

I've been grounded for sixty-two days this year. That's 1488 hours of imprisonment. Of sitting in my room thinking about how much I hate my mother. I know I'm not supposed to hate someone who cracked her pink bits in half giving birth to me. But if you knew her, you'd understand.

We're sitting in the car. Me, my little sister Olivia and Dad. It's late Sunday afternoon and he's driving me to boarding school. We're in the city, driving past the pale brown Yarra River into Sunday traffic. The car slows down, bogged in red brake lights. Dad leans into the steering wheel, rests his head and starts doing hippy yoga breathing.

Normally Dad would be at home with the fat weekend newspapers, but seeing as Mum refuses to be *anywhere near me* right now, he's had to drive me to school instead. He isn't happy about it.

'Bloody traffic,' he says to no one in particular. 'Should have taken the back way. Stupid.'

Even with the traffic, it'll only take thirty minutes

to drive from my house to the boarding house gates. I'm not a country girl. I'm not from Traralgon, Echuca, Shepparton, Leeton or any of the middle-of-nowhere places that the other boarders come from. We live in the leafy green suburbia of Glen Iris. I usually take the tram to school.

Here's the thing: I've been kicked out of home. After the last thing I did, I ran out of chances. Tipped all my parents' patience out on the floor like the last bit of milk in the carton. They just lost it. Fair enough, I suppose. I did do something pretty bad. So bad I can't even say it out loud. Neither can Mum. We both just . . . Don't. Talk. About. It.

After that thing we're not talking about, Mum and Dad went to see my school principal, Miss Knowles. They asked if I could do the last term of the year as a boarder. And Know-It-All said yes. I had no choice but to pack my bag and move out. When I asked how long I had to stay, Mum said, 'Let's not get ahead of ourselves.' That answer is a little open-ended for my liking.

I wind down the window and breathe in the exhaust fumes of a hundred cars, letting a blast of cold air into the hot, sticky car.

'Can you put that window up, Kate? It's freezing,' says Dad.

'I'm not cold,' I say, sliding the glass down a little further.

Dad punches at the window controls and gets it closed. He's been trying to be nice to me but I'm starting to get on his nerves.

‘I know it’s a tough day for you,’ he says. ‘But you’re behaving as if you’re Liv’s age.’

Liv, by the way, is seven.

Dad finally makes it to Lidcome Road, cruising past oak trees and polished-up Range Rovers and BMWs. It’s scary to think I’m not going to be able to leave here at 3.15 pm on the final bell. I’m stuck here all day, every day. I have to SLEEP AT SCHOOL. When I was thirteen, Mum got me this joke gift for my birthday – a giant eraser for ‘Big Mistakes’. I wish I had that stupid eraser now.

The worst part is, after all that fighting and screaming and slamming doors, my parents have gone really quiet. They’ve totally given up on me. Mum says they just need a break, time to ‘re-group’ as a family. Apparently my behaviour lately has affected everyone – even Liv.

Only Mum would use the word *re-group* . . . like she’s talking to a bunch of reporters.

On one side of Lidcome Road are the locked iron gates of the Billabong Gardens, a huge parkland stuffed full of twisting gum trees and native plants. The gardens aren’t part of my school, Norris Grammar, but I can usually slip out at lunchtime. I just have to watch for Year Twelves, who are allowed out on pass-outs.

The gardens are my oasis from the burning fires of Norris hell. It’s the only place I can go to read in peace during lunchtime besides the library. I sit cross-legged on my blazer by the lake, pretending I don’t have to go back to school. Sometimes I don’t. I wag and go into the city to meet up with my friends Annie and Nate at the Flinders

Street steps. I got fourteen days' grounding for that. One of the Year Eleven prefects, who was going to a dentist appointment, reported me for 'loitering in the city in my uniform during school hours'. I hate prefects.

