

# SANDRA DE LACY

## LIFE BEGINS . . . .

Dear Children,

I am writing this letter from row 5 of K-Mart. It is Thursday night shopping and the trolleys are piled high. The woman ahead has four dozen cans of soft drink, four litres of Raspberry Twirl ice cream and fourteen tins of sardines. Plus t-shirts, engine oil, and a rose bush. The label says: Mrs John Laing. Description: pink, with plump but very shapely buds which curl back their petal edges, then open in a very modern style to full fragrant flowers on good stems.

*I can see her: Mrs John Laing is plump and shapely with soft white skin. She stands beside a small table. On the table is a large birthday cake decorated with the numbers, three and nine; and a bottle of Veuve Clicquot. She is holding a fluted champagne glass and smiling in the middle of Mr John Laing's garden. I think she's waiting for something to happen. Perhaps she's waiting for the camera.*

In row 5 we are also waiting for something to happen. The man behind me is wilting badly over the control bar. He nervously consults his list and checks it against the brown rice, mineral water, Whiskettes, low fat yoghurt, croissants and celery.

Children cry for bubble gum (just like you used to) and mothers pull them back by the seat of their pants, or latch onto a plait. One child sits cross-legged among the frozen food department. I have vague memories of some Sunday School teacher ruining a perfectly good Sunday with a story about a martyr who spent the night in below freezing temperatures rather than renounce his new-found religion.

"It's disgusting isn't it?" An older woman pauses next to me. "People have to eat the frozen peas, sweet corn, and crumb coated sea food bites she's sitting on. Look where her feet are. Right on top of Sara Lee's strawberry cheese cake."

Is she serious? Or is it a ploy to jump the queue in front of me? While I ponder these things she wheels her overflowing trolley into the next row. But that's not why I'm writing to you. No, I'm writing to explain why I'm having these groceries delivered instead of bringing them home myself as I normally do.

By the time you get this letter I should be on my way to Nepal. Thai Airlines to Bangkok, then on to Katmandu to study meditation and levitation. Oh, there are some overdue library books on my bedside table. Would one of you please return them before they send the book replacement fees.

There's also a chance of a job with Mystical Eastern Tours — as a guide for English speaking tourists on their Shangri-La quest. Perhaps this time next year my grocery list will be in Nepali. I'll send you a postcard as soon as I arrive.

The man behind me has dropped out crying. Apparently he'd forgotten the toothpaste and packets of ground coriander and fenugreek seeds.

"My life won't be worth living," he said clutching his chest. But bravely he pulled himself together and left his trolley unattended. That was half an hour ago. I was just about to move his trolley down for him but this man behind me said, "Don't waste your sympathy, he's probably been seduced by the deli chick. Happened to me once." And bulldozed his trolley out of the line.

I'm going to miss the cat. Out of guilt, I suppose, I bought three packets of his favourite biscuits: Seafood cocktail recipe now with extra prawns. It's funny what we buy. For instance, this fellow . . . the one who shoved the other poor fellow out of the line . . . all he has in his trolley is dog and cat food. For the dog, tins of Pal Meaty Bites and Dine Steak 'n Kidney. The cat has No Name tuna.

"My cat won't eat that brand," I say, just passing the time. "For a whole week he refused to eat that brand."

He smiles, at least I think it's a smile. Somehow he reminds me of a bull terrier. It's the eyes.

"He would have after three weeks." He eyes off the Go Cat in my trolley. "After the third week they'll eat it."

"What about your dog?"

"What?"

"Why doesn't your dog get No Name Steak 'n Kidney?"

"Arthur?" he says. "He's a pure bred. A gun dog. Yer gotta look after gun dogs. Especially when the duck season's on."

*Mr John Laing stands at the window of his study nursing a well oiled shotgun. The study walls are lined with prints of gun dogs, some pointing, some with a mouth full of limp duck. There are no dogs or ducks outside Mr John Laing's garden; only Mrs John Laing's cat which rubs against silk stockinged legs.*

"Bloody cat's useless." The duckhunter goes to spit on the highly polished vinyl floor, thinks better of it, and lights a cigarette instead. "The wife likes it though. Says it keeps her company." Smoke wafts through the air conditioned atmosphere. "Bloody useless thing. If I had my way I'd give it a cement sandwich."

