

# *Diary Room of the Imagination*

Mrs Berry says that before you begin any piece of writing you must know your audience. The fact that I have no idea who you are, or if you even exist at all, helps me a lot. I just have this urge to try and make some sense of it all.

Mrs Berry also recommends that you begin at the beginning and work your way systematically to the end. But for me this experience is smashed up like my mum's Georgian glass fruit bowl. Each shard is dangerous and beautiful like a diamond. Some of the pieces are my story, some of them belong to my sister, Vix, and some of them belong to Nan.

Are you sure that you want to fit all the pieces together? I used to think that I would be happy if only I could figure everything out, but over this year I've learned that whoever said that knowledge is power was so wrong.

Knowledge is terror.

Once you know something, unless you are lucky enough to receive a ‘forgetting’ blow to the head, you are stuck with that knowledge for ever.

Some people discover hidden depths of courage and self-sacrifice and they go on to perform heroic deeds. They pull a stranger from a burning car wreck or they stand up to an oppressive regime.

Some people are too afraid to do the right thing so they just buckle like glass in extreme heat. Others simply . . . cut off. They spend the rest of their lives jumping up and down trying to catch hold of their feelings that are always bobbing just out of reach above their heads.

So here, on this hot October day, I am in the diary room of my imagination, downloading my thoughts and memories and wondering what sort of person I’ll turn out to be. Hero? Buckler? Bobber? I need to know the answer because today is a big day for us.

Ava Broadhurst-Conti

# *Victoria Broadhurst-Conti*

Alarm didn't wake me  
No familiar arms  
To nudge and shake me  
Cos I'm now alone  
In a houseful of people  
Who watch me  
When I'm not looking  
Who stick up rotas  
About dusting and cooking  
Who fragrance the place with disinfectant  
Not aromatherapy oil  
Who call me Victoria  
Not Vix  
To them I'm a problem  
They're trying to fix  
But I won't be broken  
Today is a big day  
I open my bedside cabinet  
It's time to take out

My journal  
And read it one more time  
Float on a kind of nostalgia  
Ava has made me a  
1960s cocktail dress  
Shiny and sleeveless  
That's the test  
'Me. Me ask about me?'  
Has to be suppressed  
Can I feel good and not  
Bleed in my need to be the best?

# Ava

BIG DAY TODAY.

I was running late, as usual, but when I walked past the cathedral something drew me inside.

The blast of cool air gave me goose pimples and my eyes struggled to adjust to the change in the light. As I smoothed my dress, my finger caught on a stray pin and the prickle of pain jolted me. I had only finished adjusting it late last night. I was determined to finish it so I could wear one of Nan's dresses today.

The cathedral was surprisingly crowded. There were groups of tourists alongside people kneeling and praying. Some people were dropping coins into a box and lighting candles. Were they asking for things for themselves, like with wishes on a birthday cake? Wishes can be like volatile radioactive chemicals. People can be too. The right mix of people at the wrong time can do a lot of damage. Today it felt like I had been given the chance to make things right.

A mobile went off close by me, reminding me that I really should be leaving. There was still a lot of stuff to get

ready. In a few hours' time, a lot of people would be coming to the café to look at my exhibition. Tasha, my boss at the Cakewalk, would be wondering where I was. I imagined her pacing the small café, brown eyes blazing as she barked orders to Len, who would not be paying her the slightest bit of attention. From this distance they seemed like a comedy act in a surreal sitcom.

I'm not religious or anything, but before I left I decided to light three skinny candles: one for my big sister, Vix, one for me and one for Nan. The flames flickered back at me like the eyes of an understanding friend.

Sooner or later I would have to confess my part in things.

It all began a year ago.

*One Year Ago*



# Vix

Scented gel  
Rollerball  
The guilt-making charity freebie pen  
That screams for help down its side  
Or the gushing fountain  
Cheeky powder-puff-pink-fluffy-topped one  
I have to choose the right weapon  
To write my life  
Turn it into  
The lyrics for a song  
That will never be downloaded  
Produced or promoted  
It's just for me  
And as this creation will never be seen  
I reserve the right to be as naff and/or mean  
As I really am  
To speak the words that are closest to my soul  
To speak in metaphor and sometimes to rhyme  
Because poetry

Doesn't speak in sentences  
And as life sometimes imitates art  
(That's what makes it a success)  
I can talk about myself in this form  
In tantalising lines  
Cos it's the only way to tell you  
My thoughts  
And not out loud  
Never out loud  
I'm a deep thinker  
Swallowing ideas and opinions  
Like a binge drinker  
And because I can dress to impress  
Have a card that says American Express  
Come from a good family  
To look at me you would  
Never suspect  
That somewhere deep in me is  
This need  
To confess  
Because my life is such  
A mixed-up  
Crazy mess

# Ava

It was the second week of term and I was happily being carried along by the lava flow of girls making their way down the school corridor when Mrs Berry popped out of her office, tapped me on the shoulder and demanded, ‘What are you, Ava?’