Here are ten other random things we're not allowed to do at Norris:

1. Eat hot food (pies, curries and so on) in our uniforms. It's not ladylike to get sauce on our chins.
2. Not stand up for old people and pregnant ladies on the tram.
3. Wear any shoes except regulation black lace-ups. I tried to get away with my calf-high black boots, but Mr Gregory forced me to take them off and wear a dorky pair of Clarks from lost and found.
4. Hitch up our skirts above the knee. All skirts must be knee length or below.
5. Shave our head (unless it's for one of those cancer fundraising days and then you practically get a medal). Hair that's cut in a 'radical style' is not acceptable.
6. Not wear our blazers when we're outside school grounds or at formal occasions. (Unless you have a 'white jumper' for excellence in rowing, debating or sucking up to teachers.)
7. Wear extreme jewellery (that includes the skull-and-cross-bones ring my geography teacher, Mrs Alexander, with her Peter Pan collars and yellow teeth, confiscated and never gave back). A watch, necklace with a cross or plain earrings are the only accessories allowed at school.

8. Leave school grounds at recess or lunchtime (unless you're running around the gardens or are a Year Twelve girl).
9. Have more than one piercing in your ears. No piercing in irregular places such as eyebrows, tongues or noses (I put a Band-Aid over my lip ring but someone dobbed me in for it and I had to take it out). Four days' grounding for that.
10. Wear make-up that's not 'consistent with natural colouring' – including lipstick, eye shadow or extreme nail polish colours. Just about everyone ignores this rule . . . especially me.

Dad turns into Norris and I grip the side of the door with my fingers. I'm sweating buckets now and my lungs feel like they're Glad-wrapped. I can hardly breathe. I take a hit of my asthma puffer and concentrate on not screaming, 'Let me out! Let me out!' like a psycho, and pushing the door open while the car's still moving.

I could roll, commando style, onto the road, scale the rusty, spiky Billabong Gardens gates and run deep into the bushes. Nobody would find me because I'd climb up a tree and live like a hermit on berries and bush food. I'd make fires and become friends with the possums and bats. But I don't do that. I just sit in my seat, feeling like my skin's peeling off, leaving all my muscles and veins exposed.

It feels weird being at school on a Sunday – especially not having to wear my uniform or fight the crowds. I feel naked.

Mum forced me to come to Norris after primary school, so I've been here for four long years already, making absolutely no effort to excel in anything except for being the school recluse. Every time the school fees roll around my parents get grumpy and tell me I better start pulling my weight – that the fees are 'crippling them', and I have 'no idea how expensive my education is'. They shouldn't waste their cash. I was more than happy to go to Glenferrie High and hang out with my mates from primary school. At least I had mates then.

Bet you think Norris is stuck up and snobby because it's a private school. Newsflash. It looks like every other school around: red brick, ugly, depressing. The gym's schmick, the library is awe-inspiring and there are eight tennis courts and a 25-metre pool, but the rest of the place is tatty and curling around the edges, like a day-old sandwich. Dunno where all those big alumni donations end up.

This was my mum's old school. My grandmother put my name down before I was even born. There was a family tradition to uphold. No question I would one day follow in my ancestors' regulation black lace-ups. In the Great Hall there's a photo of Grandma playing tennis when she was wrinkle-free and seriously hot for someone who now resembles a mauve Shar Pei puppy. I once found a photo of my mum playing hockey on the lower field in an old year book. Her ponytail swished in the wind and she snarled at the opposition through a white mouthguard. I asked her – did she used to play hockey? And she struggled to even remember wearing spikes and smacking a ball across a pitch. 'I did but that

was years ago,' she said vaguely and kept checking emails on her BlackBerry.

Dad isn't so keen on Norris. He's suss of private schools in general. I once overheard him complaining to Mum that he didn't want his daughters to become 'stuck-up rich kids with silver spoons in their bloody mouths'. He went to some down-and-out state school near Torquay, the little surf town on the Great Ocean Road where he grew up. I think he spent most of his time skipping classes to catch waves. I once asked him if I could go to his old alma mater but he just laughed and said, 'They tore that place down years ago.' Then Mum sniffed, 'Don't be ridiculous, Kate. We can afford to send you to a *very* good school. You're *very* lucky.' Funny. I don't feel lucky right now.

Liv will be yanked out of Glenferrie Primary and enrolled here in Year Seven. She's actually looking forward to it. I've caught her trying on my school clothes and checking herself out in the mirror. She's squishing her pug nose against the glass window – frothing at the mouth with excitement at seeing inside the boarding school where the big girls live. She has no idea what's in store for her. How Norris can suck the will to live right out of you . . .

Dad parks out front as usual. 'Rock star park,' he says proudly, edging into the tiny space.

