



About Mummy's Book: A Letter to My Boys

Dearest Henry and Jude,

My wonderful boys, my Henry Bear and my Judy Pops.

If you are reading this, the chances are you are about to make your way through the rest of the book. I'm not sure how I feel about you delving into your mother's deepest thoughts from years gone by, but it was probably inevitable, so here we are.

First things first: I hope you are reading this as teenagers (and not before), because you will notice I occasionally use words I discourage you from using at home. I have always felt that writing down the words in my head, exactly as I think them, adds a certain authenticity to my writing, and it is unfortunate that, sometimes, the first word in my head is 'cockwomble'. Or 'twat'. These are still not appropriate words to call each other at home – you are never too old for that time-out chair.

Back when I was a teenager I wrote diaries. With a *pen and paper*. I'm aware that makes me sound ancient, and I

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guess I am ancient in your eyes. I was born in a different *millennium* to you two. I grew up in the 1990s, with the Spice Girls, Tamagotchis, hair mascara and taping the Top 40 off the radio (remind me to show you what tapes are). I'm not going to tell you what was in those diaries because, post-school years, they mainly detailed nightclub flirting with your father (you can stop cringing; I burnt them).

I stopped writing diaries soon after I met your dad, and it wasn't until I became a mum that I felt inspired to start jotting down my thoughts once more. Only this time, rather than writing in scented gel pens on carefully selected notepads from WHSmith (which I hid under my pillow), I started writing an online blog and, before I had really considered the implications of letting those thoughts loose on the world, they had already escaped my clutches. The internet is scary like that.

So I would like to set a few things straight. Right here, right now. Not because I have to, but because I want you to understand why I have written so openly about being your mummy. I need you to understand what was going on in my head at the time, because you two, my little pudding heads, have always been at the very heart of it.

Being a mummy is really hard.

Whatever age you are when you read this, I have no doubt I will still be finding motherhood hard, but those early years were something else. On the darkest of sleep-deprived days – when one of you was screaming, I was irritable and the house looked like a war zone – I wanted to read about somebody who was having a dark day too. Somebody who

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would reassure me I wasn't going completely mad. Somebody who would tell me there was no need to poke my own eyes out in despair because it would all be okay (but that, in the meantime, it was okay *not* to be okay). That was what I needed to hear. Instead, most of what I stumbled upon offered practical tips about sleep training or told me I should be treasuring every moment with you. There was always a bloody exclamation mark at the end of everything. *Your baby is now four months old! So much to look forward to this month! You might want to start thinking about weaning!* (I didn't want to think about weaning, I wanted a hot cup of tea and some sleep and to feel like myself again.)

There were blogs where motherhood looked *amazing* and glossy – just how I'd hoped it would be. Where everybody wore a Christmas jumper, nobody shat through their sleepsuit and everybody smiled all the time. They didn't help me.

I made a snap decision to start scribbling something of my own, and the blog was born. I frantically typed post after post about life at home with toddler Henry, about being pregnant with baby Jude, about baby groups, about trips out with you and all that came in between. It wasn't very glossy, and at times it was probably a bit ranty, but those non-glossy rantings were the reality for me at the time. I suppose the blog had become my modern-day diary.

It was never really *for* anyone, but people started to read it. Just a handful of people at first, and then a handful became hundreds, and hundreds became thousands, until millions of people had read my ramblings and I realised it was very much *out there*.

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That realisation came with a massive wobble, and I started to have doubts about baring my parenting soul. I really wanted to share my thoughts – the true ones. Yet as more people started to read those thoughts I began to have this niggling worry about what those thoughts would look like in black and white, forever etched on the World Wide Web. At some time or another, we all have thoughts we would rather forget. Sometimes those thoughts scare us, sometimes we are ashamed of them, sometimes they are embarrassing and we burn the diaries that housed them. Often these thoughts are personal to us and the last thing we want to do is immortalise them on the bloody internet. What had I done?

But then I started taking stock of all the messages, all the comments, all the tweets and all the emails and I realised – holy shit! – the blog was *doing* something.

‘Thank you,’ the messages said, ‘for making me feel normal.’

‘For making me laugh.’

‘For picking me up on a particularly bad week.’

‘For giving me the courage to admit, “This week’s been crap and, no, I’m not enjoying every second.”’

