



I crouch down on the pavement . . . and gasp.

I'm looking at a perfect, dainty clock face, painted on to an imperfect circle of dried-up old chewing gum.

The smaller of the feathery black hands is pointing to twelve, while the longer one is just about to catch up with it.

Around the edge of the clock face, there's some spidery, swirly writing.

It reads: Countdown to happiness!

Shivers of shock ripple through me.

(It's good that I'm kneeling down, otherwise I might just fall over.)

So . . . the happiness clock is real.

Tiny.

Made of gum.

But real.

*And there I was, thinking it was just some nuts idea
that existed in the privacy of my head.*

*(The blood pounds in my ears like a demented tick-
tock.)*

Why have I found this?

What is it trying to tell me?

Is it some kind of clue?

A message?

*Wouldn't it be funny if it was trying to let me know
that it was time for my stupid, spiky life to change. . . ?*

Chapter 1

Ten Things I Hate

1. People who argue.

Especially parents.

2. People arguing who say they aren't.

They come out with stuff like, “But Edie, we’re not *really* arguing! We’re just . . . *discussing* things!” Yeah, like everyone enjoys “discussing things” in loud voices, while throwing mugs at each other’s heads.

3. Nits.

The only specialist hair product a girl my age (thirteen) should have is a super-shine serum. Me? I have super-strength nit shampoo, thanks to having a six-year-old brother called Stan whose school seems to double as a petting zoo for head lice.

4. Grown girls with teddies on their beds.

What's that all about? Soft toys are for little kids, like Stan. My best friend, Tash, has one of those sad-looking, grey furry bears that are meant to melt your heart. It makes me want to get a pair of scissors and go into a slashing frenzy.

5. Films with happy endings you can see coming a mile off.

Mum loves making me watch them with her once Stan's gone to bed. As the kiss is about to happen for the man and woman who've spent the last hour and a half huffing with each other, my mum will be crying and *I* will be trying not to vomit at the cutesiness of it all.

6. False nails.

They creep me out. A bunch of sixth-form girls wear them at school and think they look beyond excellent. And I guess they *are* beyond excellent, if you're into having something that looks like alien lobster claws. Our fourth or fifth nanny had them too. She'd drum those weird square nails on the granite kitchen worktop whenever she wanted to kill me.

7. Sleeping on the top bunk.

It gives me vertigo, it really does. That's so lame, isn't it? I offered Stan a month's pocket money or a new Star Wars Lego set to swap, but he said no. Then I offered him a month's pocket money AND a new Star Wars Lego set and he STILL said no. At least I've only got to do it at Dad's place.

At Mum's, I've got to put up with the stupid old clock in the hall that Nana gave to us when she downsized and moved into her bungalow. I used to quite like it when it sat on her glass china cabinet. I hate it now, 'cause I lie awake in middle of the night, listening to its loud tick-tock, marking off the minutes like some ominous clock of *doom*.

8. Yellow.

Too ridiculously cheerful for its own good. The colour Mum painted my room without asking, just after she split with Dad. I think it was meant to lift my spirits. As if I'd be so wowed by the daffodilly shade that I might not notice Dad wasn't living with us any more.

9. Cheese.

Especially when it's melted. Though I guess it's fine if you like eating something that tastes like warm,

orange elastic bands. I've lost count of the nannies who've flipped out 'cause I've said no to pizza. "But *every* kid loves pizza!" they say. "Not THIS kid. . ." I'll mumble, while I shove my plate away and stick my nose back in my book.

10. BFPs.

"I do not, repeat do *not*, need a nanny!" I told Mum, when she dropped the bombshell about *paying* people to pick up me and Stan from school.

I really resent the fact that Mum (*and* Dad) don't trust me to look after *myself*, never mind Stan.

And I *loathe* the word "nanny", though it's better than "babysitter" or "childminder", since I'm not a baby *or* a child, obviously.

What I *have* been since Mum and Dad split up is one very angry teenager.

An angry teenager who can spot a BFP (Big Fat Phoney) a mile off. The nannies; the stupidly *huge* amount of nannies we've ended up having: every single one of them has been a BFP. They've all pretended they like children. Or at least pretended to Mum and Dad that they like me and Stan.

Of course they don't, as me and Stan like to prove,

what with our gentle torturing and intimidation and everything. . .

But hey, nobody wants to hear me moaning and grouching about things I hate, do they?

Specially Mum and Dad, who're *very* busy people.

Busy with their hectic work schedules and sniping at each other.

So I'll keep the moaning and grouching to myself.

Or offload a little to my best friend Tash.

Or better still, go to the top of the nearest mountain and YELL my worries into the wind!

