

“You might not want to be Liz Jones, but you’ll relish her talent to amuse and enrage” *The Times*

Liz Jones

Girl least likely to

“As pieces of entertainment, Jones’ polemics are hard to beat”

Metro

“A riveting read, witty and frank”

Observer

“Compellingly readable”

Evening Standard

“Horribly enjoyable”

Sunday Express



“She may have turned herself into the greatest comedy character since Alan Partridge” *Sunday Times Magazine*

GIRL
LEAST LIKELY TO

GIRL
LEAST LIKELY TO

Thirty years of fashion, fasting
and Fleet Street

Liz Jones



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For my mum

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liz Jones is Fashion Editor of the Daily Mail, and a columnist for the Mail on Sunday. She is the former editor of Marie Claire, which sounds quite an achievement, but she was sacked three years in. A psychotherapist once told her, ‘What you brood on will hatch’, and she was right. Nothing she ever did in life ever worked out. Nothing. Not one single thing.

This memoir chronicles Liz’s childhood in Essex, the youngest of seven children with a mum who was both a martyr and disabled, a dad so handsome and dashing no other man she ever met lived up to his impossible pressed and polished standards. Her older brothers were hippies or, as her dad called them, long-haired layabouts, bloody hooligans. Liz was not like her siblings. They terrified her, with their Afghan coats, cigarettes, parties, sex and drugs. They made her father shout, and her mother cry. She was, is,

painfully shy, and became a borderline anorexic aged 11, having been force-fed brown bread toast and homemade marmalade by her mum since birth, which she learned was bad for her in the pages of her sisters' *Petticoat*, and *Cosmopolitan*, *19* and *Honey*. In 1975 Liz discovered *VOGUE*. From then on, it was always, always *VOGUE*.

Liz's start in journalism did not augur well: her first proper job was at *Lyons Mail*, staff of two, the newspaper for employees of Joe Lyons & Sons' tea shops and factories, during which she was forced to wear a hair net and blue plastic covers on her shoes. After a few halcyon years on *Company* magazine, during which she compiled a pop quiz and was sent to review a spa on the English Riviera, she then spent several dark years on the weekly magazine *Woman's Realm*, where she attempted to learn to knit her own Christmas pudding, and tied the entire population of post-menopausal British women in an impenetrable knot with her lack of attention to detail. At last, she made it to Fleet Street, where she put a curse on designer Ossie Clark for almost getting her sacked from *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and later upon the glossy, double-headed hydra of Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher, who invoked a very Leveson assault on Liz's email box, the trauma of which she has yet to recover from.

She was named Columnist of the Year 2012 by the British Society of Magazine Editors (the BSME awards, known colloquially as the Mad Cow gongs), but spoiled the moment by tripping up the stairs to accept the award in her cream, span-

gled Louboutins and over-long, strapless, Bottega Veneta dress that refused to stay up, given Liz had her pendulous, NHS-propagated breasts cut off aged 30. She was heard to mutter, as she posed for photos accepting the award, arms clamped to her sides to prevent exposure of her transplanted nipples (the plastic surgeon had to relocate them, for all the world as if he were Phil Spencer), ‘How does Sarah Jessica Parker do it? How?’

The not-so-private life is all here, too: she remained a virgin until her thirties, and even then found the wait wasn’t really worth it, as the sex wasn’t good; she found it tiring, just one more thing to add to her ‘to do’ list. Anyway, she is too repressed to ever really let go. She doesn’t enjoy being seen naked from different angles. She is famously barren – her womb, despite the posters of Paul Newman and David Cassidy on her bedroom wall and the decades of longing, has never been used. Perhaps she could take it back? She lives alone with her four rescued collies (Michael, Jess, Grace Kelly and Mini Puppy), three horses and 17 cats, including Susie, Sweetie, Minstrel, Leo, Boy and Mummy Cat, in an undisclosed location. Despite three decades of Pilates and much plastic surgery, she still has a stress-fat tummy. She has been called ‘the Queen of confessional journalism’ by Radio 4, has three million dedicated readers of her column about her so-called life in the *Mail on Sunday*’s *YOU* magazine, but is still too frightened to answer the telephone, too filled with disgust at her own image to ever look at her byline photo, or listen to her voice, or glance in the mirror, or eat a whole

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avocado. This book is the opposite of *Having It All*, and makes a mockery of the shiny-haired L'Oreal mantra, 'Because I'm Worth It'. It is a life lesson in how NOT to be a woman.

