

SOCIAL STEREOTYPES (Very British problems)

The Divorced Couple

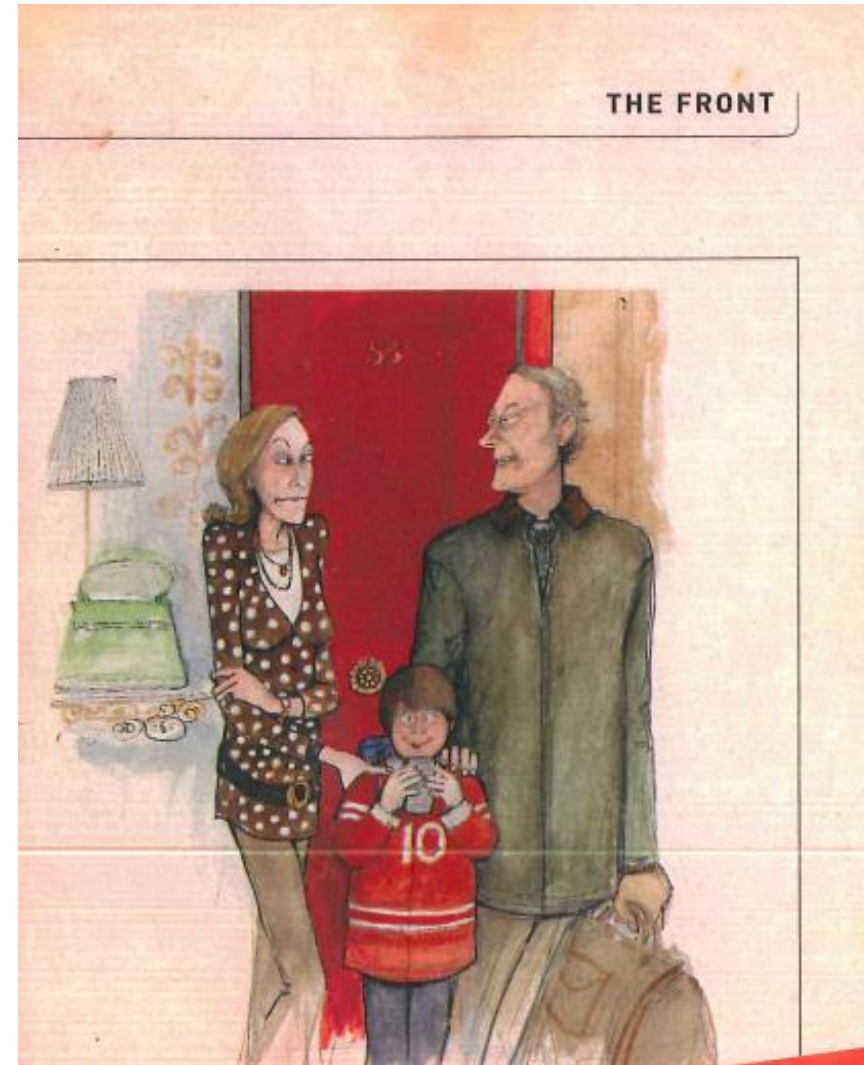
Social stereotypes The divorced couple. By Victoria Mather. Drawing by Sue Macartney-Snape

It is the Saturday handover. Giles and Philippa hover on the doorstep, smiling thinly. He does not come into the house they once shared, but over Philippa's rigid shoulders he can see all that is familiar and in the past – also that she has replaced the portrait of his grandfather with an alarmingly modern picture. On the principle that less is more (and when did the Philippa he knew become a one-green-apple-on-a-white-canvas sort of person?), it looks expensive. That settlement was ruinous; as he's saying that of course he won't give Rollo too much Coca-Cola, he clocks the Hermès bag on the hall table. Bloody hell. Philippa, who's put the bag there deliberately, is giving clipped instructions about E-numbers. 'Here at home,' heavy emphasis on home, 'Rollo has no Coca-Cola, or chocolate, Giles. The Es make him hyper, and I also feel it's unwise to take him to McDonald's. When at home,' deliberate pause, 'I give him organic food.' Philippa bitterly suspects that Samantha, who was her best friend until she ran off with Giles, thinks organic is a

permutation of orgasm. Nor is she best pleased that Giles has given Rollo a GameBoy. 'You can't buy his love, you know,' she hisses. Little annoys her more than the child bouncing on the sofa on Saturday mornings chanting, 'Daddy's coming! Daddy's coming!' Then the emptiness in the house when the hyper-whirlwind has gone to the happy land of pizza and DVDs, where his Egypt project will be left festering in his suitcase despite Philippa's veiled exhortations to his father: 'Daddy will help you with your project, darling. You will, won't you, Giles? It has to be in on Monday and Miss Sophie is very strict about the class history projects. Hugo Pswot's father actually took him to the pyramids. Some daddies are so dedicated.' Giles accelerates away before the mummies in the British Museum are tendered. Damn Philippa, she's probably idling the weekend away in a spa. A bug-eyed Rollo is returned to the doorstep buffer zone on Sunday evening. Philippa stays up until 2am making a pyramid out of an organic muesli packet.