Pity I live in the centre of a city without a mountain in sight.

OK, so let's add one *more* thing to my "Things I Hate" list. . .

11. Not getting what I want.

Like handy local mountains, parents who like each other and a family that's vaguely happy.

But, hey, I guess it's asking too much to expect that stuff.

Right?

"Right," sighs the world, with a shrug of its shoulders. . .

Chapter 2

Life As We Know It

If only, if only, if only. . .

If only it was just me and Stan at home.

4.30 p.m.: I could leave my after-school club early.

4.45 p.m.: I could pick up my little brother from his.

By 5 p.m., I could be lying on the sofa reading, with Radio One burbling in the background and a huge bag of nachos by my side.

Stan could be scuttling about on his bedroom floor, constructing his latest Lego mega-structure while popping M&M's.

Instead, we're trapped here with a large woman called Miranda who insists on . . .

- a) cooking us a variation of the same terrible tea every night (burnt burgers and chips,

- burnt burgers and rice, burnt burgers and pasta. . .)
- b) having the TV tuned into stupid shopping channels the whole time, and . . .
 - c) chatting about the offers they have on there (like me and Stan are remotely interested in state-of-the-art electric tin openers and tummy-trimming granny pants).

Miranda is the latest in a long, *long* line of nannies who've looked after me and my brother while Mum works.

That's if we're staying at Mum's.

If we're staying at Dad's, we get picked up from school by Cheryl. Cheryl is addicted to chewing gum and texting, which sounds a lot quieter than Miranda's shopping channels, but the constant *sneck, sneck, sneck* of chewing and tapping can send you *mad*.

A few hours of looking after/ignoring/irritating us later, Miranda (or Cheryl or whoever) will do the Big Fat Phoney routine, smiling sweetly at Mum or Dad as they come in the door, patting Stan on the head like he's some kind of dog and pretending it's been a total delight to spend time with us.

Yeah, *right*.

Though try getting Mum or Dad to see that. They'd rather believe a brain-dead gum-chewer or a shopping channel addict than us.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, is life as we know it for me and Stan.

How tragic is that?

"Edie . . . you're *scratching* again!"

Miranda's voice booms like a foghorn across the room. She could say, "Edie, you've won a year's supply of cash and nachos!" and I'd still be grinding my teeth at the very sound of all that booming.

If she turned down the telly for once, maybe she'd be able to speak at a normal volume. But the TV roars away, only getting switched off a couple of minutes before Mum is due back. That way, she walks into a flat that seems to be some calm oasis of well-fed kids, quietly doing their homework. (Phoney, phoney, phoney. . .)

"We have some little visitors *again*, do we?" Miranda nags on.

"Little visitors?" I repeat, pretending I haven't a clue what she means.

"*Nits*, Edie!" Miranda spells out. "Have you got nits again? I saw you scratching just now. . ."

“I wasn’t scratching. I was running my fingers through my hair,” I tell her.

I try running my fingers through my hair now, in the hope that it’ll make my lie seem true. But I can see from the reflection in the computer screen that it’s not looking too convincing; I’m wincing at the knots at the back. I’ve taken to brushing just the top of my hair and hoping no one spots the matted bits I can’t be bothered to sort out underneath.

“Hmmm. . .” I hear Miranda mutter, as she bustles off to the kitchen to scrub the burnt frying pan.

“You *were* scratching,” Stan comes and whispers in my ear.

The reflection of his freckly face is right beside mine on the computer screen. With our little and large heads together like this, it makes a handy bridge for all his brand new nits to wander across into the exciting new territory of my hair, where they can hook up with the current batch who are driving me INSANE.

“Edie!” shrills Miranda, reappearing in the doorway. “You hardly ate any of your tea!”

She says this while holding out my untouched plate and staring at the woman on the telly

demonstrating all the ways you can wear this season's on-trend snood.

"Did you know," I begin, ignoring Miranda's statement, "that seventy-three per cent of people who order from shopping channels get themselves into debt, buying stuff they don't need?"

"Oh!" gasps Miranda, sounding worried. "Is that a fact?"

"Yes."

No, it isn't.

I just made it up.

I enjoy unnerving nannies with random, untrue facts. And because I'm always either on the computer or reading, they seem to believe me. The fools.

"What does 'in debt' mean?" asks Stan.

"People spending money they don't have," I explain.

"Oh. Are you in debt?" Stan asks Miranda.

"Yes, *are* you?" I add bluntly.

Miranda is all red-cheeked and flustered. Adults can't stand talking about money. It's like asking them to show you their knickers. But I am very good at asking embarrassing questions with a straight face, and making nannies squirm.