‘My girls are the vertical owners of mink coats’

Norman Parkinson

‘Didn’t you think it strange he was married, but still couldn’t get a date on New Year’s Eve?’

Diane Keaton, talking about Woody Allen’s
character in *Play It Again, Sam*

Introduction

‘I’M GETTING BETTER.
THANK YOU’

I went to visit my mum today. She is in her old bedroom, still in the semi-detached Sixties’ house she shared with my dad in Saffron Walden in Essex, but the room could now be anywhere. Or at least, anywhere inside an institution. Her bedroom furniture has been taken away – the double divan, the heavy, dark dressing table – as the carers found it to be in the way, too low, too high, too heavy. Basically, my mum’s pride and joy, Pledged over many decades, contravened health and safety. She is, instead, in a narrow hospital cot, with metal bars on each side, a hoist above her hovering like an obscene child’s mobile. It twinkles, I suppose, when someone has bothered to open the curtains (a ritual that began

and ended my mum's every day, while she could still wield a mop to shove the heavy, oak curtain pole back up into place, given it always drooped with the weight of the blue velvet). But rather than being a comfort, the mobile-hoist hybrid is a constant reminder of her infirmity.

Everything in the room is the colour of her dentures, which she no longer wears, given she no longer eats solids. There are pads and wipes and cotton wool and anti-bac gels everywhere, as though she were a giant baby. She is served tiny spoons of baby food by a Latvian carer who shouts, from time to time, 'How are you feeling today, Meesees Jones?' A lifelong tea addict, her only liquid is lukewarm water, syringed from a small pipette into her gaping maw; a mouth like that of a long-neglected baby bird. Occasionally, the water hits the back of her throat and she splutters. She can no longer watch TV, even if she could ever find her glasses (a lifelong quest), or listen to the radio, so these last ornaments of normality have been excised. She doesn't really know it is me, her youngest child, her baby, her Lizzie (her other children were summoned with a roll call – ClarePhilipNickLynTonySue – until she hit upon the right one, but she always knew it was me) sitting by her bed, my silver laptop a shield from her torment.

I sit watching her. She keeps rubbing her pin head (as a child, she always reminded me of Mrs Peppercorn, her neat, grey bun secured with brown grips) from side to side, so I set aside my laptop and bend over her, scratching the back of her head. It must be that feeling I get when I am prone on a massage table, and my hair has sat in one place for too long on a

folded, fluffy towel. Her left eye is closed, stuck fast with a sort of glue. Having finished the head scratch, my mum now turns her head to look at me with one eye open, still bright blue. She reminds me, a lifelong fashionista, of a cover of *i-D* magazine, in which every celebrity is shot with one eye artfully, inventively obscured. I bet they've never thought of nonagenarian eye glue.

As my mum peers at me, Kate Moss fashion, she doesn't say, 'Who the hell are you?', as she has politeness ingrained into her core, like words in a stick of rock, but she is thinking those words, I'm sure. There is no glimmer of recognition, no indication that she knows it is me, her 'darling'. When the live-in carer and her thrice-daily helper, a girl who looks barely 18, turned my mum on her side to wash her this morning, I saw her back and it appears to be rotting, or at least disintegrating, as though she had been drowned at sea some time ago and has only just been beached on the shore of the NHS. The pain must be considerable but all my mum will murmur to the carers when they place an ear to her mouth is, 'I'm getting better. Thank you.'

She is obviously made of a substance they stopped producing after 1921.