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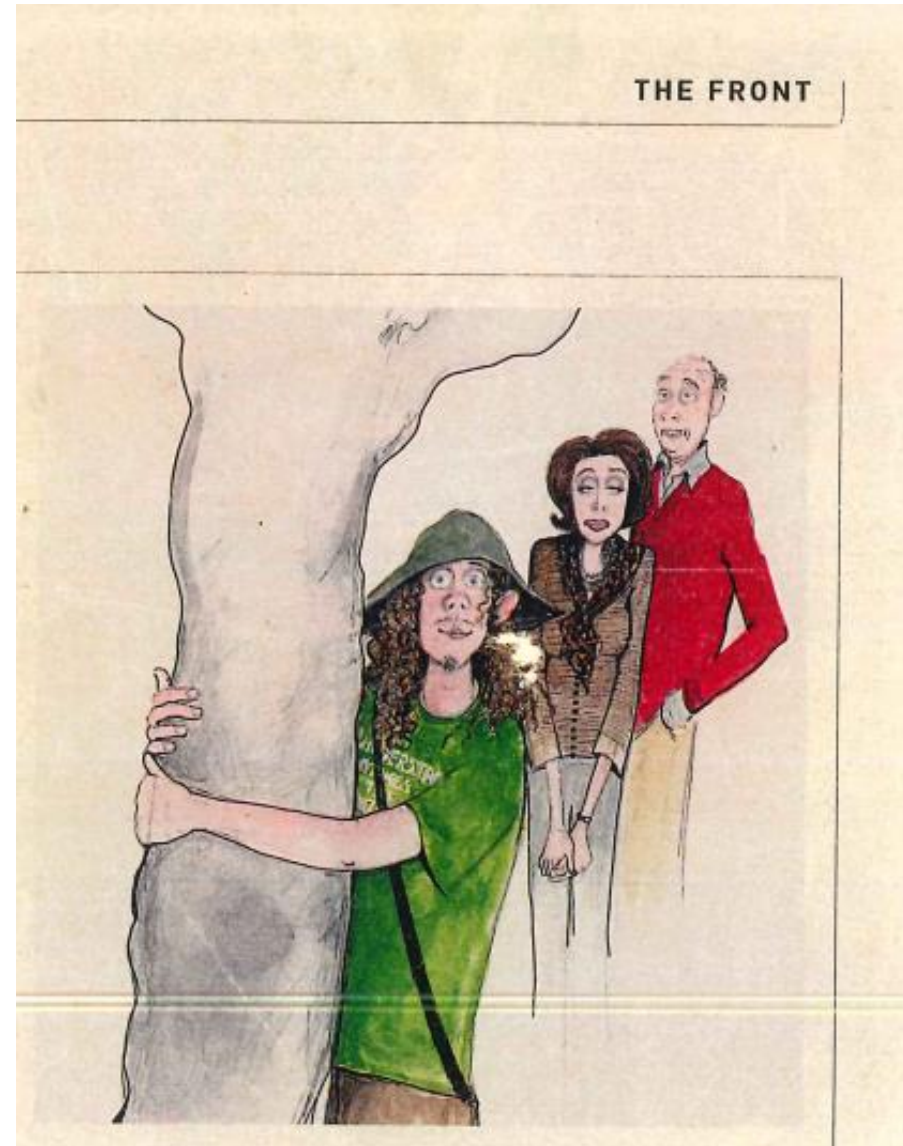


The Tree Hugger

Gideon's parents are appalled. After years of expensive education, an art course in Venice, work experience at Deutsche Gnome and the round-the-world ticket, all they've produced is a hobbit. Of course, at dinner parties Celia says that eco-consciousness is the way forward in the 21st century. 'I mean, look what Prince Charles has achieved with his organic biscuits.' However, Roger's paternal tolerance is on a knife-edge; only Johnny Walker is standing between him and a carpet-biting rant about the Youth of Today. He expected Gideon to be a master of the universe – in which case it wasn't the cleverest idea to call him Gideon. What he's got is a smelly little toad with a damn silly beard who thinks trees have souls. 'Very iffy pong from his bedroom, Celia. You don't think he's smoking pot, do you? Let me tell you, and the fool Blunkett, that there's zero tolerance in this house.' Celia feels as if intolerance has subsumed her entire life. 'I'm intolerant to wheat, Mum, it's harvested by giant corporations.