The trick is to act very serious, so they can't accuse you of being cheeky.

It's excellent fun.

"Well . . . I . . . I mean, no!" Miranda flusters. "And anyway, it's not really any of your business!"

"Sorry," I apologize, straight-faced. "I didn't mean to upset you. You're right; if you're having money troubles, it really isn't any of our business. . ."

"I don't have 'money troubles', Edie! And if I did, I'd hardly be telling *you!*" says Miranda, stomping back into the kitchen.

Great. I've got her fizzing. Now to go in for the kill.

I look around and spot Stan's empty glass of milk. I pick it up and take it through to the kitchen, pretending I'm just being terribly helpful.

Stan – my ever-willing accomplice – trots after me.

"You know, if you're worried about money, perhaps you should think about getting a better paid job, Miranda," I suggest, putting the glass in the dishwasher.

"I'm NOT worried about money, Edie *dear!*" she says snippily, scraping the cremated burger and beans into the bin.

“Doesn’t Mummy pay you very much?” Stan asks Miranda, tilting his head to the side and staring up with innocent six-year-old eyes.

“Now, it’s not polite to ask how much people earn, Stanley!” Miranda tells him, clattering the plate into the sink so hard I think it might have cracked.

“Especially when people are having money troubles, Stan,” I add.

“Edie! I do NOT have money troubles!” snaps Miranda, now picking up the blackened frying pan from the cooker hob. “How many times do I have to say it?!”

She is one step away from losing it, I’m sure. Just one more little push. . .

“Sorry. I know when people are worried about money it can very stressful.”

“FOR THE LAST TIME!” Miranda shouts at me. “WILL YOU SHUT UP ABOUT—”

She stops dead and stares at Mum, who’s standing in the kitchen doorway with her keys in her hand and a “Surprise! I’m home early!” expression on her face fading into something altogether darker.

Perfecto!

Couldn’t have timed that better myself.

I mean. . .

- TV blaring? (Check.)
- Scarlet-faced nanny yelling at me and Stan? (Check.)
- Scarlet-faced nanny brandishing a frying pan? (Check.)

Miranda is *history*.

“That’s it!” grunts Miranda. “No more! I’ve had enough of these children, Mrs Henderson. You can keep your job!”

Mum says nothing – just holds out her hand for the spare keys, like she’s done so many times before.

With much huffing and puffing, Miranda grabs her jacket and bag, rifles for the keys in her pocket, hands them to Mum, then bumbles out into the hall without a backwards glance but with a dramatic slam of the door.

“*What* happened there?” asks Mum, walking over to the TV and switching it off, just as the phoney presenter holds up the tackiest, ugliest piece of jewellery I’ve ever seen and describes it as “exquisite”.

“You didn’t believe us, Mum!” I begin. “But that’s what she’s always like – she just sits watching the shopping channels or else she’s shouting at us!”

That was half a lie and half a truth, so I don't feel *too* terrible.

Especially if it means we're one step closer to our number one wish: me and Stan, to be left *alone*. . .

"Well, she might not have been perfect," sighed Mum. "But what am I going to do now?"

"Listen, I can pick up Stan from his after-school club and look after him here!" I offer, for the four hundredth time. (One of these days, Mum's going to crack and say "OK", I hope.)

"But Edie, you're only just thirteen!" Mum tells me, as if I didn't know it. "You have homework to concentrate on, and friends to see after school sometimes. What happens if you want to go round to Tash's?"

"Stan can come with me! Tash likes Stan."

"I can be quiet! I could just take some Lego with me!" Stan chips in.

But Mum's not listening to us. She's flopped herself up against the sink and has her head in her hands. She's done that a lot in the last few months.

"Hey, what's up?" comes Dad's voice.

Mum's head snaps up.

"What are you doing here, Neil?" she asks, all bristly.

“I’m just on my way to a meeting. Stan left his PE kit at mine last night, so I thought I’d better drop it off on the way,” he answers, holding up a blue nylon bag. “And as tomorrow’s Thursday, he’ll need it, won’t you, tiger?”

Dad ruffles Stan’s hair, and Stan growls happily on cue.

“How did you get in here, Neil?” she asks.

Mum now sounds growly, but not in a fun way.

“With these, of course!” he laughs, holding up his set of flat keys, the ones with the “World’s Best Dad” motto dangling from them.

Mum is staring at him as if he is the world’s worst soon-to-be ex-husband.

“Neil – they are for *emergencies*. You can’t come and go as you like. It’s not your home any more!”

Our flat hasn’t been Dad’s home for three and a half months (and four days, if you want to get technical). Not since the night Mum threw his favourite Arsenal mug at his head (there’s still a dent where it hit – the wall, not his head, thank goodness).

