

A Town Like Alice: Episode 8

A Diary by Deborah Berkeley

Alice was born in July 2006. Deborah has kindly agreed to keep this diary to report on what has happened in their family life so far and to keep us up to date with developments. Deborah, Vince, Alex and Alice are pseudonyms, but all locations are real. To see the previous instalments please go to IQJ Issues No. 1 to 7.

January 2009

- Hospital appointments in last 3 months: ENT, genetics clinic
- Child Development Centre (CDC) appointments: family psychotherapist, dietitian, vision clinic, audiologist
- Specialist teacher, two learning support assistants (LSAs), SALT, OT and Educational Psychologist
- Health professionals: 10

Clinics to come: orthopaedics, vision clinic

This month: Alice gets excluded from the inclusive nursery and the poacher attempts to turn gamekeeper

5.30 a.m. Alice wakes up, demanding 'mork' (milk). Yes, I know it's great that she can now ask for something, instead of just crying. But frankly, it's too early in the morning to be proud. Especially when I might meet our resident mouse in the kitchen. Listen carefully for telltale scratchy rustles as I decant rice milk into her bottle and pad back to bed. Alice is soon snoring away, head on Vincent's pillow, feet on mine.

6 a.m. It's going to be one of those days. Alice is prodding me repeatedly under the armpit as she tries to settle herself back to sleep. Hoping her restlessness doesn't mean recurrence of stomach bug which has kept her off nursery for two days this week. I've got piles of paperwork to file and sort at home. And an important phone call to wait for. Today I find out if I'm to become a keyworking co-ordinator for the local child development centre. They know I can't work full-time, but there is a family-friendly working policy. I was invited to send in my CV, so people keep telling me

it's in the bag – although they also warn me that these things often favour internal candidates. I can't explain why, but even though I know yesterday's interview went well, I know it's going to be bad news. A little twist of anxiety inside me is growing gradually bigger, like the balls Alex makes from elastic bands.

9 a.m. Am accosted by rude power-dressed mum (Jigsaw coat, little Whistles cardie, Hobbs boots) in the playground, who urgently needs a mutual friend's telephone number. 'Can you call her for me, my phone's dead?' she demands, 'I really need to get to the office...' There's something about the way she looks me up and down, that makes me see what her eyes see. I don't rate it much either. No make-up, scruffy khaki mumsy jacket, fat-girl jeans, and battered 3-wheeler pram. I feel like the head louse Alex squashed last night when he was lice-combing. Rude cow. Or perhaps I'm just bitter and twisted, because today I don't have an interview to go to and a reason to dress up in lipstick, smart boots and a Per Una office frock. But on yet another hand, would I really want to be in a tizz every morning, transitioning awkwardly from school run to work? On balance, probably yes. I'm sick of the lack of respect, the lack of real purpose, and, more importantly, the lack of cash that my current 'lifestyle' brings. Yes – I'm chairperson of the parent forum and have sat on a few committees here and there. But I'm sick of being the only unpaid person in a room full of well-paid peers. The occasional sandwich and a free pen or two aren't going to get our bills paid or my ego fed.

10 a.m. Dropping Alice off, where, in celebration of the last day of term, all the children are gathering for a puppet show. LSAs, head teacher, caretaker and dinner lady ask about the job. Why did I tell everyone? My phone has never been more silent. Decide that once I've tidied up at home, I'm going for a swim. Just thinking about that calm relaxing water makes me feel less stressed...

10.10 a.m. No breaststroke for the wicked. Day continues to get worse as LSA finds me unlocking my bike from nursery car park. Alice has a head louse and must leave nursery immediately, without seeing the puppet show. Bike now locked outside nursery, to be collected later. Alice bobs along beside me, unconcerned about the puppet show, or that she stayed in nursery just long enough to remove her coat and put it back on again as we stroll homewards. Head louse is found and squashed. Are head lice the only thing I have power over these days, I wonder, as I stare theatrically at the phone. I am a star in my own melodrama. The Many Whines of Deborah. On cue, phone rings. British Gas want to know why we haven't paid our latest bill. Because I haven't got a sodding job, I want to tell them. Because I spent £75 on dress, tights and boots to wear for my interview. If I get the job the money was a good investment, but if I don't, it's going to look like overindulgence.

1 p.m. Friend texts to say he thinks I am overqualified for the job anyway. Nice to hear (and quite possibly true) but that doesn't pay the mortgage, the gas bill, or keep Alex's ever-growing feet in new trainers. Feel very drained all of a sudden. I liked being someone with an interview to attend, with a job to hope for. Now, I feel there is nothing to look forward to. Am shocked at just how personally I am taking it all. If I don't get the job, I'm still the same person with the same experience to offer an employer. But not getting the job calls into question whether that experience is actually what NHS bosses want. Maybe, when I'm proffering my opinion as a parent on a voluntary basis, I'm looked on with a less judgemental air. Maybe, in attempting to join the professionals, I sound ridiculous, dangerously maverick, and badly educated.

1.45 p.m. It's all over. The good enough internal candidate, who is able to work full-time, has been taken on. I fully understand why this has happened but wish I'd known just how much weight would be attached to the ability to make early morning meetings – I wouldn't have applied. Neatly, the interviewers attached more weight to knowing/understanding internal NHS procedure, than to the individual abilities candidates could bring to the work. This means that the department who invited me to apply have technically done their bit by appearing to encourage me, but I was always the less-well-qualified interviewee.

2.30 p.m. Playground is full of shrieking children in Santa hats and reindeer ears. Can't help but feel stitched up, humiliated and embarrassed, all at once. Wish I had never told Vincent, or the other mums I am friends with. Their hugs and sympathy make me feel even more of a loser.

One week later. I'm debating whether to file this diary entry. There is a danger that what I have written will

read like sour grapes, and yes, of course I am bitter, because I wanted the job and was judged to be less well suited than the internal candidate. I don't know anything about them. For all I know, she or he might also be the parent of a child with complex needs, and be able to offer just as much as I in terms of service user experience. But you know what? I'm not ashamed of how I am feeling. It's OK to want to take my experience in the child development field and use it to benefit other parents. It's also OK that there are jobs out there that can only be done by someone who has the childcare arrangements to work full-time hours. I was the right person, but in the wrong vacancy.

More soon...

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If you would like to make contact with Deborah please contact TAC interconnections.