His eyes narrow as he puffs away. "Still, keeps her company, I suppose."

"Would you mind putting out that cigarette?" The woman with the soft drinks and the rose leans against my trolley.

He stares above my head. "Course when I go hunting the old cat comes in handy."

The woman is leaning heavily against the un-iced sponge which I'd placed carefully on the top rack to avoid damage from the Queensland Blue pumpkin. "Excuse me," she repeats. "Would you please put out that cigarette."

"He's good company for her. She gets nervous on her own at night." He turns to the woman: "Do you get nervous on your own at night?"

"Can't you read?" She points at a No Smoking sign. "I'm going to get the manager." She is leaning so heavily against my trolley (and your sponge cake) it begins to move backwards, starting a chain reaction; the last one knocks a few pot plants off a Special stand.

He watches them fall, nodding in their direction. "Do you know, I was listening to the radio the other day . . . there was this gardening programme . . . and this bloke was saying that half the deciduous plants you get from the supermarket are dead when you buy them." He blows smoke towards my trolley. "Check the fibrous roots. That's how you tell. Well, you can't tell from the leaves, can you? Not in winter."

*Mrs John Laing smiles demurely at the duckhunter and sips her champagne although her blue eyes do not smile.*

When the woman comes back the duckhunter has finished his fag. The butt is under his shoe. The sponge cake is wrecked and the woman looks unhealthily pink cheeked.

"You should watch your blood pressure." He crosses his arms against the brass buttons of his denim jacket.

The manager takes one look at the barrel chested duckhunter, sniffs the air apprehensively and walks on quickly.

Further down the line behind the aisle with the peanut butter special, children hang from a trolley by their toes and fingers and begin to sing:

*Why are we waiting  
Slowly dehydrating . . .*

Which reminds me. I feel very thirsty. Normally, I don't drink soft drink; all those calories. But if I'm quick I could grab a couple of cans of low cal Pepsi or mineral water. I might ask the duckhunter if he'd like one; keep him on side. Don't want to be pushed out of the queue.

He doesn't drink that rubbish, he says. Bad for the arteries. And why would he pay for bloody water in a bottle when he can get it free from a tap. He keeps glancing at his watch in a meaningful fashion. I'd better sprint.

God, what an experience. I've got to tell you. Here I am, weaving among the trolleys and children lying asleep on the floor, hurdling tiny bodies and bobbing heads when I look around to see the duckhunter starting to nudge my trolley sideways. No time to stop for the low cal stuff. I grab anything and gallop back. One little child bobs up as I leap over her. My foot and her head collide. She starts bawling.

I stop. "Sorry," I pat her cute little pony tail. She bawls more loudly. "Where's your mother?" She points towards a woman stooping to pick up one of the fallen rose bushes. Clumsily she bumps another which rolls to my feet. The bold type says: Mrs John Laing. I tuck the rose bush under my arm and look up to see the duckhunter who's almost edged out my trolley. The bastard.

But the non-smoking lady of the soft drinks and rose bush is on my side. She is pushing back the trolley. Leaning over it again, I might add. So much for the sponge cake. But she's holding her own.

"Thanks, thanks very much," I say and throw the duckhunter a withering glance.

I open the can of soft drink. It squirts all over the duckhunter. Tiny drops cling to his sandy eyebrows.

"Shit," he yells. He thinks it's deliberate.

I am pleased about the rose I'm about to buy although I wonder if all the roses on special are Mrs John Laings.

*In the garden a hand reaches across the screen and offers her a spade, a plain one with the paint peeling off the handle. She smiles quizzically at the spade: there are no instructions for planting. Or perhaps she's smiling at the hand.*

In the kitchen you'll find a Sunset edition on How to Grow Roses in between Cooking for Your Life and Cooking the Indian Way. Chapter two is on planting. Please study this chapter carefully. Don't forget to choose a spot which gets plenty of sunlight and shelter from the Westerlies. It's quite well grown so if you look after it properly it should bloom beautifully next spring.

Try not to sleep in, Bartholomew. I've bought another alarm clock so now you have three. This one's battery operated just in case of power failures although I know you prefer to wake to muzak. I know your father seems totally self sufficient as he involves himself with the passing seasons; cricket and football with a sprinkling of racing year

round. And of course the newspaper. But don't be fooled. He enjoys a chat during the commercials.