'No chance I could go in by myself?' I ask.

'No chance whatsoever,' Dad says cheerfully.

I really want to arrive quietly. I don't want anyone to know why I'm here. The kicking out of home thing is

mortifying. I'm enough of a freak already without having this new tag hanging around my neck.

I look up at the boarding house and for the first time I notice there are bars on all the windows high enough to jump from.

Everyone's pulling suitcases and backpacks out of cars. All smiles – no tears or long hugs. They're just casually heading inside, gossiping and giggling. I catch a few floating whispers from a group of boarders and my nervous neck rash flares up.

'Why is *Kate Elliot* here? I thought she was a day girl?'

'Does she know it's not Halloween?'

'Looks like she's been dug out of a grave.'

I'm not going to be able to fly under the radar. The rumour mill has cranked up already. Why am I boarding when I live so close to the school? Junkie? Sex addict? Psychopath? All three? Maybe if I look scary and sinister enough they might leave me alone all semester.

I feel even more out of place than normal here. No one is dressed like me. I guess nobody ever dresses like me. Today I've got blood-red fingernails, a purple velvet jacket, black petticoat dress and lace stockings. My skin is white and my hair is dyed the colour of a vinyl record. Everyone else is either straight off the farm – work boots, trackies, jeans, ponytails, freckles and clean, tanned skin – or they are sporting up-to-the-minute designer gear (possibly designer rip-offs if you look closely enough) from somewhere exotic and Asian.

I've got to be honest: I'm scared. I've never lived out of

home. Sure, my parents have taken us on local holidays, even the odd overseas trip, but they've always come with us. I don't want to let Dad see me cry, so I act tough, slam the car door and don't let him help me with my bag.

'This can be easy or this can be very hard,' he says under his breath. 'Let's try not to make a scene.'

Dad's as laidback as Mum is highly strung. He works two days a week as a graphic designer at *Drop Zone*, a surfing magazine. The rest of the time he's a stay-at-home dad. I think he's pretty good at it. He tries to help me with my homework and he plays Barbies with Liv. The problem is he's hopeless at keeping the house tidy – mess just follows him around. Mum comes home from working in Canberra and yells at him because there are wet towels on the floor and he got takeaway *again*. I don't know why they bother staying married. They hardly see each other and when they do, they end up fighting. When Mum is home she's so stressed out and distracted she usually ends up glued to her phone, frantically running around the house cleaning up after us, or waging battles with me.

Lately our mother–daughter time has been spent locked in squabbles about my clothes (too black, too weird, too second-hand), my friends (too spooky looking, not enough manners), homework, curfews, chores, world views, music volume, time spent on the computer and listening to my iPod (too much) versus time spent exercising in the fresh air (not enough). There's really nothing we agree on.

I stomp across the courtyard wheeling my heavy bag behind me. Liv and Dad go in first and I loiter at the entrance for a minute. I'm in no hurry to submit myself

to a full cavity body check or whatever happens when you enter into a maximum-security boarding house.

I'm fiddling with my phone when a battered ute pulls up and Maddy Minogue, a boarder in my year, hops out, flashing her knickers. She's scowling at an old, wrinkled guy behind the wheel.

'Don't I get a kiss goodbye from my daughter?' he says.

'No way,' she says. He looks disappointed and she relents, giving him a peck on the cheek.

'That's better.'

A young guy throws Maddy's bag over his shoulder like it's a sheep ready to be shorn. He's so not my type – he's too tanned, square jawed and wholesome – but I can't help staring at him as he runs up the stairs, two at a time, and throws the bag down next to me. I'm guessing he's either Maddy's brother or her latest boyfriend.

He looks up and smiles and I swear he gives me a cheeky wink. Does he? Not that many people dare wink at me. Especially when I'm in full Goth gear. I'm so stunned I just stare at him solemnly.

I'm not sure if he winked at me or not but, for a second, I don't feel as miserable.

The Year Tens are still gossiping but the possible winker has caught their attention.

'Who. Is. He?' says Emma Cobb.

'Lachlan Minogue,' says Harriet Barker. 'Can you believe skanky Maddy Minogue has a brother that is so delectable?'

We all stare at Lachlan and let out a collective schoolgirl sigh as he leaps back into the ute, waving at Maddy.

