

THE
FIGHTS
THAT
MAKE US

To Nancy, Mary and Sal

First published in the UK in 2024 by Usborne Publishing Limited., Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg,
Deutschland, VK Nr. 17560

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781801315791 7699/1 FMAMJJASOND/24

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY.



“So much of our history is forgotten or just not told, but what even is history anyway? It’s this moment. Right now. Every second we live becomes history, and life continues.”

Closing words from Adam Zmith on The Log Books podcast

“There is joy, there is light, there is positivity in our community. Yes, there’s a fight we’re trying to win, but it doesn’t mean that everything has to be doom and gloom all the time [...] it can be fun. It’s not *all* rainbows and glitter – but it’s a *lot* of rainbows and glitter.”

Shivani Dave, non-binary producer and presenter (from the Pride and Progress podcast, April 2023)

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THIS DIARY BELONGS TO LISA SCOTT

STARTED ON MY 15TH BIRTHDAY

Monday 24 August 1987

KEEP OUT

PRIVATE

This includes you, Matthew Scott. If you dare even THINK about reading this, I'll find out and you'll be DEAD. I mean it. And I'll tell Mum about the you-know-what hidden under your bed and then she'll kill you and you'll be dead twice. And I will find out if you read it, you know I will.

01 HEART AND SOUL

“Oh,” says Mum, sitting down suddenly. “Oh, that *is* sad.”

There’s something about her voice which makes me stop what I’m doing – making my favourite breakfast of Cheerios, Rice Krispies and corn flakes mixed together, mashed up with a spoon and drowned in milk – and turn to see if she’s all right.

Mum is always exclaiming about something. Tutting over the news on her phone or laughing at some supposedly funny video that one of her friends has forwarded her. People who complain that teenagers are obsessed with social media haven’t met my mum. But this is different from the usual running commentary of sighs and groans and “here, Jesse, you’ll love this baby panda falling over”.

“What is it?” I ask, putting my bowl down on the table

next to my glass of orange juice.

“Oh,” she says again. “Well, I just opened this letter and, here, look... It was just a bit of a shock, that’s all.”

She hands me a sheet of paper.

I read it quickly. A few phrases jump out: “sorry to let you know”, “memorial service”, “donations to Cancer Research”. But I don’t recognize the name or the address.

“Who’s Lisa Scott?” I ask Mum.

“Lisa? Lisa’s my cousin.” She pauses. “*Was* my cousin now, I suppose.” She rubs her hands over her eyes. She looks tired.

“I didn’t know you had a cousin called Lisa,” I say, surprised. “You never talked about her. Have I ever met her?”

Mum leans back in her chair. “No, you haven’t. It’s years since I’ve seen her, she was quite a bit older than me, you see. I didn’t even—” She stops, takes a deep breath. “I didn’t even know she was sick. I should have known, I should have kept in contact... Oh, I don’t know.”

I look at the envelope. It isn’t addressed to Mum. Instead, it’s been forwarded to us from Gran’s old address.

Mum nods. “Yes, it was sent to Gran. She was always one for keeping in touch with everyone, wasn’t she?”

She smiles, but she looks sad underneath. Maybe this is why Mum’s so upset about someone it sounds like she

hardly knew. Because it reminds her of last year, when Gran died.

Gran said that she wanted us to think about her after she’d gone, but she didn’t want us to be sad when we did. She wanted us to remember the happy times and how she made us laugh. Although she wouldn’t have said it like that – she didn’t say “gone” or “passed away” or that sort of thing, she just said “when I’m dead”. Everything dies in time, she used to say, flowers and leaves and birds, people too. No point pretending they don’t. That’s part of what makes them so precious. Death is just a natural part of life, she told us, that’s why you have to cherish being alive, and live the best you can, every single day.

But when you feel sad, you can’t just decide not to feel sad any more. At least, that doesn’t work for me. But I can try not to think about it, or to hide it so that no one notices.

I don’t know what to say, so I lean over and rest my head on Mum’s shoulder, just for a moment. She squeezes my hand in reply.

“Well,” says Mum firmly. Her voice is calmer now. “We must go to the funeral, of course. I’ll have to book tickets to London, find somewhere to stay, ask for the time off work... 20th February, that’s in half-term, isn’t it?”

“Would Dad and I have to go too?” I ask.

“It depends if he can get the time off,” says Mum. “You wouldn’t *have* to go, but...I’d like it if you came, Jesse. Gran would have wanted to go. As she can’t, I think we should be there to represent the family, don’t you? For all I know, we might be the only family there.”