My mum spent all her life working hard: polishing, cooking, mangling, pegging, ironing, pressing, weeding, whisking, Vim-ing, kneading, mixing, mincing (not an affectation, but what you used to do, by hand, to yesterday's Sunday joint), rubbing fire tongs, pokers and door knockers with old Marks knickers soaked in Brasso, and cutlery with Silvo. And she

never once lost her temper with anyone, despite the endless tasks and arthritis. She was patient and self-sacrificing. She never swore, raised her voice, or had a piercing. She never owned a pair of trainers or shaved her underarms or legs, or wore sunglasses, or any garment with an elasticated waist. She couldn't drive a car, didn't even write a cheque until after my dad died ('Cashback? What's that, Dear? Ooh, how marvelous!'). She never had an affair. She was never greedy. The tradition in our house, if we children were working our way through the Quality Street tin at Christmas, was that she wouldn't take her own sweet but would wait, like a well-trained Labrador, until one of us spat ours out with disgust (one with a coffee-flavoured middle, say, or a jelly centre). She would eat that one for us, to avoid waste. If, while she was still sentient, I took her flowers or a box of Bendicks chocolates (I was nothing if not upwardly mobile), at the end of the visit she would always press the gift in my hands, insisting I take it home with me. If I took her fresh peas, she would pop them straight in the freezer. My mum was never about 'now', she was always about tomorrow or, more accurately, the day after tomorrow.

And look where that attitude has got her now. I show her the tulips I have just brought her: 'I'm so lucky,' she whispers. 'Thank you.'

Look, I think, peering at her hollow eye sockets, her open mouth, her fingers with their overlong nails still bearing her mother's diamond engagement ring, where being good for 93 years has got her. A decade alone in a narrow single bed.

Before I leave her that day, I look around downstairs for a bit, mainly for something to do as I find it hard to sit next to her for long periods at a time, holding a hand that is now so soft when as a child it was always rough and scaly from washing up without Marigolds ('Oh, I don't need them'), a texture that meant our hand-knitted sweaters and tank tops were always prematurely pilled. I walk through the rooms, opening cabinets in 'the lounge' that had been her pride and joy, always buffed, looking at her lifetime collection of things that are now all worth so little, and probably always were. Her pale-blue-and-white Wedgwood plates and ornaments, crystal vases that rarely, if ever, held fresh flowers, my dad's silver cufflinks and broken Parker pen, the clock on the mantelpiece that was always slow, or fast, ancient cookery books in the kitchen with black-and-white photos that, as I flick through them, bring back memories of childhood: the Victoria sponge, the rock cakes. Those bloody rock cakes. All I wanted as a child were fairy cakes decorated with silver balls but Mum couldn't afford silver balls; maybe every now and then a Lyons Swiss roll but it was never adulterated with the frivolity of cream, not even buttercream.

I open a drawer in the kitchen and there are the implements my mum used all her life: a rolling pin with one handle missing, a blunt potato peeler. Still, now, and rusting. Around the room there are brown tiles depicting ears of corn that, after 25 years in this rented house, my parents never thought to remove and change for something better, something a bit more tasteful. The tiny, twisted, fake Christmas tree under the

stairs is gone, though, along with the three-dimensional foil star edged with tinsel that I made, having carefully followed the instructions on *Blue Peter*. It was thrown away last summer when my mum was given weeks, if not days, to live. If my mum survives until next Christmas, she won't even have that gaudy monstrosity on the cabinet by her bed to remind her of the years she spent hot in the kitchen, roasting a capon. (I only found out recently that a capon is a big male chicken. We never once had turkey, as turkey was 'too expensive'.)

On the massive hulk of a sideboard with its stack of board games (the chess set had all the tops of the knights and monarchs chewed off by our dog Pompey in his early years) are photos not of us, her seven children, but of her many, many grandchildren and great-grandchildren: 19, approx., at the last reckoning; I've simply lost count. 'We didn't really have cameras in those days,' was my mum's answer when I had queried the lack of evidence of our childhoods. As a teenager, I had vaguely thought I must have been adopted. I open the tallboy and find an old Viyella shirt box. I open it to find it's full of my magazine and newspaper clippings, all in date order, every single one, or at least until 1999 when my mum's brain stopped even though my writing didn't. My mum never told me she had read or seen anything I had written: my parents didn't overly go in for praise. In the Eighties, when I told them I was going to Los Angeles to interview New Jack Swing star and future husband of Whitney Houston, Bobby Brown, my mum phoned me not to say, 'Well done, you are the first

member of our family to go to the United States'; instead, I heard my dad's clipped, Art Deco tones by her side warning me the place was riven with gang crime. But she was proud, it turns out, that I had done slightly more than just avoid being run over by a green number 11 bus on the A130 from Chelmsford to Southend seafront. Maybe that makes the past 30-odd years of my career all worth it. But no. Not quite. As we shall see.