It will soon be my turn. The man behind is getting very impatient. I'm afraid the sponge is a shambles, Louise. Don't let them bully you into doing all the cooking, although I know eating Bartholomew's food will be a test of courage.

Another thing I forgot to do, was to retrieve Great Grandmamma from behind the chest of drawers. She fell down when I was putting away those lurid coloured briefs with matching singlets your father went out and bought a week ago. After years of sensible white. Perhaps I was tugging the drawer harder than usual. She's near the corner. Don't leave her there too long in case the moths get at her. I meant to take her along to a specialist in Melbourne to touch her up; it was one of those things I never got round to doing. It's funny after all these years he should go and buy his own underwear. Will you please see to Great Grandmamma, Louise? I know she may seem totally irrelevant to your life now but don't let Daddy throw her out, you'll regret it in a few years' time. After all she is your great great grandmamma. I suggest you get her framed in something dark and sober.

And I want you to be especially careful Louise. I know you think it's ages but really thirty nine is just around the corner. Oh I know you think you've got it all together; everybody says what a well adjusted young woman you are. I know you've always said to me: age is all in the mind. "Up here," you'd point. But spare a thought Louise, for Mrs John Laing in her husband's rose garden.

On my thirty ninth birthday I waited till you and Bartholomew went to school and your father was at work and then I looked in the mirror. For the first time in years I had a really good look. And I remember thinking: God. Next year I jump another statistical barrier. And how unfair it was. Apart from a criss-cross of fine lines under the eyes there was this enormous pimple on my chin and one forming on my cheek. The worst of adolescence combined with the worst of ageing. Well, I said to the woman who stared back at me, does it really matter? The next day I decided it did, so I went out and bought a whole new wardrobe, got a brand new haircut, had a facial, a massage, enrolled in a slim 'n trim programme and a course in cosmetics. The first night of my slim 'n trim programme I somehow ended up in the wrong room and there was this film on the Himalayas. It looked so wonderful I just sat there.

You should do that course, Louise, that one you always say you want to do but never get around to doing because you'd have to give up your job and then you'd lose your super; the one on computer graphics. They say that's the area to be in. You never know where it might lead. "They" was actually my computer teacher. Did I ever tell you? Just one

of those courses you do through television and correspondence. You'd have liked him. My friend Myra and I liked him. She was also doing the course. We'd sit there in front of the television, pens poised, dressed to the nines and hang on every word he breathed about systems analysis, data bases, spreadsheets, cobol. I'd never realized how exciting and sensual words like M-S DOS could be. You try it. M-S D-O-S. It travels smoothly over the tongue, doesn't it?

His name was John Latimer. I doubt if he and Mr Laing have much in common.

*Mr John Laing does not speak. He strokes the gun and avoids the camera: he sits half submerged in a plush leather chair, staring across the vast expanse of his study, through the window, beyond the marble columns of the new mock Georgian mansion to the rose garden where Mrs John Laing smiles, heedless of the problems of black spot, downy mildew, rust, when to prune, how much to prune; and supermarkets.*

The man who went looking for the toothpaste and fenugreek has just been carted down the aisle marked Omo, Active, Pine O Cleen and Mr Sheen. He's on a stretcher with a paramedic in a white coat holding his hand. Or is it the deli chick? No, the paramedic is dangling a packet of ground fenugreek seeds in front of the prostrate man's eyes which are glazed and see nothing.

Soon it'll be my turn. Just another thing. Water the Mrs John Laing as soon as it arrives and plant it out tomorrow. Remember roses need a sheltered position with lots of sun. Next year when it's in bloom send me a photo.

And Bartholomew, please don't overlook the cobwebs. You know how easily they fill the corners of those high ceilings. You're the only one tall enough to reach and it's always been your job. Your father will vacuum before guests come if you ask him. But he'll never dust. He says he likes spiders: he doesn't want to be responsible for knocking down their homes. So don't forget the cobwebs or else the spiders will take over.

My turn next, kids. Will send you a postcard from Bangkok.

Your loving mother.

P.S. Sorry about the sponge cake.