Mum’s right. Gran would have wanted us to be there.

But that doesn’t mean that *I* want to go. There are so many reasons not to. I hate dressing up and formal stuff and having to be polite to people I don’t know. I know Lisa is part of our family, but I’ve never even met her. And Simran and I have got our joint history project to do together over half-term. And...

“Would I have to wear a dress for the funeral?” I ask, feeling breathless at the thought.

Mum snorts. “Where did you get that idea? When was the last time anyone got you to wear a dress? Don’t be daft. You just need to look smart, that’s all. Well, smartish.”

I breathe normally again. I knew she’d say that. I knew it would be okay. But that didn’t stop me from worrying.

Even thinking about wearing a dress, or a skirt, makes me feel uncomfortable. Maybe I’ll want to one day, but right now, I tense up and it makes my chest feel tight. Like when someone uses my full first name or like when I used to have long hair and could feel it on the back of my neck. It just feels wrong. I know the opposite feeling too. When

someone listens to me and takes me as I am, without any fuss, then my whole body relaxes.

“Actually, this could be a good thing,” continues Mum. “We’ve been talking about making a trip to London for a while, haven’t we? We could stay a bit longer, see the sights, maybe go to some museums and get ideas for this history project you keep talking about. What do you think?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say. I’m still not that keen.

“It would be some time together, just you and me, g—” She pauses, swallowing back her words. I can tell she was just about to say “girl time” before she stopped herself. “Together time,” she says firmly.

Since I told Mum and Dad I’m non-binary, they’ve both been trying so hard to say and do the right things. To be fair, they usually do okay. Once, when I borrowed Mum’s laptop for something, I saw she had a website open, with blogs from parents of non-binary kids. It was nice to know she was trying to understand it better, but kind of embarrassing too.

I’m not sure they totally get it though – that it’s not just about clothes or using the right words or any of the outside stuff – it’s about how I feel on the inside. Not like a boy or a girl, not totally anyway, just like me. Jesse. Those labels are fine for some people, I guess, but they don’t make sense

for me. And when I realized that I didn't have to accept the labels – that some other people choose not to either – then I could show people the person I was but had kept hidden away. Right now, changing my hair or what I wear is one part of feeling more comfortable in who I am, and in showing that to the world, but it's not the only way.

"So, what do you think – a trip to London, you and me?" asks Mum.

Maybe she's right. About the museums anyway. I'm in dire need of inspiration for our history project. Ms Grant says that each pair can do whatever we like, as long as we investigate something that matters to us and use our history skills to examine evidence and sources. It's exciting, but hard too. Especially when Simran and I have zero ideas so far. But I want Ms Grant to think our project is the best in the class, the best ever. She's only taught us for a term and a bit but she's totally different to any teacher I've had before.

She came striding into that first lesson back in September, her red skirt swishing and huge hoop earrings swinging. Everyone was chatting and messing around as usual; it was the first week of Year Eight and no one was used to being back in school yet. The noise in the classroom made my ears ache. Even so, we all paid attention when she slammed a large pile of textbooks on her desk with a bang.

"Right, Year Eight, are we ready?" Everyone shuffled slowly back to their seats. My best friend Simran and I were sitting together as always.

She waited for silence. Dylan and Conor were the last to stop whispering. "Good. I'm Ms Grant, I'm looking forward to getting to know all of you this year. Let's begin."

She picked up one of the books from the pile and waved it at us.

"This is our textbook for the year. Who's this on the cover?"

I watched a surprising number of hands go up.

"To help me get to know you, when you answer a question, please tell me your name too." She looked round the class and pointed at Ella.

"Ella – it's Henry VIII," Ella said, looking pleased with herself.

"Exactly, Ella, Henry VIII. We've all heard of Henry VIII, haven't we?" Lots of nods. "So, this is a bit harder, how many people were living in England and Wales when Henry was on the throne?"

Everyone stopped nodding and looked at her blankly.

I don't usually put my hand up, but there was something about Ms Grant, the way she *expected* us to know things and to *want* to know things, that already made me want her to notice me.

I did a rough calculation in my head, then I put up my hand, but not too high, so it looked like I could just be stretching.

When she nodded in my direction, I checked behind me in case she meant someone else before saying, “The population’s about seventy million now, and there were a lot less people then, what with plagues and no proper healthcare and everything, so maybe half that?”

Simran stared at me. She was surprised to hear me say so much in class.

“Good deduction, er...?” said Ms Grant, nodding.

“Jesse,” I said.

