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opening extract from

My So-Called Life

written by

Joanna Nadin

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December

Saturday 25

Christmas Day

Christmas presents asked for:

- mobile phone
- *O.C.* Complete First Season boxed set on DVD
- Chanel No. 5, as worn by Marilyn Monroe
- Touche Eclat to cover up hideous dark circles inherited from Granny Clegg
- hair straighteners to tame hideous curly hair inherited from Grandpa Clegg.

Presents received:

- Mum and Dad—BBC *Pride and Prejudice* boxed set. Apparently *The O.C.* has been added to Mum's list of proscribed items (also featuring *EastEnders* (common), Coronation Street (northern and common) and Ribena (purple, causing stain issues)). When I asked her why, she said it gave teenagers an unrealistic image of life in a seaside community. This is because she grew up in Cornwall where Granny Clegg made her wear a balaclava to school.
- James, my brother—*What Not to Wear* by Trinny and Susannah. This is rich coming from a seven year old who has been known to go out dressed in a Virgin Mary outfit.
- Grandpa Riley—a box of toffee with "Thank you for looking after my dog" on it, which is weird as I have never looked after his dog because it *a*) is sick all the

time; *b*) looks at me menacingly; and *c*) ate one of my pink Converse low-rise. Maybe it is a plea. I hope not.

- Granny and Grandpa Clegg—a £5 WHSmith token and a Selection Box (sell-by date last August). The concept of inflation has clearly not reached St Slaughter yet, along with central heating and Channel 5.
- Auntie Joy(less) and Uncle John—a junior New Testament. They are severe Methodists and force my cousins to go to a cult church in Redruth where they dip you in a pool in all your clothes and talk in tongues.
- Uncle Jim—nothing. I don't think they celebrate Christmas in Tibet.
- Scarlet, my best friend—this diary.
- Sad Ed, practically next-door neighbour and second best friend—*The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Ed's ambition is to become an alcoholic genius and die in a car crash by the age of thirty. He has no chance. He passed out at Scarlet's birthday party after two martinis, can only play 'Bobby Shaftoe' on his guitar, and came third last in the school poetry competition last year.

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Emailed Scarlet. She got: a Nokia with an inbuilt MP3 player, camera, and the *O.C.* theme as the ringtone; *The O.C.* Complete First Season boxed set; a Cure T-shirt and a pair of enormous skate trousers (she is thinking of

becoming either a goth or Avril Lavigne); and a book called *Let's Talk About Sex*. This is typical. Scarlet's mum is a sex therapist and her dad is a gynaecologist, which sounds exotic, but is, as Scarlet points out, actually gross. Especially when they start talking about pelvic floors at breakfast.

Casually mentioned Scarlet's new mobile phone to Mum. She said Scarlet would fry her brain with radiation. I said if I had one I would only use it to text people but Mum said I would get RSI and fail my GCSEs (which, I might add, are two years away). So now I am the only thirteen year old in Saffron Walden forced to use the public phone box to call Dad for a lift, which is embarrassing, not to mention unhygienic. I know for a fact that Mark Lambert once got his thing sucked in there by Leanne Jones for £2.50 and a Westlife CD.

Ate Bounty, Twirl, Mars bar, and half a Twix from out-of-date Selection Box whilst reading *What Not to Wear*. Apparently I am committing a litany of crimes against fashion. Under no circumstances should someone of my height (157 cm—only five cms off being a medical midget, according to James) wear cropped trousers. Looked in wardrobe to assess situation. Own three pairs cropped trousers, one pair of jeans (with a burn hole in the knee where James tried to invent inkstain remover), a bridesmaid's dress left over from Uncle Jim's second wedding, a kilt (don't ask), four assorted Marks and Spencer jumpers, a hoodie, seven T-shirts (three black,

one grey, one Brownies, one Saffron Walden Carnival, and one "I Love Bodmin Farm Park"), and my school uniform. Not promising.

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10 p.m.

Feel a bit sick. Maybe should have stopped at the Mars bar. Sylvia Plath would have stopped at half a Bounty. Or, probably, would have chosen an apple instead.

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Sunday 26

Boxing Day

A terrible thing has happened. Grandpa Riley's dog has been banned from the Pink Geranium sheltered housing complex after eating the turkey for the communal Christmas lunch. Grandpa says it wasn't the dog, but, according to the warden, Mrs Peason, a pile of incriminating sick was found outside Elsie Stain's porch. Apparently it is the last straw in a long list of canine misdemeanours. She has asked Dad to come and pick it up this week or it will be sent to the dog home. That box of toffee must have been a premonition.

Also, a giant tidal wave has washed away Thailand. Mum says that's the problem with choosing the third world as a holiday destination—not only are the toilet arrangements suspicious but it is ravaged by freak weather, which is why Cornwall is ideal. James pointed out that Granny Clegg still had an outside toilet and

that it had rained persistently on three out of the last four visits to Cornwall, at which point he got sent to his room to reflect on world disaster.

Emailed Scarlet but no reply. She is obviously too busy watching *The O.C.* whilst wearing enormous skate trousers and reading about her G-spot. Went round to see Sad Ed. He was depressed, as usual. Mainly because he got a David Beckham calendar and a machine that dispenses miniature Dairy Milks for Christmas. He had asked for a stuffed crow and a box of Slimfast (he wants to get in shape for his tragic untimely death—he says he cannot be a revered genius with fat upper arms). He has not liked David Beckham since Year 5 but his mum and dad are in denial. He said the Tsunami is a symbol of globalization and the capitalist society eating itself. I had to leave as he was making me depressed as well.

