanned – she suddenly peered in at the kitchen window going, 'Yoo-hoo.' I asked Pippa (politely) not to shout at the kitchen window in future, but to ring on the doorbell like everybody else. She never fully recovered from the telling-off. Then baby Julian needed something and she had to go. She had the stripy trousers on which never quite work at the back and it looks like a *trompe l'oeil*.

Also, on the friend-front, there's Nunney, the Tomalins' new helper volunteer (time was up for the old one). He's very confident and jokey which is good for Tom but will take a bit of getting used to. Nunney has the annoying habit of suddenly laughing *at* you though – which can be disconcerting. For instance, to make conversation, I asked him if he had any hobbies and he burst out laughing as if I'd said a hilarious punch line. I must've looked shocked because he then said, 'Sorry, no, I don't have any hobbies. Do you?' and of course I said, 'No, not really.' So that's how it'll be with this helper. Seems a bit like hard work.

To be fair he did tell a funny thing about himself. On his first night having supper with Claire and Michael and Tom, there was a plate of smoked salmon as a shared starter with lemon wedges and when the plate was passed to Nunney he just ate it (all) and said, 'Lovely.'

Claire said, 'Oh, that salmon was meant for all four of us,

never mind.' And they moved on to the casserole, which Nunney was too full for.

Anyway, I think he'll be good for Tom. And if not, he's only here for six months.

Love, Nina

PS Also on the friend-front, Misty C from Robert Smyth School is at college in Roehampton and Helen from Jez's sixth form is at college in West London.



Dear Vic,

Mary-Kay keeps being ambushed (her word) by a loose paving slab on the crescent near the house. It's this slab that, when you step on it, squirts water at your foot (if it's been raining) and trips you up in general. I say 'you' but it actually mostly happens to MK. I asked her why she doesn't sidestep the slab and she said it's never the one she thinks it is. I keep saying I'll mark it with a blob of green paint, but never do.

Sam was due to go to Ras's for tea. Ras's mum asked if there was anything Sam doesn't eat. I said he had the usual prejudices for his age (which isn't exactly true but I couldn't be bothered to go into detail). You'd think she'd know anyway, they've been friends since toddler age.

Me: Ras's mum wants to know if there's anything you don't like.

Sam: Shoes with shoelaces.

Me: She meant food.

Sam: I don't like Brazil nuts or trout-fish.

Me: Oh no, she was planning a trout-fish and mixed nut risotto.

Sam: Shit.

Played a little trick on Nunney, which seems bad now, but at the time was funny. There was a note on the sideboard from Claire saying about putting a casserole in the oven at such and such a time and temp and I added at the bottom 'and please groom Miranda (the cat)'. Later:

Nunney: I've told Claire I'm not prepared to groom the cat.

Me: Oh, what did she say?

Nunney: She was fine about it.

We all played Buckaroo, which Sam got for Xmas, but none of us like the bit where the mule bucks (too shocking) except Nunney, who says if Sam doesn't want it (Buckaroo) he'll take it round to 57. Me and Will have advised Sam not to let go of Buckaroo so soon.

Love, Nina

PS Jez says it wasn't Mrs Lucas who drew the map of England as a woman in a bonnet riding a pig. It was Mrs Curtis. I think he might be right but I am sure Mrs Lucas was the nervous driver. He says Mrs Lucas always walked to school.



Dear Vic,

I can't pass on Mr Blunt's letter to Jonathan Miller just at the moment – I think I'm in his bad books. It's partly that I asked him if he was an opera singer and everyone laughed (because he isn't

one and although being an opera singer is fine, apparently it's ridiculous if someone thinks you are but you aren't). Can't decide if this is insulting to opera singers or to anyone who isn't one.

Also, I think J Miller is bearing a grudge over the loss of his saw at Xmas. He never mentions it but I know something's on his mind.

Me: *(to MK)* I think Jonathan Miller hates me.

MK: What?

Me: I think Jonathan hates me.

MK: I shouldn't worry about it.

Me: *I shouldn't worry about it?* That means he does.

MK: I'm sure he doesn't *hate* you.

Me: It's your fault, making me borrow the saw and then losing it.

MK: I didn't lose the saw – you did.

Me: No, *you* did and now he hates me.

It's the injustice of it that bothers me. I tried my hardest to keep the saw safe, but nothing's sacred (in this madhouse).

I think MK was miffed because Jonathan Miller said, 'Don't forget to bring it back,' because she hates being bossed about. He didn't say it but it's too late to tell her that now.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Will goes to a posh school. One friend there is a distant relative of Ian Fleming the writer (the one that has the Ink Spot pool, I think).