“Well done, Jesse. Not quite that many though, but thanks for starting us off and for giving us your reasons. That kind of analytical thinking is really important for a historian.” She smiled at me and I couldn’t help smiling back. “It was actually more like 2.5 to 3.5 million.” My smile disappeared. I was way off, she must think I’m really stupid. “So, why, when there were millions of people living in Britain, do we only ever hear about one man?”

It was a real question, but no one knew how we were supposed to answer it. Of course, Dylan had a go. Whether he knows the answer or not, Dylan always has something to say. It’s like the contents of his head just pours straight out of his mouth.

“It’s not just Henry VIII though, is it? There’s his wives. You learn about them too, Miss. Oh, I’m Dylan, Miss.”

“Exactly, Dylan, we do. We hear about women who die, get cast aside or killed. But that’s not *all* that women did in Tudor Britain. Or what women do today. At that time, out of those two to three million people, only a few of them had the power to make decisions which affected the whole country – only the men who owned land, no one else...”

“What?” said Jasmine. “That’s so unfair.”

“Exactly,” Ms Grant acknowledged, before continuing, “which means that those men *wrote* the history, and that, even today, we forget that other people, other histories ever existed. But they did.

“So, we *will* be learning about Henry VIII,” she sighed, “and his wives. But we’ll also be learning about influential women like Margaret Beaufort, who had a huge impact on education at the time. We’ll look at the range of roles, from sailors to seamstresses, that Black people took in Tudor society. And uncover queer history too, like the relationship between royal musician Arabella Hunt and her ‘husband’ Amy Poulter.”

Jasmine made a face when Ms Grant said “queer”, then she nudged Ella, stared at me and Simran and whispered something. Just like always.

“We’ll be looking at who writes history and why, how it affects us now, and whose voices are missing. We’ll discover how we’re all part of making and recording history.” Ms Grant paused and looked around again, making sure everyone was watching her. We all were. “Who keeps a diary?”

I kept my hand down this time, but a few hands did go up. One of them was Simran’s. I glanced over at her. I didn’t know she wrote a diary. I wondered what she wrote about me.

“Or writes a blog? Or emails or messages on social media? That’s all history, it’s you recording history, what matters to you, what changes you see, the details of what your lives are really like.”

A list of sentences appeared on the whiteboard. I scanned them quickly.

History is boring.

History is all about the past.

History is about kings and queens.

History is about power.

History is about facts.

History depends on who tells the story.

History affects my life now.

History is written by the winners.

“In pairs,” said Ms Grant, “I want you to discuss these

statements and pick one you agree with and one you disagree with and why. You have five minutes, go.”

Simran turned to me. “Wow,” she said after a moment. “She’s awesome, isn’t she? And a bit scary too. Did she really say we’d be studying queer history?”

“Yeah,” I said, not really listening to Simran.

I wasn’t worried about whether Ms Grant thought I was stupid any more. I was thinking about what she had said and how it made me feel – that the people and events that everyone said were so important weren’t the only ones that mattered. So maybe there was a place in history for people like me, not on the edges of the story, but right in the centre.

Thanks to Ms Grant, history lessons soon became the best part of the whole week. But that’s all going to change soon.

A few weeks ago, when we were all excited about the projects, she told us that she’ll be going on maternity leave after Easter. I can’t imagine having an ordinary teacher for history again, not after how brilliant the last few months have been with her.

Ms Grant says we’ll put on an exhibition to display all our projects before she goes. We’ll make the school hall into a gallery, like a real museum, so that our families can come in and see what we’ve researched. Maybe looking

round museums in London will give me some ideas to share with Simran for our project.

The doorbell rings. Mum looks surprised.

"It's just Simran," I say, shovelling the last few spoonfuls of cereal into my mouth as I get up from the table. "We're going into town, remember? Her dad's dropping us off."

"Oh," says Mum. "Yes, of course, I'd totally forgotten..."

She sits there, staring at the letter. Not saying anything about me talking and eating at the same time or nagging me about putting my dirty bowl in the dishwasher.

"Mum, are you okay?" I ask. This letter has really shaken her. She's gone all vague and dreamy, like she was in the weeks after Gran died. "I don't have to go..."

"No, no, I'm fine." She waves her hand at me.

The doorbell rings again. Long and shrill.

"Go on, off you go," she says. I pick up my bowl. "Leave it, I'll sort that."

"Thanks, Mum!" I put the bowl back on the table, shove my feet into my trainers, down the last of the orange juice and give her a hug on my way out.