I twitched and blinked whilst Mrs Berry glanced impatiently at her clipboard. The question sounded odd, like something out of a Shakespeare play. Had I heard it right? She knew perfectly well who I was, but what I was? That was a truly bizarre question. Mrs Berry was always emphasising what she called ‘appropriateness in partnership with academic achievement’. I chewed the inside of my cheek and debated whether to put on a mockney accent and say something sassy like, ‘A lot prettier and richer than you, darlin’.’ She ran the philosophy club so perhaps my answer should’ve been something along the lines of, ‘What I am, Mrs Berry, is a product of my own upbringing. Nothing more, nothing less.’

I come from an interesting family background. My dad comes from a long line of Welsh/Italian ice cream makers.

Grandpa Conti created the award-winning ‘Welsh Rarebit’ flavour. Dad’s tastes were even weirder – he left the world of ice cream for the tang of politics.

My mother, Elspeth Broadhurst-Conti, is a barrister who spends her days arguing for people’s rights and her nights pointing out all my wrongs. We didn’t know much about her father, apart from the fact that he came from Africa and met Nan whilst he was studying law in Manchester and went back unexpectedly, leaving her expecting! Mum refuses to talk about him but is determined to become a high court judge. How twisted is that?

Mrs Berry cleared her throat and tapped her pen impatiently. I am down on some sort of list as having non-specific learning difficulties (no one can actually specify what they are!) so she was obviously giving me more time. Nan had argued with Mum about it saying, in her Manchester accent, ‘She only seems slow in your household because the rest of you are always dashing about like headless chickens.’

What was I? The answer to this question would have to be, ‘A great disappointment to my family’. It was my big sister, Victoria, who had been visited in her cot by the fairy godmother and granted the classic girlie-girl wishes of being the Pretty One *and* the Clever One.

I had all the same features as my sister – long dark wavy hair, brown eyes, but whereas people talked about her ‘Julia Roberts smile’, I felt like a wide-mouthed-frog.

People said she was curvy and had an hourglass figure; I resembled a barometer – thin neck and big bottom.

Mrs Berry broke the silence. ‘Now, shall I put you down as Other? I usually do put you and Victoria down as that but I thought I’d better check. This ethnic monitoring form has to be sent off today. Is that fine?’ She smiled weakly at me.

I twitched the corners of my mouth back at her.

Mrs Berry quickly ticked a box and scanned the corridor for the next person on her list.

I rejoined the lava flow and made my way to morning assembly where I tried to forget about how weird that conversation had made me feel.

How ‘Other’.

# Vix

In September  
I shrieked with delight when I saw her  
In the corridor  
She shrieked too  
And waved her arms  
We hugged  
Rosamund  
My template  
My one true model  
For a bezzie mate  
I squealed and said  
'You're looking . . .'

I paused  
Her presence filled the gap  
Down to size zero, teeth been changed by brace  
Brunette is the new blond  
'And you Vix,'  
She looks me full in the face  
'You're just the same.'

## Ava

After that weird conversation with Mrs Berry I couldn't wait to get to my textiles class. Once I've got a needle in my hand rather than a pen I can relax. Miss Duncan shares my interest in vintage fabrics. Ever since I can remember, I've been collecting old Barbie dolls and designing outfits for them. Over the last few years I have been scouring charity shops and car boot sales for old dress patterns and then trying to find the right scraps of vintage fabrics to recreate them in miniature. My family call them my Bootsale Barbies. When I'm sewing or following a dress pattern I don't feel clumsy and my ideas flow.

Mum had been questioning me about my coursework over dinner the other night when Vix had cut in, 'Isn't textiles a term of abuse?'

'Only if you're a naturist and don't wear any clothes,' Mum had replied and then they'd laughed.