‘Totally gorgeous in every way,’ says Harriet.

Silently I agree with her. Another unlikely event.

Dad finally gets sick of waiting for me. He flies out of the boarding house and grabs my bag – knocking me out of my fantasy about moving to the country and letting this strange farm boy take me on picnics.

‘Kate? Come on!’ Dad says, irritated. ‘Everyone’s waiting.’

Inside the boarding house it’s chaos – girls everywhere, bags, noise. I want to crawl into a corner somewhere but we’re swept up by some girl called Gabby, who’s my ‘boarding coordinator’. She’s about twenty and dressed in ironed jeans, a crisp, striped shirt and Converse. ‘I live on campus,’ she says with a big cheesy smile that’s aimed right at Dad, ‘so I’m here for anything you might need, Kate. Even just a chat or a cuppa. Life in the boarding house isn’t always easy. I should know: I used to be a boarder here a few years ago.’

‘Okay, thanks,’ I mutter. But I’m pretty certain I don’t want a cuppa and a chinwag with Gabby.

‘Are you here full time?’ Dad asks Gabby.

‘Part time,’ says Gabby. ‘I’m studying at uni. Second year med.’

I bet Mum would love that little revelation. She’d think Gabby’s wholesome geekiness might be contagious.

‘Okay,’ Gabby says, clapping her hands enthusiastically. ‘Before we settle you into your room, Kate, I’ll give you all a quick tour.’

My room. I start to feel better, imagining locking myself

away for a few hours and talking to Annie about how much of a prison this place is.

Of course Dad and Liv tag along. They don't want to miss a moment of my humiliation. We trail Gabby down a narrow corridor into an echoey dining hall with long wooden tables and benches. It reeks of disinfectant.

'Breakfast is at seven, lunch at twelve thirty and dinner at six thirty sharp,' says Gabby. Ladies in hairnets potter in the kitchen preparing dinner. I've heard the boarding house food is inedible and have brought a stash of chocolate and lollies with me so I don't starve.

'All the boarders help with serving and clearing. Rosters are put up on the noticeboard every week. I know what people say about the food at boarding schools, but it's actually pretty good,' says Gabby to Dad. She's trying to impress him.

Girls like Gabby think my dad's cute with his cool jeans and surf T-shirts. Revolting.

'The girls particularly enjoy pizza night on Saturdays. Kate, you can also come here anytime and make yourself a hot drink and grab a bikkie or a piece of fruit. Okay. Next stop, the TV room . . .'

Gabby moves on to the TV room, a sad little box filled with beanbags and limp couches with mystery stains. There's also a sterile study area.

'Between eight and ten pm the Year Seven to Ten girls meet here to do their homework,' says Gabby.

'I suppose it will make a change from the tram,' says Dad.

It's true. I usually finish assignments on the way to

school, scribbling madly and hoping I can get it done before my stop.

‘We monitor internet use very closely,’ Gabby says. ‘There’s a security device installed on all the computers, just in case. No laptops outside of study times. No smart phones during school or study hours either.’

‘What?’ I gasp.

How am I going to stay in touch with my mates? Carrier pigeon? Annie and I text all day long, and I chat online with Annie and Nate every night after school.

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I met Annie at a festival last year – seven days’ grounding for that. Mum reckons I need to be ‘at least eighteen to handle that sort of atmosphere’. That’s over two years away.

I tried to explain that everyone goes to see bands.

‘Why do you want to be like everyone else?’ Mum said.

‘Like there’s any chance of that, Mum. Have a good look at me.’

Anyway, Annie was waiting in the portaloo line and she gave me a tissue because the loos were completely toilet paper free as usual. Turned out we had exactly the same taste in music and we spent the rest of the day together. I wish Annie went to Norris so I could hang out with her on weekdays. She goes to an alternative college – a school kids go to when they don’t want to go to school. She gets to wear casual clothes, there are no bells and she calls the teachers by their first names. If Norris was like that I wouldn’t even mind turning up every day.

Annie started talking to Nate in a line for drinks. He’d lost all his mates (or maybe they’d lost him), so we said he

could come with us. We all just clicked. Pretty soon we started hanging out together all the time.