02 HEAVEN IS A PLACE ON EARTH

"At last," says Simran when I open the door. My laces are still undone. I have to shuffle carefully down the path after her so as not to fall over. "Dad's got the twins in the car. God, they never shut up. He's taking them swimming after dropping us off."

"I'll sit in the back with them," I say. "I don't mind."

"If you're sure," she says, opening the passenger door.

I like Simran's brothers. They badly wind her up, but they make me laugh. I'm jealous of her being a big sister, instead of the baby of the family like me. When I was younger, I used to plead with Mum and Dad for a little brother or sister. But there was only me and Tom – and he's gone away to uni now.

“Hello, Mr Gill,” I say, fastening my seat belt. “Thanks for the lift.”

“My pleasure, Jesse.” Simran and I have been friends since we were younger than the twins and I’ve barely heard her dad say more than a couple of sentences at a time. Simran and her brothers more than make up for it though.

I’ve been collecting some really good jokes for Ranveer and Parminder, but first I let them try out their jokes on me. I always laugh, even at the rubbish ones or the ones that make no sense, despite Simran’s sighs from the front seat.

“Which Roman emperor always has a cold?” asks Ranveer, wriggling with excitement.

I make a show of scratching my head and pretending to have no idea, even though I first heard this joke when I was in Year Four like they are. “I don’t know, which Roman emperor always has...”

“Julius Sneezer!” shouts Parminder before I’ve even finished, and then does a huge pretend sneeze.

“Hey,” protests Ranveer. “That was my joke! Dad, he did my joke!”

“Boys!” says Mr Gill, quietly but firmly. “Stop showing off.”

“It’s okay,” I say to Ranveer. “I didn’t hear properly, you tell me the answer.” Ranveer repeats the punchline,

I smile and tell him it’s a good one. Then, when he’s looking out of the window, I wink at Parminder.

I’m so obsessed with this history project that even Ranveer’s joke makes me think about it. Hurston used to be an important town in Roman times. There are Roman ruins in the park on the way to school and signs telling you what used to be where hundreds of years ago. Simran and I *could* do something about the Romans, I suppose, if we get really desperate. Maybe...but it doesn’t feel personal enough somehow.

“Dad, let us out here,” says Simran as we reach the high street. “Please, I can’t bear any more of those jokes.”

“But I’ve got a really good one,” pleads Parminder.

“Next time,” I tell him with a grin. “I promise. Thanks, Mr Gill.” Simran slams the car door behind her before I’ve even undone my seat belt.

Out on the street, Simran takes my arm and steers me through the door of the hospice shop. She loves charity shops, mixing and matching, cutting and stitching, and turning second-hand clothes into something entirely unique.

I don’t.

“I thought we were going to Over the Rainbow, not going shopping,” I say.

“In a minute, just a quick look round. I need your help.”

I sigh. “No really, Jesse.” She already has a top in each hand. She holds up one in front of her, and then the other, and then the first one again. “What do you think? Which one’s best?”

I shrug. Simran looks great whatever she wears. Not like me. I’m better at knowing what I *don’t* like, rather than what I do. And, anyway, it’s only recently that I’ve started looking in the mirror and recognizing the person looking back. Simran calls it “finding my style”. But I think it’s more like finding a part of myself.

She snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Come on, Jesse.” I look properly this time.

“The first one,” I say at random.

“Hmm...” says Simran. “I’m not sure...” She puts both tops back on the rail. I drift over to look at the books. I’m flicking through some old Lemony Snicket’s when Simran taps me on the shoulder.

“What about this?”

She puts a hanger into my hand and steps back, nearly knocking an extremely ugly royal jubilee teapot off the shelf behind her. I lean forward to catch it, but it just wobbles then rights itself again.

I look at what Simran’s handed me. “For you?” I ask, surprised. It’s not her usual style.

“No, course not, for *you*.” I run my fingers over it. The

fabric on the front is so soft, but the back is silky smooth. It’s grey, but not dull. The colour is dark and deep, but warm too. It’s...beautiful. It’s like Simran’s reached into my head, found a style that I didn’t even know I had and then conjured it into reality. She’s grinning like she knows it too. Only Simran would think of picking up a waistcoat.

“Put it on,” she says. And I do.

I normally prefer clothes that are too big for me, where I can hide inside them, but this fits perfectly. Simran claps her hands. “I’m buying it for you! Early birthday present.”

“But my birthday’s not till July!”

“Whatever, it’s yours!” I don’t even try to say no. I want it.

