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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Love, Nina**

Despatches from Family Life

Written by Nina Stibbe

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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# *Love, Nina*

*Despatches from Family Life*

NINA STIBBE



PENGUIN BOOKS

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55 Gloucester Crescent  
London NW1

September 1982

Dear Vic,

It's fantastic here, the house, the street, London. You can hear the zoo animals waking up in the morning.

Mary-Kay is funny. Nothing bothers her much – except she can't stand having too much milk in the fridge (they have skimmed).

Her and Sam and Will all have the same basin haircut. Apart from that, she's quite fashionable. She swears a lot (f and c), and reminds me of Elspeth, but not an alcy.

She loves hearing about you lot, so do S&W. They remember everything I tell them and they often ask about you all by name.

Yesterday MK asked, 'So, is it Victoria who plays the violin?' and I spat out my tea laughing. Honestly, Vic, they're always laughing. I feel so happy here.

People come round loads. Some real weirdos. The other night one of them laughed at my ponytail (very short and a bit sticky-out). I saw her reflection in the French windows pointing.

I told Mary-Kay later, 'I saw (that woman) pointing at my ponytail and smirking.'

MK said, 'Oh, she's just an idiot and you're more of one for caring.'

That's what she's like.

Love, Nina

PS Who's George Melly? I'm in his room.

## *Introduction*

In 1982, at the age of twenty, I left my home in Leicestershire to take up a job as a nanny in London. I'd not been a nanny before but felt sure it would be a nice life.

And it was a nice life at 55 Gloucester Crescent. The household was made up of Mary-Kay Wilmers and her sons Sam, aged ten and a half who had some disabilities, and Will, aged nine. Also, there was Lucas the cat who was mostly out, and Alan Bennett, who lived across the street and often appeared at suppertime, and other neighbours, visitors and droppers-in.

Except for missing my sister Victoria, I was settled and happy straightaway.

Victoria stayed in Leicestershire, near where we'd grown up, working and living in a nursing home. I missed telling her everything every night, however mundane – the explaining of who was who and what he'd said and she'd said and what that might mean. Not that I very often wanted her opinion on anything, nor she mine, but we'd grown accustomed to a nightly conflagration.

If there'd been a convenient phone where she lived these letters would not have been written because I'd have just rung her up. But there wasn't, so I wrote to her and she wrote back and there was something nice about the writing of and getting of letters, so we carried on.

It occurs to me that if Vic had loved London as I did, my letters wouldn't have been so detailed, as she'd have seen everything for herself on little trips. But she disliked London and came to stay only once or twice in all that time and spent those visits twitchy and longing to be home and not noticing the things I wanted her to notice.

These are the letters I sent to Victoria during my first years in London, starting with my arrival at Gloucester Crescent. The letters were often undated or partially dated. I have done my best to get them in the right order, but this was oddly tricky and I apologise if one or two events seem to occur slightly early or late. I apologise too for the things I got a bit wrong. Alan Bennett was never in *Coronation Street* for instance and Jonathan Miller has never been an opera singer as far as I know.

As for spelling, grammar and so forth, apart from some fine tuning, these have been left as they were in the original letters.

I'd like to thank Mary-Kay Wilmers who, in spite of misgivings, agreed to this book being published. Some names have been changed for obvious reasons, but most haven't and I hope the cast will enjoy seeing themselves here.

Nina Stibbe, 2013

## Who's Who

(Some of the characters, and their occupations at the time. Some names have been changed.)

VIC: Victoria Stibbe, my sister

MARY-KAY WILMERS (MK): mother of Sam and Will (S&W), deputy editor of the *London Review of Books*

SAM FREARS: Mary-Kay's son

WILL FREARS: Mary-Kay's son

ELSPETH: Elspeth Allison, my mother

GEORGE MELLY: jazz singer, critic, writer

AB: Alan Bennett, playwright, screenwriter, actor

JONATHAN MILLER: theatre and opera director, actor

TREVOR BROOKING: footballer (West Ham United)

JEZ: Jeremy Stibbe, my brother

DR DILLON: doctor at Great Ormond Street Hospital

WILLIE CARSON: jockey, TV presenter

CLAIRE TOMALIN: biographer and journalist, literary editor of the *New Statesman* and the *Sunday Times*

TOM TOMALIN: son of Claire Tomalin, Sam's friend

NUNNEY: Mark Nunney, volunteer helper at the Tomalins'

MICHAEL FRAYN: partner of Claire Tomalin, playwright and novelist

JOHN LAHR: American theatre critic and playwright

ANTHEA LAHR: writer

PIPPA: nanny to a family in Primrose Hill

AMANDA: nanny to a family in Gloucester Crescent

RAS WHITTAKER: schoolfriend of Sam's

STEPHEN FREARS: father of Sam and Will, film director

BETSY REISZ (NÉE BLAIR): actress

KAREL REISZ: film-maker  
SUSANNAH CLAPP: friend of MK, worked at *London Review of Books*  
CESIA WILMERS (GRANNY WILMERS): MK's mother  
MR MACKIE: Ian Mackie, ophthalmologist  
RUSSELL HARTY: television presenter  
MICHAEL NEVE: former partner of MK, academic  
MARY HOPE: friend of MK  
POLLY HOPE: daughter of Mary Hope  
GM: Sheila Barlow, my grandmother  
THE EVANS: family in Gloucester Crescent  
DELIA SMITH: cookery writer and TV presenter  
DEBORAH MOGGACH: writer and screenwriter  
MAXWELL: my ex-pony  
HARRIET GARLAND: friend of MK  
RIK MAYALL: actor  
ADRIAN EDMONDSON: actor  
JOHN WILLIAMS: lecturer at Thames Polytechnic  
ANNIE ROTHENSTEIN: second wife of Stephen Frears, artist  
MR JOHNSON: former boss  
STELLA HEATH: student at Thames Polytechnic  
PETER WIDDOWSON: lecturer at Thames Polytechnic  
BRIAN HOOPER: former British Olympic pole-vaulter  
VICKI JOYCE: lecturer at Thames Polytechnic  
PETER M: lecturer at Thames Polytechnic  
PETER H (PH): Peter Humm, my personal tutor, lecturer at  
Thames Polytechnic  
PB: Peter Brooker, lecturer at Thames Polytechnic  
LES DAWSON: comedian  
MOLLY O: Victoria's horse  
NICK NICHOLS: visiting lecturer (from San Diego State University)  
TOM STIBBE: my brother  
GORDON BANKS: England goalkeeper (ex-Leicester City)



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?

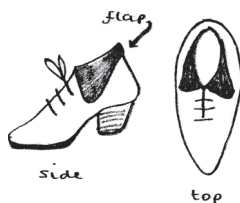
MK: Yes.

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