To them textiles was a soft option. Not something to be taken seriously. To me it was everything. The textiles room was my sanctuary. It's the only room in the whole

school where I actually feel that I can do something.

I can totally sympathise with people who say they are trapped in the wrong body – I am trapped in the wrong family and so have been sent to the wrong school for me. Somewhere out there is a super brainy girl trapped in a family of dullards.

The lesson was spent with Miss Duncan outlining the personal portfolio element of our course.

‘As there are only four of you taking this course, you will be expected to get on and work independently. You will have free access to the room and some of your classes will be shared with the other A-level and GCSE students. I’m really looking forward to working with you. You will have the opportunity to take up a work experience module to gain valuable practical knowledge and I will say more about that as the term progresses, but enough of this talking – over to your sewing machines . . .’

Music to my ears!

Then in walked Rosamund’s sister, Kennedy.

## Vix

Baudelaire had green hair  
He liked loose-living women  
In their underwear  
Christopher Marlowe  
Liked boys and tobacco  
And spying  
I have a mind  
That in its  
Private moments  
Thinks in  
Cheap rhymes  
Often  
When I'm scared  
It's like I have this  
Large tape measure  
Stuck down my spine  
And reaching above my head  
I try to stretch  
But I never quite measure  
Up

No one can see this  
Only me  
Wish I could be  
More like my moon-faced sister  
Let off the hook  
With her weird love of textiles  
And textures to caress  
The sister that Mum insists  
Must be given time  
To process  
Her thoughts  
We are total opposites  
That don't attract

## Ava

I used to watch my sister like I was playing a game at a kid's birthday party. The one where you have to memorise the objects on a tray. I thought that by doing that I would discover the secrets of how to be popular, clever and well groomed. That some of the fairy dust would rub off on me.

So far, all I had learned from my sister was that you had to spend hours in the bathroom, shriek on the phone to your friends, act like a bored thirty-something in bars that you are only just legally allowed in, have incomprehensible conversations about obscure architects or designers and pout like a three-year-old when you don't get your own way.

Vix could interrupt one of our heavy family political debates about war or poverty saying, 'You know what . . . If I'm being honest, I don't really care what happens on the news. It doesn't really affect me.'

Everyone would laugh and comment on how arch and ironic she was. Mum would have signed me up on the spot for a world awareness class if I had said that.

I would have liked to talk over my ‘Other’ feelings with my sister, but Rosamund and her sister Kennedy had come back to Hildegard School and Vix went from being Ms Just About Bearable to Ms Totally Impossible.

Rosamund always had this effect on her. Brought out her pretentious side. Nothing was ever good enough after she’d spent an evening with Rosamund, especially not me. When Rosamund was not around we would meet together in the evenings and share a hot chocolate and chat about stuff. Nothing earth-shattering, but we would talk or sometimes watch a soppy DVD together.

Lately it seemed that Rosamund was always hanging around – being ultra charming and faintly bored in the background.

To me Rosamund has always smelled wrong. She was too plastic perfect, like one of the Bootsale Barbies that I collect. No one can always say and do the right thing. Not without following a script instead of their own feelings. And Vix was starting to smell wrong too. There was no time in her life for anyone else apart from Rosamund.

Rosamund and her sister Kennedy had always lived across the square from us but had spent the last few years away trying out a couple of boarding schools. Since the start of term, when Vix took up with Rosamund and the broadband brain brigade, she had dropped most of her former friends.

Mum hadn’t been too keen on the friendship but that

all changed when Vix was invited to join the G+T club. To be labelled gifted and talented at Hildegard School is really something because nearly everyone there has a super-sized brain to start with. Vix had always been just hovering on the outer rings of this group, so when she was selected to join the *crème de la crème* that was the end of all questions about their friendship.

Kennedy and I were not expected to be friends. Not since I had melted her Barbie Dream Castle after she had tricked me into drinking her special French lemonade (*oui-oui*). Kennedy loved playing practical jokes on me. She seemed to think making me look a fool was the funniest thing on the planet. Over the years I'd learned it was easier to stay out of her way.

She is not as smart as Rosamund but she is ten times pushier. She was the one who always got to play Mary in the Nativity play at primary school whilst I was third sheep or the messenger with one line. She was causing a stir at school already by requesting to bring her lapdog Precious into class with her. Mrs Berry had turned beetroot at that suggestion and muttered something about appropriateness and allergies. Kennedy had blinked back and said that stroking pets was good for high blood pressure.