Monday 27

Bank Holiday (UK)

Gave up waiting for email reply and went round to Scarlet's. Suzy and Bob (Scarlet gets to call her mum and dad by their first names) are frantically setting up a Tsunami appeal fund with the Saffron Walden Labour Party and Suzy's tantric yoga group. Scarlet was too busy to watch *The O.C.* as she was helping Suzy write letters to Sainsbury's and Tesco's demanding they hand over tinned oriental produce for immediate repatriation. Even

Scarlet's brother, Jack, is doing something. His band, Certain Death, are playing a charity gig at the Bernard Evans Youth Centre next week.

I tried calling my mum Janet once and she banned me from watching *Dawson's Creek* for two weeks.

Dad is going to fetch the dog tomorrow. Mum is not happy but has agreed, under a three strikes and it's out rule regarding food theft and vomiting.

Tuesday 28

Bank Holiday (UK)

Went to collect Grandpa's dog from the Pink Geranium sheltered housing complex, which sounds like an exotic gay nightclub but is a three-storey concrete block of flats on the site of the former gasworks. Mrs Peason the fascist warden was waiting at the front door with Grandpa and the dog, who looked very sad. (Grandpa, not the dog. The dog was eating a Mars bar and was too busy to look sad.) Mrs Peason said, "At last. This dog is a menace to health and safety. I hope you have a ready supply of Jif." Grandpa shook his head and said things like, "It's all over for me and you now, pal. Don't pine yourself to death." But the dog just climbed in the boot. I think it was glad to get away from Mrs Peason.

Mum has told Dad that the dog is not allowed into the lounge, dining room, or bedrooms, except in cases of absolute emergency (what would these be, I wonder?).

She has put up James's old stairgate on the kitchen door to restrict its activities.

8 p.m.
The dog has chewed through the stairgate and is locked in a stand-off situation in Mum and Dad's bedroom, where it is growling menacingly from under the sprig-patterned duvet cover.

Wednesday 29

Went into town with James and spent my £5 WHSmith token on *Sugar Rush* by Julie Burchill. Scarlet has read it twice and says it is seminal. James bought a dictionary of Elvish and a Carol Vorderman Sudoku puzzle book.

Rival Tsunami appeals are appearing all over the place. I counted at least five in the space of 500 yards, including one by Les Brewster and his wife, Ying, who own the Siam Smile Thai café on the High Street (formerly the Dog and Bucket pub). Les (overweight, bald, fifty-seven) divorced Mrs Brewster (also overweight, bald and fifty-seven) two years ago and married Ying (thin, full head of hair, twenty-one) after a holiday in Phuket with the pub darts league. They are raising money to rebuild the sex bar where they met.

Got back to find that the dog had eaten the DVD player and the *Pride and Prejudice* boxed set. Dad claims it is

not the dog but there is a pile of sick by the dog's bowl with a picture of Colin Firth in it. Mum says it is two strikes down but James says DVDs do not count as food.

Thursday 30

Tomorrow is New Year's Eve. I have still not been invited to any parties but I know that Jack is having all the members of Certain Death over for a jamming session and that will include Justin Statham (lead guitar) who can play the solos out of 'Stairway to Heaven' and 'I Believe in a Thing Called Love'. Scarlet says Jack says he is going out with Sophie Jacobs whose dad invented Microwave Muffins and who was once in a Fairy Liquid advert, but everyone knows she is still in love with Chris Cross (seriously), who is in quarantine for glandular fever, so as soon as he is given the all-clear it will all be over with Justin and I will be there to comfort him. I just need to lay some groundwork now. I will call Scarlet in the morning and get myself invited over.

Read three pages of *Sugar Rush*. Scarlet is right. It is clearly a modern classic. Why, oh, why can we not move to Brighton, which is full of exotic and tragic people like blacks, lesbians, and the homeless? All Saffron Walden has is Barry the Blade, the notorious town madman, who eats leftover falafel from the dustbin outside Abrakebabra. Where is the urban degradation? Where is the multicultural melting pot?

Friday 31

New Year's Eve

11.45 p.m.

New Year's Eve has been a total disaster. I should be at a house party having meaningful conversations on the stairs with Justin Statham but am, in fact, at home watching Jonathan Ross. Scarlet was too busy to celebrate—Suzy and Bob are holding a candlelit vigil with Les Brewster and Ying in the Siam Smile (they have joined forces in an attempt to form one giant Tsunami Appeal and weed out the pretenders). I asked if I could go but Mum said that the sex bar being washed away was probably a good thing and that anyway, she needed me to babysit so they can play Giant Jenga with Clive and Marjory next door. Sad Ed came over for a bit and we played his Leonard Cohen CD (he is a total Emotional Music Obsessive) but he has a 10p.m. curfew. He says that we are both the products of depressingly unbroken homes and that is why our existence is so meaningless. Although his plight is worse than mine as his parents are both 48, which makes them practically pensioners, and they are in the Aled Jones fan club.

Ed is right, I need more tragedy in my life. Why is life never like it is in books? Nothing Jacqueline Wilson ever happens to me: I am not adopted, my mum is not tattooed, I am not likely to move to the middle of a council estate or be put into care. My parents are not alcoholics, drug addicts, or closet transvestites. No one in

my family is brown, gay, interestingly autistic, or even mildly retarded (although James won't eat fruit and meat on the same plate and can sing the books of the Bible off by heart, which is a bit *Curious Dog*.) Even my name is pants. Why didn't my parents call me something exotic like Lola? (Actually I asked Mum that once and she said that no daughter of hers was being named after a transsexual prostitute.) In other words, my life is earth-shatteringly NORMAL.

This cannot go on. Something deep and life-changing has to happen. Thin Kylie (Britcher) was put into care for a week when her mum's breast implant burst. Even Fat Kylie (O'Grady) has suffered tragic loss—her dad Les choked to death on a Findus Crispy Pancake last March.

Next year will be different. It has to be. Starting tomorrow.