Some of the messages from other mums (and a fair few dads) reduced me to tears. I have been given insights into their lives, into battles with post-natal depression, into their continual feelings of guilt and failure and their resigning themselves to the fact that they are very much alone. ‘I thought it must just be me,’ they told me.

I wanted to gather them all in one place and shout, ‘*It’s not just you!*’ through a megaphone, and that desire spurred

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me on to continue pouring out my honest assessment of day-to-day motherhood – an assessment which, remarkably, grew legs (and a front cover) and has allowed me to write my first-ever book.

I will no doubt look back at the blog and this book in years to come and think, ‘Jesus, you never stopped moaning, woman.’ I will no doubt look back and think, ‘But those years were over in a flash.’ I will no doubt look back and discover that I have written things I wish I hadn’t written at all, things that were so very real at the time but which I would set a match to if I had the chance.

I may have called you slightly offensive things, like arseholes (sorry!), once or twice (I genuinely am sorry about that, though when you have little arseholes of your own, I’m sure you will understand); I may have reflected longingly on days spent working full-time; I may have wondered aloud why it wasn’t all rainbows and cupcakes, why I was bored with park trips and baby groups and why I couldn’t cherish every sodding second.

But I want you to know that there are so many moments I *have* cherished. Moments we have all cherished as a family. The cuddles we’ve had, the stories we’ve read, the people we’ve met, the places we’ve been, and the fact that the two of you and your dad have made me laugh every single day. I really wish I could offer you a favourably edited version of your earliest years, an edit where you would never have to find out that your mum swore quite a lot and sometimes cried. I wanted to be the glossy Christmas-jumper mum, I really did. I’m sorry if in any way I have let you down.

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It's true that I haven't always felt like I am cut out for motherhood, but I have always known that nobody could love you more. You are beautiful and hilarious and totally bloody bonkers, and I am so very proud to be part of such a lovely family. I am proud to be your mum. Whatever else I achieve in life you two are my masterpieces and I will never have anything more important to my name.

Here's to us, my darlings.

I love you to the moon and back.

Mum xx



Introduction: The Unmumsy One

When I used to think about what my life with children would be like, I think I imagined my existing, child-free life with a couple of small people Photoshopped in: charming, small people with curls and cheeky, jam-smearing chops. It's not that I was startlingly ignorant – I knew there would be adjustments (less sleep, more nappies, less Jägerbomb-drinking, more pram-pushing). But, aside from maternity leave, the inevitable contact with another human's snot/sick/shit and the seemingly obligatory requirement to buy a VTech Baby Walker complete with plastic phone, I just didn't forecast my life changing that much at all.

I didn't forecast a hurricane.

But neither did Michael Fish in 1987, and look what happened there.

Needless to say, when Hurricane Baby hit in the winter of 2012, I was not prepared. Physically and materially speaking, I was pretty well equipped. Mentally and emotionally speaking, I was not. All the gear and no idea. That was me.

I have been asked several times what the hardest thing

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about that first baby hurricane was (and, indeed, what the hardest thing about having kids is now that I am the proud owner of two small humans, of whom only one is curly-haired). I can describe at great length the sleep deprivation, the toddler tantrums in Debenhams and the frustration and boredom of watching *Escape to the Country* while feeding an insatiably hungry baby when all I really wanted was a shower.

Yes, those practical challenges were in themselves a test but, over and above all of that, the biggest test by far has been the perpetual self-doubt.

*Why am I not loving every second?
How come all the other mums are loving every second?
Is it possible that I'm somehow wired incorrectly, that
I'm simply not up to the job?
This isn't what I thought it would be like at all.*

When I typed 'I want my old life back' into Google during a fraught 3 a.m. feed, I immediately deleted the search history on my phone. I was ashamed of myself because, mostly, I didn't want my old life back at all. I was head over heels in love with my bald bundle of baby-boy goodness and so very grateful that we had made a family. But there were occasions (like when I had already been up four times and the baby projectile-vomited in the Moses basket) when I couldn't stop myself from thinking, What have we done? Occasions when I couldn't stop myself from shouting, 'I don't want to do this any more. *It's fucking shit!*' at my

husband, whose face told me the baby adventure wasn't panning out exactly as he had imagined either.

Several years later, in spite of the moments of magic still being interjected with moments that are just a bit shit, something incredible has happened. Despite flashes of continued self-doubt, I no longer truly believe I am alone in having these feelings. Why? Because it's impossible to ignore what has been an overwhelming response to my online account of those parenting highs and lows.