There was one moment of hilarity, though, during my visit. The carer told me Mum had been calling out in the night. 'Robert! Robert!' she had wailed. 'Where are you, Robert?' The carer said she had tried to calm her down, saying, 'There IS no Robert. You are dreaming! There IS no Robert!'

No one had thought to tell the carer the name of my poor mum's dead husband.

Walking back upstairs, turning sideways as I have had to do for more than 15 years due to the Stannah stairlift (my dad would trot up the stairs with his lead hand outstretched, grasping an imaginary partner in a faux tango), I realise that every single thing my mum told me growing up, what she taught me with her stoicism, her uncomplaining nature, her *niceness*, was just not true. Things will not be okay. Things will not come right if I am patient. Life is not cosy as long as the fire is lit and the cheese and biscuits are on the tray and the salt cellar hasn't fallen over yet again. Because if my mum, after a lifetime of sacrifice, of gentleness, of hard work and selflessness, can be condemned to a decade and more spent

prone in her size 18 floral M&S nightie (the other week, a temporary carer, drafted in because the full-time one was on holiday, put on a clean nightie that was slightly too small and it chafed around my mum's arms, giving her red weals: how odd, I thought, watching the Sudocrem be slathered on to the wound, that something so homely and full of mummy-ness as a Marks winceyette nightdress could be so easily turned into an instrument of torture) with not even any thoughts scudding past her closed eyes to keep her company, then what hope the rest of us? If there are any thoughts remaining in my mum's small head, such as whether she's remembered to get the washing in, or picked the mint for the mint sauce from the clump by the washing line, or aired the tea towels, or 'done the fire', or proved the dough, or made a list, or asked Daddy, she finds them so confusing as to be frightening, as she hasn't completed any of them at all.

Who would guess that behind that ordinary front door, in this ordinary house, is something so extreme in its awfulness – worse than Guantanamo Bay, worse than anything else I can think of. How strange that home, which was the only place I was told was safe for me to inhabit, should be a house of horrors. It was always the *outside* world my mum and dad wanted to protect me from. Even when I was grown up, if I told Dad I was planning to go somewhere, he would map the route, then telephone me, telling me the journey I was about to take was 'extremely dangerous'. If I cycled from the rectory in Rettendon along the A130 towards Wickford, a barren place but it had a Woolworths, Millets, library and tennis

court, I would be warned ‘The A130 is the most dangerous road in Essex.’ Even now, jaded and having landed in a foreign clime, my first reflex is to reach for my phone and let my dad know I’ve arrived safely. Three rings (my parents had no truck with unnecessary expensive telephone calls) meant I’d arrived and not been murdered. I imagine any sort of prolonged silence sent them into a spin.

Often, as I sit by Mum’s bed in a dreadful chair that also doubles as the commode she can no longer even sit on, she turns her one eye to me and it is leaking tears. As a child my biggest fear was that my mum would die, but more than once over the last few years I have considered smothering her with her embroidered pillow. Anything to end her torment. I used to pray for my parents every night: ‘Please help my mum, dad, Penny [the rabbit], Guinea [the guinea pig] and Pompey [the randy, flatulent Labrador-Retriever cross].’ I would have to open and close my hands in prayer a certain number of even times, enacting a solitary game of paper, scissors, stone (an OCD tic that continued until I was married but stopped when my husband found my nightly prayers comical and then annoying). If I didn’t pray and count, pray and count, someone close to me would die. I always assumed my mum would topple first, as she seemed the most vulnerable. She was always an invalid; I never knew her as anything else. When I was 11, she went ‘into Broomfield’, a ghastly hospital just outside Chelmsford, to have her neck stretched to help with the pain of arthritis. My dad had to cook while she was away: poached egg in mashed potato. I still can’t eat either.