Nate is only seventeen but he lives out of home and has a full-time job. He dropped out of school after Year Ten and worked his way up the fast-food ladder to become KFC Footscray's assistant manager. His skin is always greasy from the chip fat but he gets free food and they pay him every week, so it's a pretty cool job until his Goth band, Violent Glitter, gets signed.

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Gabby continues our little walking tour. She points out a communal laundry.

'It's a good life skill for the girls,' says Gabby as she demonstrates how the machines work, pushing buttons and twirling knobs. She does it so fast I will never remember.

'Got it, Kate?' she asks.

I nod, just so we can get this over with.

I don't know how things can get any worse until Gabby reveals the bathroom area. There are six shower stalls with doors and six toilet cubicles. The mirrors are open to the whole area, so there's pretty much no privacy for putting on make-up or squeezing zits.

'Shower time is limited to five minutes,' says Gabby. 'We've got timers in every cubicle. We find the girls are very conscious of the environment and saving water. We also have a recycling program in the house.'

The tour over, I reunite with my suitcase and drag it up three flights of stairs to the dorm rooms. I still won't let Dad help me, even though he tries to look chivalrous.

Liv skips along next to me, saying hello to strange girls and acting cute like she always does.

We walk down a hallway of rooms full of girls lying on beds, talking, eating, unpacking and playing music. I just want to put my things away and be by myself for a while. There doesn't seem to be a quiet place in the whole house. Everything hums like a beehive.

Room 4D is my cell for the next term. I follow Gabby in and see four beds lined up – two on each side.

'Aren't I . . . I mean . . . don't I have a private room?' I say to Dad.

'Nobody has a private room,' laughs Gabby and I feel my neck rash flare up again. 'This isn't the Hilton.'

So here is the horrifying truth: I'll be sharing a dorm with three other people. And two of those people are staring at me right now, their mouths slightly open, eyes wide. No surprise – they don't want me here either.

I've never shared a bedroom in my life. I want to kick the other girls out into the hall, drag their beds out and lock the door.

'Harriet and Jess are your roommates this term,' says Gabby.

The girls have resumed unpacking as if I am invisible.

'Maddy Minogue is your fourth.' Gabby looks at her watch. 'Yes, late as usual.'

I know Maddy is here and I wonder where she is. Already she is the most promising of my three roommates.

Jess Pervis is butch, with a freckled face and thick, yellow braids. She's on the swimming team. No. She is the swimming team. Harriet Barker is pretty – that's

obvious – but there’s a mean streak lurking in her eyes. You wouldn’t want to cross her.

‘Kate’s joining us as a boarder for the rest of the year,’ Gabby says, her voice rising up an octave, trying to break the toxic mood.

‘Why?’ asks Harriet. ‘Don’t you live in the city?’

I feel a flash of anger and shame. Gabby comes to my rescue.

‘She aaah . . . wants to try out boarding life, don’t you, Kate?’

‘Yes. That’s right. I’m desperate to be a boarder,’ I say, deadpan.

‘Well, anyway, girls, I’m sure you’ll make her feel welcome and show her the ropes.’

The ropes. I imagine an abseiling rope hanging directly out of the window with me in a hard hat and carabineer. Escaping.

Jess shrugs and says, ‘Sure,’ and then there’s a very awkward silence that even cute Liv can’t fill up.

I’ve never talked to either of them, even though Harriet is in my science class and Jess and I have lockers two doors apart. Boarders tend to herd themselves away from the day girls most of the time, sitting in their own groups and eating lunch together.

‘Right, Kate, you’re all set. Just choose a bed and unpack,’ says Gabby.

I dump my bag on an unclaimed single bed. It’s smaller than the one Liv sleeps in. At home I have a huge double bed, my own TV and an iPod dock. My bedroom is my whole universe and I love everything in it. I wasn’t even

allowed to bring posters here – there’s a strict no Blu-tack policy. All I have are a few photos of my dog, Chilli, Annie and Nate, and a clean pinboard that Gabby says I can ‘personalise’.

‘We like to keep the rooms nice and tidy,’ says Gabby. Will she ever stop talking? ‘That just means make your own bed in the morning and keep your personal belongings neat and out of the way.’

Dad gives me a look. We both know what my room looks like at home. Mum likes to describe it as ‘the pit’. Or sometimes ‘the black hole’.