What started as a small handful of comments became hundreds; hundreds became thousands; and now, each and every day, my inbox is flooded with messages from parents whose experiences are not too dissimilar from my own. Parents who are beating themselves up for not loving every second – something they are sure they could do if only it wasn't all so bloody hard. I once scoffed when I heard parenting being described as 'the hardest job in the world', but that was before I had lived it, before I had cut my own maternity leave short in favour of heading back to work part-time because, quite honestly, I couldn't hack being at home with the baby all day.

The name of my blog is often misconstrued. Being 'mumsy' for me was never a negative concept. 'Mumsy' sounded splendidly natural, happy and at ease with being a parent: all the things I wanted to be. So I called the blog 'The *Un*mumsy Mum' because that was how I felt at the time: like a bit of a fraud, like I didn't belong in the club. Writing down what was in my head and reading other parents commenting, 'Me, too,' was truly remarkable and

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inspired me to keep going (both with the writing and with motherhood, as I've since had another child).

This book is for all those parents who have messaged me, and many more besides. It's for parents everywhere. Mums, dads,* stepmums, stepdads, foster mums, foster dads, gran-nies, grandads and everyone in between who is in charge of bringing up a small person.

I feel it necessary to point out that by no stretch of the imagination is this a parenting manual. If you were hoping for tips on getting your baby to nap in time for *Judge Rinder* or practical guidance about weaning, you might want to exchange my book for one of those 'How to Grow a Child Who isn't a Total Knobhead' titles.

This book won't tell you how to parent, what to buy, how you should feel. But I hope you find it useful, nevertheless. More than anything, I hope it tells you that, whatever you are feeling, you can bet your bottom dollar that somebody else has been there and is feeling the same way, too.

So here it is. My uncensored account of going from zero to two children in the space of three years. The expectation versus the reality. The emotional highs and the 'I just sieved a poo out of the bath with my hand' lows. The unapologetically honest account I wish I had come across when I was desperately scrolling through online baby forums at 3 a.m. I'm trying so hard not to use the word 'journey' right now, because I hate it when people bang on about their sodding

*Dads more than welcome here, too, though I feel I should probably give you a heads-up that I do talk about blocked milk ducts and fannies.

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journeys. But, in the non-*X-Factor*-montage sense of the word, I suppose this *is* my journey.

On we go, then.

‘When I look back to the vision I had of myself as a housewife *before* I actually had children (1950s-stylee, with my pinny on, my rosy-cheeked kids playing nicely while I had a civilised coffee with a friend who was sampling the freshly baked muffins I had made), I just laugh and wipe the snot smear off my leggings.’

Lara, Chorley



Part One

What Have We Done?

‘Night feeds are something special. By “special”, I mean they are a bit shit.’



Just the Two of Us

Allow me to set the pre-baby scene. It's 2009.

I'm taking you back to 2009 because that year seems a fair representation of the pre-baby us. It was the year we bought our first house and both had grown-up, serious jobs. James was occupying one of the many Civil Service jobs he's tried his hand at over the years, and I had just been promoted to Relationship Manager in an asset finance company, which, in practical terms, meant I spent lots of time driving around to farms in Devon financing machinery, and I bloody *loved* it.

We worked hard and played *sort of* hard. We occasionally rolled in drunk at 2 a.m. smelling of vodka and clutching shish kebabs but, with the benefit of hindsight, we should have played harder. (I'm somehow mourning the raving I never did in Ibiza; not that I ever had any urge to get my trance on in an Amnesia foam party, but I *could* have if I'd wanted to.) I didn't appreciate the extent of our freedom.

After an intense week of work, for us, the weekend revolved around a Pizza Hut delivery, bottles of wine and

beer, the odd beach walk or excursion to a National Trust house (mainly for the cream tea) and copious amounts of sofa lounging, tea drinking and Jammie Dodger eating to the background hum of Sky Sports News. ‘Chores’ were hoovering out the car (which we could do in peace or while listening to the radio), grocery shopping (we bought what we fancied when we fancied it) and ‘cleaning the place’, which took all of thirty minutes and consisted of sorting out piles of work clothes and tidying an already uncluttered living space.

Life was good, and we were happy. We were *settled*.