She had numerous operations: new knees, new hips. Often, she would develop a life-threatening blood clot, which meant she was prescribed ‘anti-establishments’ (coagulants) to thin her blood. She was always an old mummy, not the sort who would go shopping with you in Topshop, or buy you a bra. Now I wish my mum would die before the palliative care funding stops (you’d have thought, mistakenly, it ends with the grave, but no) and she is forced into a care home. She will be buried with my dad (‘On top of him!’ my oldest sister, Clare, said lewdly when we were discussing funeral logistics: how inappropriate, I thought. Mum simply doesn’t do lewd) in the cemetery outside Saffron Walden, just before you get to the giant Tesco, and this ghastly prison sentence will be over. My mum doesn’t want to go into a care home because she thinks Daddy will not be able to find her. After he died, in 1998, my mum says she saw him, downstairs in the hallway, young and handsome in his army uniform. She always wanted to see him again, so wouldn’t dream of leaving the house, even though she is sentient in fleeting moments only.

No one has told Mum that her son, Nick, has died. We buried him in February 2011. The humanist service was held at a ‘green’ burial ground in Essex, just off the M25. Not the most romantic of locations, but everyone buried there gets a tree planted on top of them, along with wild flowers. Lyn’s son, also called Nick, was by now too ill for her to travel home from Australia to be there, but Clare gave a eulogy. She called Pompey ‘Popeye’ and we all laughed at her mistake. Nick’s body was in a cardboard, biodegradable coffin; it seemed tiny.

As he was wheeled outside into the biting wind, Monty Python's 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life' crackled out of the speakers. It was a non-conformist funeral for a man who had never quite fitted the mould.

As well as Monty Python, Nick loved Bach and Bartók. After being sent down from university, he headed to London and, as well as playing with Cockney Rebel, Annie Lennox and Julie Felix, joined a couple of bands – Red Brass and Ascend. I remember seeing him on *The Old Grey Whistle Test*, head bent over his guitar, long, lank hair hiding his face. He didn't look up, once, so uninterested was he in fame, or so diffident, I'm unsure which. Some of his bandmates made it to the funeral. One had brought a review by Chris Welch of a gig Ascend had performed, which read: 'Equal in stature to some of the biggest names in American contemporary music . . . slightly less eccentric than The Spoons.' All these names no one has ever heard of only serve to illustrate how elusive success is. Nick wasn't interested in money. He never owned a property or a credit card or held a driver's licence. At the funeral, a friend recounted how Nick had once gone into a branch of John Lewis, a tale as improbable as being told one of his singles had reached number one. I also found out that, when my brothers and sisters and I had chipped in to pay for our father's funeral, in 1998, Nick had sold his last guitar so that he could do his bit. Not selling out had its drawbacks.

Nick was admitted to hospital over Christmas and died shortly after New Year's Day. Having suffered from pneumonia, he seemed to be rallying, listening to England win the

Ashes, and reading the obituary of his contemporary, Gerry Rafferty. But then he came down with vomiting and diarrhoea, which made him the latest casualty of NHS spending cuts, meaning he'd been shunted from pillar to post until a bed in intensive care could be found. Because he'd been so cantankerous, no one had bothered to wheel him to the bathroom. What a small disease to fell such a big presence. He became a victim of the capitalist bastards after all.

Mum knows, though, about Nick, on some level. The other day, she told a new live-in nurse that she only has six children. She also said she saw my dad and her mum in her room, waiting for her. I hope that is true.

So, I sit with my mum, tapping away, writing this book. And, I suppose, when you are staring at someone with whom you used to watch *Ironsides* (I had a thing for Ed, the tall, besuited sergeant who wore a narrow, black tie, given it was the Sixties), sharing a bar of Dairy Milk, and she is in such torment and you simply cannot help her, even though she has always helped you, then you inevitably take stock.

I wish I had been bad, just a little bit. Braver. Smoked a cigarette, say, or flirted with a man. Had a one night stand. Called in sick. Shown her I, too, could make a grandchild. Taken a year off, or perhaps just a week. Because good ends don't necessarily happen to nice people; it's the grabbing bitches who get the rewards, as I was to learn much later in life, too late. I was always cautious, probably because, having grown up in the Sixties and Seventies ('Forties, more like!' my

ex-husband used to say in one of his endless swipes at my extreme antiquity), hearing about what my brothers and sisters got up to at the Isle of Wight festival, say (Tony set a woman's afro alight when sparking up one of his endless rol-lies), or in dreary bedsits in Tufnell Park with the curtains permanently closed, terrified me. The danger! The consequences! The heartbreak! My dad was always cross with them, the long-haired layouts. They made my mum cry.