Sam and Will love nostalgia. It doesn't matter how ordinary a thing is, if it occurred more than a month ago, they discuss it in

glowing terms and great detail. Sam especially has a good memory for detail.

Will: Do you remember when that dog nicked your sausage roll?

Sam: (*laughs*) Yes, do you?

Will: I've just mentioned it.

Sam: Do you remember when Stibbe scored that header at the Astroturf?

Will: (*laughs*) Yeah, it was an own goal.

Sam: Yeah.

MK: Didn't you remember all this yesterday?

Will: No, Saturday.

Mary-Kay has a new (boy)friend called H—. She can hardly bring herself to say the word (H—). It isn't only the name H— she has a problem with. She's just funny about names and like so many things, once you know she's funny about it, you start to see why and then you're funny about it. I tested her on names she finds it easy/difficult to say.

Me: H—?

MK: Difficult.

Me: D—?

MK: Difficult.

Me: Geoffrey?

MK: Difficult.

Me: Michael?

MK: Easy.

Me: Stephen?

MK: Easy.

Me: Jack?

MK: Difficult.

Me: Alan?

MK: Enough, shut up.

My theory: some (lots of) men's names sound like toilets, penises or wanking. Have you noticed?

Will and me both have head-lice. Sam is lording over us because he's clear as a bell. MK's having the overnight lotion same as us, to be on the safe side. We look terrible. All greasy-haired. And we stink. AB was a bit put-off at supper and said not to scratch or shake near his plate.

See you soon.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Met Mary-Kay at John Bell pharmacy in Wigmore Street. Approaching the car where MK had parked, we saw a traffic warden (bloke) writing a ticket.

MK: (*calling out*) Hullo, warden (*walking quickly*), I'm here now.

Traffic Warden: (*placing ticket*).

MK: (*takes ticket and offers it back to the warden*) I was only a minute late.

TW: (*backs away, avoiding ticket*) I'm sorry, madam.

MK: But I'm here now.

TW: The ticket is issued, I'm afraid.

MK: (*points to litter bin*).

TW: I'm sorry, madam.

MK: It seems unsporting . . .

TW: I'm sorry, madam.

MK: In this weather (*sunny*).

TW: (*smiles*).

MK: Well, you smiled, that's something.

TW: (*laughs*) Yes, madam.

Driving away:

MK: He was handsome . . . didn't you think?

Me: I didn't see him in that light.

MK: In what light did you see him?

Me: Authoritative.

MK: Yes, and handsome.

Later we were talking about buddleia (the horrible purple-flowered shrub that grows out of neglected masonry in places like Highfields):

AB: It can be nice, in the right place.

Me: I don't like it – it grows out of derelict houses.

MK: Only if it has to.

AB: It's very attractive to butterflies.

MK: (*to me*) There you go, butterflies like it.

Me: But it grows out of cracks and guttering.

MK: (*pleased*) Butterflies and squalor.

Hope all's well with you.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Of course he's *the* Alan Bennett. You'd know him if you saw him. He used to be in *Coronation Street*. He's got a small nose and Yorkshire accent.

He's very nice. He says, 'Don't be daft' etc. He's getting quite

famous now (probably more so than Jonathan Miller actually) but he's not bothered about it. He's very interested in history, but he's rubbish on nature (like MK) although he is very outdoorsy and does like it (nature) for walks etc. (unlike MK).

When he comes over for supper he does this tiny short door-bell ring, hardly a ring at all, he just touches the bell and it makes just the beginning of a ring. That's him. Minimum fuss.

Once, late at night, when I was on my own, I thought I could hear someone creeping around in the house (burglar or worse). I got myself so scared I rang AB and asked him to come over. He came over straight away (his mac over his pyjamas) holding his broolly. He had a good look around. There was no one. I was so embarrassed I almost wished there was. I said, 'I feel such an idiot.' And he said, 'Don't be daft.'

Love, Nina

PS Everyone passes with Brown School of Motoring (BSM). Really, Mr Brown has never had a fail. The thing about Mr T is he's on medication and he indicates right and left by HAND. I've seen him. You need someone with a normal, modern car (and techniques), not a Hillman.



Dear Vic,

A man from Camden Council came round to notify us. He was only a bit older than me but acted very official and mature. He talked about 'forthcoming essential street-works' and gave us a typed page. He was formal and wouldn't chat or be at all light-hearted (unlike the traffic warden the other day).

MK: So, will there be digging?
Young Man: A certain amount.
MK: Machines?
YM: I expect so.
MK: Will it be noisy?
YM: Do you go out to work during the day, madam?
Me: Why? Are you about to offer her a job?
YM: I'm not authorised to make appointments.