The following year, we tied the knot and started dabbling in that dangerous pastime I like to call Rightmove browsing. I’m sure it was all that talk of extra bedrooms and garages and friendly neighbours that prompted us to engage seriously for the first time in The Chat. There was only one chat to have by this stage, as we’d already gone down the pet route and rescued Floyd the Cat, who we treated very much like our baby.

The next level in our adult lives awaited.

I can’t pinpoint or remember the exact ‘Shall we have a baby, then?’ conversation, but I remember we agreed that I would come off the Pill and we would ‘see what happens’. There is nothing casual about ‘seeing what happens’. From the moment you are no longer *not* trying for a baby, you are very much trying for one.

I’m not sure what the rush was. There was certainly no biological rush, as I was just twenty-three at this point. We had all the time in the world to start procreating, but

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something instinctive told us it was the right time. We may have been just a few months into married life but, by this stage, we were a full seven years into our relationship. I was just *sixteen* when we first got together (at a nightclub on an industrial estate: the romance of fairy tales – I know).

All of a sudden, I became hyperaware of babies in buggies and pregnancy bumps on the bus. Despite my continued enjoyment of work, wine and uninterrupted Friday-night takeaways, more than anything else I wanted to be a mum.

I guessed it would happen straight away.

It didn't happen straight away.

In fact, ten months into the whole 'I think I'm ovulating. Can you pause *Top Gear* and come upstairs, please?' debacle, we'd become slightly disheartened with the bi-daily shagathons and leg-holding in the air (me, not James, who never once lay with his legs in the air for ten minutes to discourage gravity).

Then, suddenly, we had other things to concentrate on because we'd just completed on the sale of our house and secured a new one with that extra bedroom and garage. Hurrah! It was a chaotic time, as we had only a couple of weeks off work to pack up, move house *and* prepare for a week's holiday in Kos; a holiday I'd booked prior to knowing we'd be moving that month. So, in a state of mostly unpacked but not quite organised household disorder, we found ourselves getting ready to leave for a road trip to Cardiff airport. I ran myself a bath (to take care of the essential holiday hair removal) and, while I fannied around in the bedroom waiting for the tub to fill up, I just had this *feeling*

that I was coming on my period: achy legs, slight tummy churn. You probably don't need to know the workings of my menstrual cycle (you'll undoubtedly know far too much about me as it is when you've finished reading this book), but I never really had regular periods, something we had been told might make it difficult for us to conceive, something which would have made it all the more sensible to pack tampons as a precaution for a week in a bikini.

I don't know whether the feeling was in some way different from the usual pre-menstrual rigmarole or whether I just wanted clearance to drink my body weight in dodgy Greek ouzo, but something prompted me to grab a pregnancy test out of my knicker drawer and wee on it. I shouted down to James, 'I think I'm coming on my period, but I've done a test just in case, so I have the all-clear to drink wine.'

James came back upstairs. I was totally naked by this point (about to get in the bath, as I say), hovering over said stick of fortune. 'Well, what does it say?' he asked.

'There are two lines. It's a plus. It says I'm pregnant. Fuck.'

'Fuck,' he echoed. 'Are you sure? Do another one!'

'I can't! I don't need another wee.'

I then sat in the bath, trying to digest the possible parenthood news, while James went to get me a pint of water so I could flush out some more urine. I did two further tests.

One test could be a fluke.

Two tests: still questionable.

Three tests: well, three tests showed irrefutably that I was *with child*.

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Holy mother of chuffing God, there was a baby in there.

And we were about to whisk him or her off to Kos for a stay in what turned out to be the shittiest hotel we'd been to in all our years, with a shit 'beach' and shit food. Add to that an overall sense of shittiness brought about by knowing that not only had we rejected a villa in Tuscany but we were now also *not* enjoying our last holiday as a twosome.

The saving grace of that holiday-which-was-a-bit-shit (have I told you how shit it was? I feel the need to reiterate this point, as it was James who said no to Tuscany, for cost-saving reasons) was that we were carrying around our baby secret. We were going to be parents, and we beamed from ear to ear.

According to the BabyCenter pregnancy app we had downloaded on the way to the airport, I was already seven weeks pregnant. The absence of my period had not alerted us because that, in itself, was not unusual. I'd had no other symptoms and had therefore been drinking Pinot Grigio and not taking folic acid for the first seven weeks of our foetus's existence, something I planned to rectify as soon as we got back to Blighty and I could ram-raid Boots for mum-to-be supplies.