Once we get to Over the Rainbow, I tuck the bag under the table. We’re sitting by the window, but I am more interested in what’s happening inside the cafe than looking at the street outside. This is the place I love most in the whole world. We never bump into anyone else from our year in here. They’re all in the shopping centre, in McDonald’s or Starbucks, not this little bookshop cafe on a tiny side street. I don’t have a problem with any of them – well, except maybe Jasmine – I’m just glad that this is mine and Simran’s special, secret place.

The bunting that decorates the walls is in the colours of the non-binary, trans and Pride flags. It was this bunting

that first made me stop and peer through the window a few months ago. I couldn't go in because Mum was in a rush. We were cutting through a new shortcut she'd found back to the car park.

The next weekend I made Simran walk past with me five times, just so I could peek inside, until she got fed up and dragged me through the door.

As soon as we walked in and saw the people and the books on the shelves and the brightly coloured posters on the walls, Simran turned to me and said, "Jesse, this place is for *us*."

The chairs and tables, glasses and plates, none of them match, but it doesn't matter. I like it that way. The shelves are stuffed with books and magazines and it's okay to flick through them even if you're not buying one. Maz, who owns the place, is always pressing her favourite books into people's hands, even if they've just come in for a takeaway coffee.

Also, people talk to each other here, even if they don't know each other. At first that kind of freaked me out, but now I'm used to it. It's the first place I saw two men holding hands, or someone wearing a badge saying "she/they". Hurston's too small to have its own Pride, but instead we've got Over the Rainbow. And I think that's even better, because it's here all year round, not just for one day.

I slurp my banana milkshake. You can get milkshakes here in every colour of the rainbow, even green, it's so cool. Simran leans forward and looks at me expectantly. "Go on then, put it on."

"Are you sure? What if I spill something on it?"

"You won't, go on."

I slip off my hoodie and put on the waistcoat instead. I feel a bit self-conscious at first. I mean, what twelve-year-old wears a waistcoat? But then I look around at what everyone else in here is wearing and start to relax. No one's going to notice or care what I look like. And it feels good. It makes me want to throw my shoulders back and sit up taller.

"Now," says Simran. "Half-term's only a week away. I was thinking – we've got to do something good. You and me. There's no way I'm spending the whole week stuck at home, trying to stop Ranveer and Parminder destroying the place while Mum and Dad are working. I don't even get babysitting money. They say being a sister isn't a job, it's a blessing." She snorts. "So, what do you think? Would your mum and dad mind me hanging round at yours?"

"Course they wouldn't," I say. "But who'd look after the twins?"

"Not. My. Problem," says Simran fiercely. Then she softens. "Actually, Dad is working at home a bit and I'm

sure for a couple of days they'll be round at friends' houses anyway. I can help out when they're not. I mean, they're not so bad really."

"Come to mine whenever you like, we can do our history project."

"What?" exclaims Simran. "I swear you're obsessed with that project. Obsessed." She shakes her head in pretend despair.

"I'm not *obsessed*," I tell her. "I'm just *interested*. I mean, it's loads better than normal homework, isn't it?"

"*Interested* in the project or *interested* in Ms Grant?" asks Simran, grinning.

"In the *project*," I say firmly. I look over my shoulder, pretending to be distracted by who's coming through the door, in the hope that Simran won't notice that I'm going red.

When I look back at her, she's smiling an annoying smile, but she doesn't say anything.

"So, have you had any ideas about what we can do it on?" I ask her.

Simran stretches back like a cat and flicks her long black hair over her shoulders. "Dad thinks we should do the Sikh soldiers. From World War One."

"What Sikh soldiers?"

"Exactly. As Ms Grant always says, no one tells you

about them, do they?" Simran waves her finger at me. "Dad says one in six of all the soldiers fighting for Britain in World War One came from India and loads of them were Sikh, just like my family. They were really brave and everything. Some of them fought with actual swords."

"No way!"

"Uh huh. Dad's got these history books full of ancient photos. He got really excited when he thought I might be interested. I suppose it is kind of cool, but I'm not sure. I'd like it best if it was our idea, not someone else's, not even Dad's. What do you think?"

I try to imagine Simran's dad as one of those soldiers, going into battle brandishing a sword. But it's much easier to picture him sitting in the big battered armchair in Simran's living room, with a mug of tea in his hand, reading books about old battles as the twins climb all over him.

"It's the best idea we've got so far," I say. "My dad thinks we should do it on the history of flood defences in East Sussex."

"Yawn."

"He says they've got archives at his work we could go and look at."

"Stop talking about that this second, or I'll fall asleep right now," threatens Simran.