He went to live with his mate Eric after that, till he got his flat in that new block overlooking the canal. That’s where we stay every Tuesday and

Friday night now, plus all day Saturday. Dad tells people that this is his “quality time” with us, which is a good description, I guess, if you think watching your dad working on his computer while you catalogue strange things floating in the canal counts as “quality time”.

Mum fibs quite a lot as well – she tells everyone that the split is “amicable”. In most dictionaries, “amicable” means “friendly”. But Mum obviously uses a *different* dictionary, one where “amicable” means “horrible”.

“OK, Justine, message understood,” says Dad, holding his hands up in surrender. “From now on, I will ring the doorbell. Or maybe phone first, to see if I have your *permission* to ring the doorbell. Or would you like me to get *my* solicitor to get in touch with *your* solicitor, to see if it’s all right for me to return Stan’s sports bag?”

“There’s no need for that, Neil!” Mum says sharply.

Right, time for me and Stan to go. Listening to your parents having hissy fits with each other is about as much of a laugh as getting sand kicked in your eyes.

“Come on,” I say to Stan, pulling him by the

sleeve of his school shirt. “Let’s leave Mum and Dad to enjoy their argument. . .”

“We’re not *arguing*, Edie!” they burst out at the same time, then get flustered with shock at agreeing on something for once. Even if it happens to be a lie.

“Whoops – silly me for thinking that you were!” I say sarcastically.

Stan nuzzles into my side. He goes pretty silent at times like these.

“Your dad and I get on fine,” Mum announces. “Don’t we, Neil?”

“Yes, of course!” Dad replies, through gritted teeth.

Wow, how lousy is it when your own parents are world-class BFPs?

“In fact, Neil – I’m glad you’re here,” Mum carries on, widening her mouth in what I think is supposed to look like a smile. “I just found out that I have to go away for a work conference on the Saturday after next, to plan the new design range. I won’t be back till late, so would you be all right to have Edie and Stan stay for two nights instead of one?”

“Well . . . *no*, actually,” Dad answers bluntly. “I was going to ask *you* to have the kids that Saturday! I’ve got a really important meeting with a new client

then. It's out of town, so I might have to stay over and—”

Mum's fake smile flicks off. “And when were you planning to tell me about this?”

Uh-oh, here we go again. I nudge Stan and, arms around each other, we take a few backwards steps, like we're doing a three-legged race in reverse.

“I only just had it confirmed ten minutes ago!” Dad says defensively, brandishing his BlackBerry. “You're not the *only* one with a career, you know, Justine!”

“Yeah, a career I can't do properly because you keep letting me down, and now Miranda has just walked out and—”

“Well, it's hardly *my* fault if—”

CLUNK!

I shut the kitchen door and shut out the sniping.

“Stress snack?” I suggest to Stan.

“Mmm,” he mumbles, looking up at me with his Malteser eyes.

We head off to my room, where we'll raid the box under the bed that I keep my stash of KitKats, Rolos and other assorted yumminess in. There's a handwritten note taped to the top of the box that says: “EDIE AND STAN'S EMRGIZEE CHOCLIT –

HANDS OF!” (Hopefully, you’ll have a pretty good idea which one of us wrote that.)

I came up with the idea of stress snacks when our parents gave up on saving their arguments till after Stan went to bed.

It was obviously around the time I gave up on trying to pretend to my little brother that everything was OK with our family.

Speaking of time, as we slouch off towards my room and the awaiting emergency chocolate (Snickers for me, Mars Bar for Stan) the antique clock of doom on the hall table chimes to let us know it’s quarter past five.

With every dull, slightly out-of-tune chime that old clock makes, my heart sinks.

It arrived when my parents started fighting more, and it’s like a permanent reminder (*tick-tock, tick-tock*) that there’s something wrong, all wrong, with our family.

You know, sometimes I feel like picking it up and chucking it out of the window. How great would it feel to see it smashed to pieces and silent on the pavement?

Then me and Stan could go shopping for a *new* clock. One that’s bright, shiny white instead of old,

dark wood. One that tinkles prettily on the hour, making a sound that almost gets you giggling.

A clock that makes you excited about what's coming next, instead of dreading it.

Yep, that's what me and Stan need: a happiness clock.

But what's the point of wishing for things that don't exist or will never happen?

It's better not to think about the future.

All I can do is try and make the here and now OK for Stan.

"D'you want my Snickers bar too?" I whisper to my brother, as I push my bedroom door open.

"Yay!" Stan yells in a whisper back.

"One condition," I add. "Just don't be sick afterwards. . ."

See? I am *such* a caring sister.