Liv bounces on my bed, overexcited. ‘You’re so lucky, Kate!’ she says. ‘I wish I could go to boarding school.’

‘Okay, Liv, you can stay and I’ll go home.’

Liv gives me a gappy smile. One of her teeth is about to fall out. ‘Can I, Dad?’

Dad pulls Liv off the bed. ‘We should let Kate settle in.’

Liv’s top lip wobbles. Dad gives me a look that means I should give her a hug and make her feel better. But really, she’s better off without me in the house. I’m a dodgy older sister. My parents don’t even let me babysit her anymore. Last month I stole sixty bucks from her money jar to go out. She’d been saving for ages. When she found her jar was empty she didn’t even tell Mum and Dad, because I swore I would pay her back. I haven’t yet.

‘Don’t cry, Liv,’ I say, giving her an awkward pat on the head. She buries her head into my stomach and squeezes me. I feel my eyes start to tingle. They’ll have to leave before I lose it.

‘Bye, Kate, we’ll see you soon,’ says Dad, hustling Liv

out of the room. He's almost out the door when he comes back and sits next to me on my bed.

'You'll be fine here, Kate. Don't forget how amazing and original you are. You'll be home soon. Mum will come round. I'll make you a playlist for your next trip home. Okay?'

'Dad, please,' I whisper. 'Don't leave me here. I'll be good. I promise. I've been better lately, haven't I?'

I notice Harriet and Jess listening in from across the room – they've even stopped pretending to unpack.

Dad hugs me tightly. I let the guilty feeling I've been carrying around for weeks drop to the ground like a heavy rock.

'This is tough on us too. But we don't know what else to do. We just want the old Kate back.'

'You can have me back. I swear. I'll be different.'

My nice-girl act isn't working. Normally I can talk him around but his face is hard and smooth. He won't be changing his mind, no matter how good my sob story is. Mum won't be talked out of this crazy plan either. She doesn't want me in the house. This is really her decision. Not Dad's.

'This isn't forever,' he says. 'You might actually enjoy having a break from us for a while.'

'You mean *you'll* enjoy having a break from *me*,' I say quietly. 'Just abandon me then.'

He sighs deeply, his shoulders slumping. Suddenly he looks like an old man – crumpled and creased. He kisses my cheek and I immediately wipe it off with the back of my hand. I watch him go, closing the door and not even

looking back. I realise this is really happening. To me.
Right now. My own parents have ditched me.

I lie back on the bed and close my eyes. I have never
felt more alone.

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It was a Sunday so it was family day. Dad had organised for us all to go to the zoo. Liv was the only one who really wanted to look at kangaroos scratch themselves in the shade, but Dad was so enthusiastic it was hard not to get caught up in his excitement. The house was a shambles as usual, the breakfast plates were still on the bench and sticky cereal crawled across the kitchen table. Dad was trying to find the picnic basket in the hall cupboard and had pulled the entire contents out on the floor. Tennis rackets, dusty ski gear, even his old skateboard.

I picked up the skateboard and took it for a spin down the hall.

‘You used to ride this?’ I asked, skidding over the polished floorboards. ‘Back when you were young?’

‘I can *still* ride it,’ Dad said. ‘Give me a go. I’ll show you your old man’s moves.’

Yep, we all had it coming really.

Mum slammed the door to her home office.

‘*Really?*’ she shouted at Dad. ‘I told you I had to log

on this morning just for a few hours. And you're what? Letting the kids skate around inside and turning the entire house upside down. Can't you keep things together, just for a few hours, so I can get some work done?'

Dad ignored her and kept taking things out of the cupboard and chucking them on the floor. Liv put a pair of old goggles on and squealed with delight. She loved the whirling chaos that surrounded my dad.

'David? I'm talking to you . . . can you stop?' Mum waited for Dad to pay her some attention but he didn't even look at her.

'We're going to the zoo today,' he said to the cupboard. 'We agreed. Sunday is family day. No work, Isabel. Remember?'

Mum's a politician so she spends most of her week in her Canberra office – she flies out Monday morning and we don't see her until late Thursday night. On Fridays she rushes off to see her Melbourne team and most weekends she has even more work – a party meeting, conference or function. She says that her job isn't nine to five. That she has to talk to people when *they* have the time. I like that she has a job that's a bit different and she's passionate about helping people, but the problem is we never see her anymore.