So there we were, in our ghetto sunshine hotel, discussing baby names and nurseries and telling ourselves we really shouldn't get carried away until we'd confirmed everything was all right while at the same time getting completely carried away about our little potato. Finding out I was pregnant for the first time was pretty amazing. It was scary and daunting, too, but mostly it was amazing.

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I'll forever hold an image in my mind of our tanned and excited faces in the car on the way back from Cardiff airport, scoffing M&S sandwiches and Percy Pigs (and Pals) from the service station. Smug about our little secret potato. We knew we were on the cusp of something pretty life-changing.

The reality, of course, as we gaily chomped on Percy and his Pals, was that we knew nothing at all.

pregnancy – two quirks, if you will (things I had generally dismissed as ‘a load of old tosh’) – that I can in fact verify as true, having experienced them first-hand.

The first was nesting.

‘Nesting’, as a term, is quite misleading, I think, because it conjures up images of decluttering, decorating and making sure things are just so. The nesting I found myself absorbed in was much less about decluttering and more about disinfecting. Of ridding the house of all dust, grime and odours and leaving behind the soft scents of Cif Cream (Original) and Windowlene.

I could not get enough of cleaning products. They just smelt so good. The Cillit Bang advert where ‘Barry Scott’ obliterates shower scum before declaring, ‘Bang! And the dirt is gone!’ was practically a turn-on at one point.

At the height of my cleaning obsession (which was far worse with Jude), I was spraying and scrubbing my kitchen worktops at least three times a day – and that was the most ordinary of my cleaning activities. Skirting-board bleaching, cupboard disinfecting, pulling the fridge out to clean behind it, door washing, wall cleaning – I once washed the *external* walls and downstairs outside windows with Flash power spray before instructing my father-in-law to do the same to the upstairs windows while he was up a ladder clearing the guttering. I also asked James to pull the TV stand out twice in the same week because I hadn’t managed to blitz all the dust the first time and I couldn’t relax until I had blitzed *all of the bloody dust*.

Nobody argued with me when I was eight months

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pregnant, because they had clocked my crazed look and feared I would climb a ladder/attempt to move a 42-inch TV on my own. They were right to be slightly fearful. There were spells of comedy, but I had become a nightmare to live with. One time, I paused our Friday-night film to strip the cushion covers and put them straight in the wash. Because you just can't bring new life into a house with unwashed cushion covers. Another time, James put some leftover lasagne – which was ever so slightly leaking out of its dish – into my newly disinfected fridge. 'Lasagne-gate', we named that particular meltdown, because I cried for half an hour before getting the surface cleaner back out. Poor James.

Obviously, I can see *now* that shedding tears over lasagne residue was highly irrational – I was being ridiculous. But it felt very rational at the time. In fact, it was one of the most instinctive and compulsive feelings I've ever had – I *needed* to clean the nest.

It wasn't until a couple of weeks after the birth that I could walk down the cleaning aisle in Tesco without attempting to sniff-test how citrus fresh the products were. (Barry doesn't do it for me sexually any more, just so we're clear.)

The second pregnancy-related quirk I was hit with was cravings. Less so in my first pregnancy – unless you count McChicken Sandwich Meals, and I've been craving those for the best part of twenty-nine years. But certainly in the latter part of my second pregnancy I developed quite a hard-core craving for ice. Not icy drinks or ice lollies but *ice cubes*.

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Popped straight from the freezer tray into my mouth and crunched one by one as if they were peanut M&M's. For every tray I demolished I would freeze another so I would never run out. Because running out would have been catastrophic to my emotional wellbeing. Apparently, ice-cube crunching can be symptomatic of iron deficiency and is very common in pregnancy. Whatever it was that compelled me to crunch up to fifty ice cubes a day, it was bloody odd. Just the thought of it makes my teeth hurt.

So my pregnancy adventure was nothing if not interesting.

(And a blessing.)

(And just a little bit crap.)

'When I was pregnant, I visited Toys R Us for the first time. This is the conversation I heard from a family coming out as I went in:

“I want a Minion!”

“You're not having a Minion.”

“But I *want* a Minion! Waaaahhh!”

“You didn't even know what a bloody Minion was before you went in there!”

'I will never forget this.'

Marie, Exeter