Later at supper:

Me: (*to AB*) Did a young man come to you?
AB: Not today.
Me: We had one to warn us of street-works.
AB: (*very interested, turns to MK for more*) Oh, what?
MK: Some digging and stuff.
AB: Why didn't the young man come and warn me?
Me: It's not your side.
AB: But things travel across.
MK: Not the young man though, apparently.

AB returned to the subject after pudding.

AB: I can't think what road-works could be necessary.
Me: It's not *road-works*, it's *street-works* (*I fetch the typed page*).
AB: Oh, yes, it says here *street-works*, you're right.

He never believes what I say – without proof.
I remembered the wobbly slab that splashes and trips people
(especially Mary-Kay).

Me: Someone should've told the man about the wobbly slab.
MK: (*hands up*) Yes! I thought that when he was here.
Me: Why didn't you mention it?
MK: Enough was enough.
Me: I'll bring it up.

AB: You can't just lift paving stones willy-nilly.

Me: I meant bring it up in conversation.

Hope all well with you. Good luck with quiz. You might want to brush up on football and pop. They always ask about those. And about Mark Twain.

Love, Nina



Dear Vic,

Told MK about this under-the-sink cupboard bin thing they have where Pippa lives.

Me: you open the cupboard door and the bin lid lifts off and you can just toss rubbish in and shut the door again.

MK: (*seeming unimpressed*) Oh.

Me: It's really good.

MK: How is it better than the one we've got?

Me: Well, you don't have to touch the bin lid with your hand.

MK: I don't like those hidden bins.

Sam: Me neither, I like things out in the open.

AB: Very Brechtian.

So we'll carry on with the swing-top even though the swingy bit has disappeared (must've fallen in) and it's just a big hole. MK doesn't care about having all our peelings and fag ends on display.

On the subject of 'au pair' Pippa. I think she might be leaving her job. Keeps hinting but not saying. I can tell she wants me to ask. No chance.

Love, Nina

Dear Vic,

Ben came to visit me. Mary-Kay opened the door to him. Later she said, 'Well, he looked a bit – you know.'

I said, 'A bit what?'

And she said, 'You know.'

So I said, 'I suppose so.'

She could have meant anything – you're guessing half the time.

Sam has finally told us what his anxiety is – it's that the queen might have an intruder at the palace. We said she'd already had one and he could stop worrying. He said he was worried she might have another – a copy-cat intruder. When we all laughed and he realised it wasn't a bad enough anxiety, he switched to being anxious about Shergar (will he ever be found?). He's always up on the news.

Mary-Kay has been to the USA. And you'll never guess what she brought back as a souvenir. A duvet cover. I couldn't believe it. To go all that way and get yourself a duvet cover. I said it was very nice. It was OK – stripy like a bloke's shirt, but nothing special considering. I said, 'Did you get anything else?'

She said, 'Yes, I stocked up on headache pills.'

Also, while in the USA she tried a new kind of sandwich, an American sandwich – bacon, tomato and lettuce (BLT).

Remember the woman that laughed at my ponytail? Well, she was here again last night. This time she laughed at the supper and said it was the first time she'd 'appreciated the qualities of Heinz Ketchup'. Then she asked who'd cooked it.

Horrible Woman: Who was responsible for the delicious supper (*looking at S&W*)?

Me: I was.

HW: Oh! I am sorry. I'd assumed it was one of the boys.

This morning I said something to MK.

Me: HW didn't think much of my turkey burgers.

MK: Well, it wasn't your best-ever supper.

That annoyed me – it was MK who bought the turkey mince in the first place (S&W are supposed to have gone low-cholesterol diet-wise now since Stephen turns out to be high) and apparently turkey mince is helpfully low. Anyway, the horrible woman only came round because she wanted to tell MK about the fellow she's having an affair with – MK mostly calls men fellow or chap, sometimes bloke, but never guy (or man, come to think of it).

Me: She deserved those turkey burgers then, two-timing cow.

MK: No one's that bad.

Funny hearing about your old ladies and their baths. You should try washing Sam's hair. He hates it and gets more and more annoyed, and struggles as though you're trying to drown him and he shouts for Trevor Brooking (throughout the rinsing) plus you're having to be very careful not to get soap in his eyes.

Mary-Kay has started washing her hair over the kitchen sink (when she's in a hurry). I know because she keeps the shampoo in the cupboard above the sink by the sunflower oil. I'm hoping one day she'll pick up the wrong bottle.

Love, Nina

PS *Do Not* practise in Dad's car. It veers to the left. I drove down the M1 (Leics to London) and my arms were killing me the day after, it's like you're on a permanent hairpin bend just keeping it in a straight line. I stopped at the services (Newport Pagnell) and a bloke advised me not to drive it any further.