When I was a kid I went with her and hung out with all the other politicians' kids – there were babysitters who took us to the movies, the aquarium or the park. It was pretty fun. Liv still adores it but I'm not seven and I don't want to be babysat or spend all day with a bunch of people talking politics – it's not my scene.

Now my parents try to keep Sundays just for family, otherwise all our time together would be swallowed up by Mum's job. For a few weeks it was really great – all of us hanging out together. But gradually Mum started letting family day become work catch-up day. It was inevitable. She has only one true love in her life. And it's not Dad. It's her work.

I spun the board around and accidentally banged into the side table, knocking a bunch of papers and bills off it. I tried to pick them up but it was too late.

Mum turned around, her laser ray of anger now beaming down on me.

'Kate! Please, stop!'

Annoyed at being yelled at like a kid, I kicked the board down the hall towards her. Didn't she get it? How hard was it to turn off her phone and her computer for one day and pretend to be interested in the zoo? It would've made Dad and Liv happy. I guess it would've made me happy too.

The board banged into her ankles. I can't say I didn't mean for that to happen.

'Ouch. Kate, that hurt.' Mum rubbed her foot and picked the board up. Fun over.

I slunk over to the couch and pretended to read a magazine. I felt that familiar anxious knot in my gut. They'd been fighting a lot lately so my stomach often ached.

'Are you coming?' asked Dad.

'I can't.'

'You don't want to.'

‘No, David. I said I can’t. I’ve got an early flight in the morning. I’ll be in Parliament until ten at night. I have no other time to finish this presentation. Somebody has to pay the mortgage.’

Dad stopped his search and looked at Mum with a frown.

‘It was your idea to seek pre-selection. To work the hours that you do. To be in Canberra all week long. Why don’t you retire? I’ll happily get back into the workforce if that’s what you want. Just say the word. Just say it, go on.’

Mum glared at Dad.

‘Yeah, I thought so. It isn’t about being the breadwinner, Isabel. It’s about your ambition. Just admit it.’

‘I love my job, you know that. I know it’s tough on you guys sometimes. But I’ve done the hard yards, David. Where were you when I was changing nappies? Making playdough? Taking Kate to playgroup? Oh that’s right. Surfing. With your mates. At uni. Pretending you hadn’t become a father.’

‘I was twenty-two, what did you expect?’

‘Oh, I dunno. A little responsibility? I expected it then and I’m still waiting . . .’

‘I look after our kids all week long so you don’t get to lecture me about responsibility. Now I’m taking Kate and Liv to the zoo. If you want to get that bloody phone out of your ear and come with us, we’ll be leaving as soon as I find the picnic basket.’

Dad returned to the cupboard and chucked a load of clean towels onto the floor. Towels that I had seen Mum fold the day before.

Mum stomped down the hall and came back with the lost basket.

She handed it to Dad silently. Then she went back to her office and closed the door.

And that was the start of the current cold war.

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Dad was reading Liv a Roald Dahl book and I was pretending to do my homework, but really I was sketching a picture of a boy's eye – it was green with a black teardrop. I was going to post it on Sketchfu, a cool website where you can draw stuff and post it up.

We were eating pad thai straight out of the plastic containers, twirling glassy noodles around our forks. Liv had sauce down the front of her dress. We were full and happy until Mum blew in like a frosty wind.

‘Did you all have a good time?’ she asked.

As she talked she was collecting things from the floor. She was obsessed with cleaning up the mess. Dad ignored her and so did I.

‘We saw a red panda,’ said Liv. ‘It was so cute. You should’ve seen it, Mum.’

‘Yes, you should’ve seen it, Isabel,’ I said, giving Mum a dirty look.

‘Call me Mum,’ she said, rubbing her eyes. They were bloodshot and she looked exhausted.

‘So, David, this is dinner?’

Dad shrugged. ‘You were at home all day, you could’ve cooked something nutritious.’

‘Yes, I had so much time to cook.’

She looked at Liv’s dirty dress.

‘Olivia, you are filthy. Time for your bath please.’

Liv clung to my dad’s neck and burrowed into him. ‘Noooo. We are at the good part. Daddy said I could skip the bath tonight.’