I wish someone had told me, not that I was beautiful because I know I'm not, but that I was normal and acceptable. Then, perhaps, I wouldn't have spent my life trying quite so hard to be better than I am. Lying. Manipulating. Tanning. Plucking. Jogging. Dieting. Staying late (in the office, not up – I always knew I had to get my beauty sleep). I never once disobeyed the glossy magazine mantra of 'Cleanse, tone and moisturise!'

Maybe it was because my image in Mum's dressing table mirror didn't measure up to the ones I saw in *Diana* and *Jackie* and *Honey* and *19*. Aged ten I had made my own magazine, cutting photos out of Lyn's pile, and called it *Trendy*. Twiggy was on the cover, in an unprepossessing striped tank top, as I'd cut her out from the cover of *Vogue Knitting*. 'How to get Twiggy's legs' was one feature: my answer had been 'to wear fab white tights'. I wrote a list of banned foods. There was a problem page, of course there was. I put the finished magazine in the bottom of the wardrobe.

Maybe it was because all around me there was chaos: so many other children and noise and untidiness, despite my

mum's best efforts to stem the tide. My mum loved me but was always too shy to say I looked lovely, Darling, or ever talk to me about things like periods or towels. Maybe this is why the anorexia started: I wouldn't have dreamt of telling my mum that I had started bleeding, not a mum with a darning box, a tape measure so worn you had to guess, and special built-up slippers (one leg was much shorter than the other).

But other people could have, should have, taken me as they found me – my husband, friends, boyfriends (that last word barely deserves a plural, as there were only three and one of those only lasted six months, so really it was two and a half men). But as I was always in doubt about my own right to be alive, how could they not be, too?

I wanted to be more exotic, like Marie Helvin or the woman with the buttock-length hair Marlon Brando fell in love with during *Mutiny on the Bounty*, not someone who had grown up thinking a box of Vesta Chow Mein (it was desiccated, so not even found in the cold aisle) was the height of sophistication. Someone who had nothing more to listen to in their small, grey, faux leather record case than 'The Holly and the Ivy' and Danny Kaye singing 'The Ugly Duckling'. My feathers were all stubby and brown.

But then, Essex was a bleak place to live, with only the local Wheatsheaf, slumped on the side of a dual carriageway, as a distraction. It's been boarded up now (I drove past the other day – even the dual carriageway has died! It has been grassed over, now the new bypass sears through fields that once held

bright yellow gorse and chaffinches and yellowhammers). Essex is a different place these days, of course: women with skin the colour of The Three Degrees, the eyelashes of a drag queen, skirts up around their thongs, their haunches vajaz-zled. It wasn't like that in my day, I thought not long ago when I attended Essex Fashion Week in Rainham (oh, how my career has soared!) and watched the chattering queue outside the Tanfastic booth.

But at least these women are changing themselves because they think they deserve a bit of fun: men, kids, a gel manicure, white BMW 4x4. I wanted to change myself because I couldn't bear to be me any longer, someone who came from a kitchen with ears of corn embellished on the walls and a fake *Hay Wain* in the lounge. I didn't want to be like my mum, with a husband and seven children and not a moment to herself, who always fell asleep before the nine o'clock news, knitting on her knee. But then, perhaps, I did follow her example in one way. I took her determination to polish and just rubbed at things at work, at my own body, endlessly. (When I was first with my ex-husband, I wanted to be so much better for him, as a reward for him having married me. I left my house in Hackney one day and had my hair dyed, my eyelashes extended, an airbrush tan, teeth whitened, brows dyed so black I resembled Groucho Marx. When I got home he said, 'You look great. But I didn't expect you to return a member of a different ethnicity.'))

I wish I could rub out my life, twiddling knobs as on an Etch A Sketch, and start again. I wish I had appreciated my

mum while I still had her, not wailed about whether or not there was meat in the stew or lard in the dumplings, and why couldn't I have a fab chain belt from Bonds? How many years did I waste in a concrete bus shelter with its glass smashed, waiting for a number 11 bus, or Marlon Brando, to arrive, or for my life to start, whichever was sooner?

I think I would do every single thing completely differently.