‘You can’t. You have school tomorrow. Come on. Now.’

Dad untangled himself from Liv’s grasp. ‘Come on, Monkey. Go have a bath like your mum says.’

Mum got Liv off to bed and then made a big batch of spaghetti sauce. She did it every Sunday night and froze it in little packets for us to eat during the week. Sometimes she made curries and soups as well. It saved us from Dad’s cooking or takeaway. She was big on organisation, always leaving us colour-coded weekly activity spreadsheets, handwritten notes and chore sheets. She tried to make sense of the chaos while Dad just embraced it.

Dad grabbed a piece of fruit from the bowl, careful not to touch Mum. She didn’t look at him. This could go on for days.

I sat in front of the TV, still pretending to be doing my geography assignment. This time I was IMing with Annie. Pinging messages back and forth like a tennis match.

‘My press sec thinks it’s a good idea if we get a family photo done,’ Mum said to Dad, who was still ignoring her. She packaged up the sauce and put it in the freezer.

‘Did you hear me? Are you free on Friday afternoon? David? Hello?’

Dad shrugged and turned away from her to make himself a cup of tea.

‘Kate. How about you?’

I shake my head. ‘Nuh, I’ve got something on.’

‘What?’

‘Um. Netball practice.’

‘You hate netball.’

‘Yeah, but . . .’

‘This is non-negotiable, Kate. And I don’t want you to wear that bizarre Goth stuff. I’ll pick out an outfit for you and for Olivia.’

‘I’m not wearing anything *you’ve* picked out. I’ll wear my own clothes, thanks very much.’

‘You will not,’ said Mum. ‘I’m not having a family photo standing next to Morticia Addams. No make-up, my outfit.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘NO?’

‘You heard me.’

Mum shook with anger. ‘Okay, fine. Then you can forget going out with your friends for the next two weeks.’

Dad flung his apple core into the sink like he was bowling for Australia.

‘Kate’s an individual, Isabel. She’s got her own style, you can’t just dress her your way so you can look good in a staged photo.’

‘Style? She looks like a circus freak, David. Whatever. I’m too tired for this,’ said Mum. ‘We’ll talk about it later.’

Mum wiped down the benches like a woman possessed, then she looked around at the kitchen, frowning. The garbage was overflowing, there were bottles and cans spilling out of the recycling, the floor was covered in crushed cereal and dog hair. We should’ve ducked for cover because the heavy artillery was about to come out.

‘This kitchen’s a mess,’ Mum said. ‘Who’s meant to be cleaning up today?’ She looked at the chore sheet on the fridge. We didn’t bother with it when she was not around.

‘Well, Kate, you’ve done a bang-up job,’ she said sarcastically.

I packed up my computer and tried to make an escape to my room, but it was too late.

‘Kate! Dishwasher!’ said Mum.

I scowled at her. ‘I have homework.’

‘We all know you’re mucking around talking to your friends online. Just do it. Now.’

I chucked my laptop on the couch and stormed into the kitchen in a blaze of anger.

‘Why can’t *you* do it?’ I shouted.

‘Because I can’t do everything!’ she shouted back. ‘There were three other members of this family the last time I checked.’

‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’

‘No, Kate. Now. I’ve got lunches to make for tomorrow. Did you pick up my shirts from the drycleaners, David?’

Dad ignored her.

‘No, of course not. Because I have to work and support you all and do everything.’

I elbowed Mum out of the way and started clattering around with the plates.

‘You don’t do everything,’ I said. ‘Where were you today? Didn’t see you at the zoo. It’s family day, remember? There were four members of this family the last time I checked.’

‘I don’t like the attitude, Kate. We’ve talked about this. Drop it.’

‘The truth hurts, doesn’t it, Mum? Can’t take it, can you?’

‘Forget about doing the dishwasher. Just go to your room.’

‘No, I’ll do it.’

‘Kate – just get out of here. I mean it,’ Mum said in a low, threatening tone.

I think about that moment a lot. Those few slow seconds when I could’ve walked away, gone to my room, lay down on my bed and just slept.

Instead, I stayed in that kitchen. And that’s the moment when everything in my life went totally and completely pear shaped. That’s the moment I landed myself a boarding house gaol term with no bail and the very dim possibility of parole.