And you can't have log fires – every time you cut down a tree it screams.' Gideon lies awake at night worrying about the Amazon. Even as he is prone in his Peter Jones sheets, swaths of rainforest are being culled by the forces of capitalism. Humanity is going to self-destruct because more paper is needed for the stiff invitations that litter his parents' mantelpiece. Only the other day Celia was desperately trying to find where they were supposed to be having drinks with the Whittle-Thompsons, but Gideon had already recycled the card. The newspapers are daily arboreal mass murder; hence Celia has been forced to give up the *Mail*. Fortunately tree-hugging is not an early-morning activity, so Roger is able to get out of the house and into his chauffeur-driven car with the *FT* intact. His punishment on his return is a lecture on toxic emissions. 'Only the life-giving oxygen from leaves is between you and death by carbon dioxide, Dad.' All three of them will be infinitely relieved when Gideon goes up to read Planet Regeneration at university.

THE FRONT



The School Project

Imogen and Michael are hard at work on The Family Life of Queen Victoria. It is, of course, Xenia's school project but she hasn't been allowed near it. Panic set in when Imogen discovered that the Goldstones had organised tea for Abigail with Julian Fellowes, scriptwriter of *The Young Victoria*. 'An Oscar-winning writer, Michael! We have to Do Something immediately.' So they queued for the car ferry to the Isle of Wight – costing some £150 – to go to Osborne House.

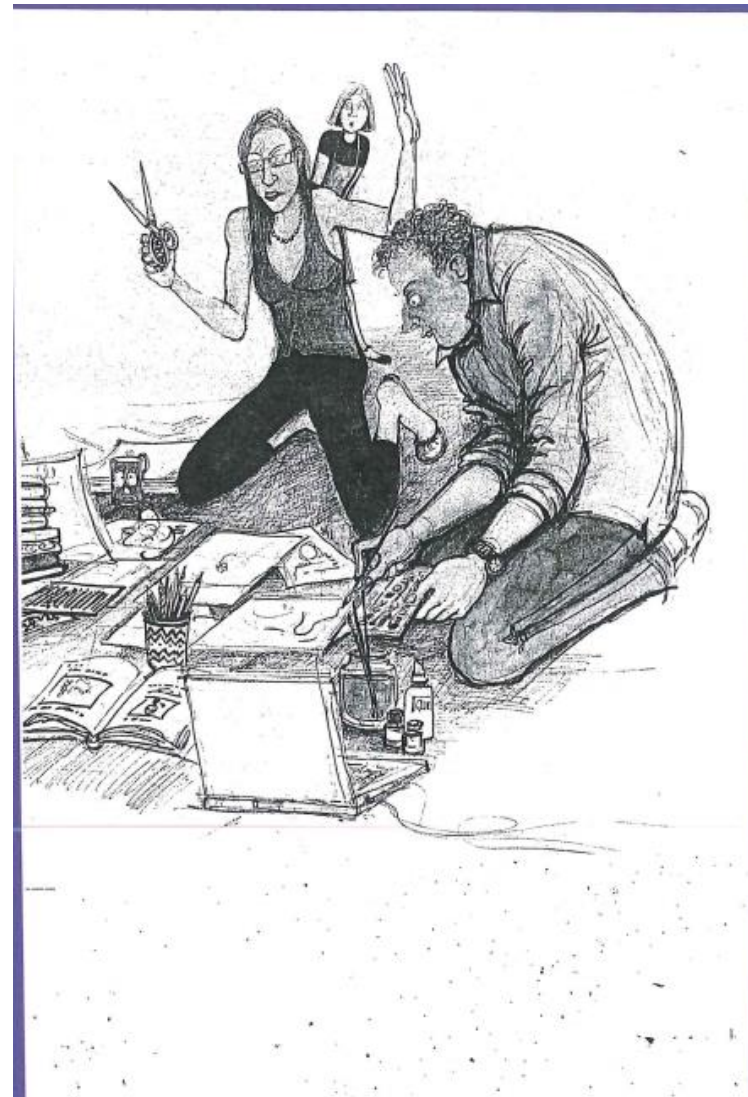
'Xenia, this is going to be such fun! There's a marvellous gallery of family pictures on the top floor, brilliantly organised by the Duchess of York – you know, darling, you see her in *Hello!* mag, the mother of Beatrice and Eugenie?' Xenia lifts her eyes briefly from texting and says, 'Yeah, Eugenie looks cool.' Michael, who has strong views on the waste of police time and his money on security for nightclubbing royalettes, grips the steering wheel.

Osborne does not do it for Xenia. 'Mum, I'm 10. I'm not interested in dead people.' The royal children's chalet and vegetable patch – 'You see, darling, the Queen wanted the little princes and princesses to know what it was like to lead a simple life' – is just

pathetically *Sound of Music*. Her parents buy postcards and books (£50) to take home to cut up and stick in an engraved Noble Macmillan album (£130 in the sale). Imogen spends three nights cramming on the internet, as if for her finals, then printing out research (extra ink, £45).

Michael says at least this is better than the chocolate project, with the nightmare visit to Chocolate World near Birmingham. Imogen's desperate that other parents, with low cunning, won't return her calls about project bullet points Xenia's lost. The National Portrait Gallery is scoured for more postcards; they haunt the V&A and the Albert Memorial: 'Xenia, we must take a picture of you in front of it, on your mobile, so Miss Atkinson can really see you're doing the work.'

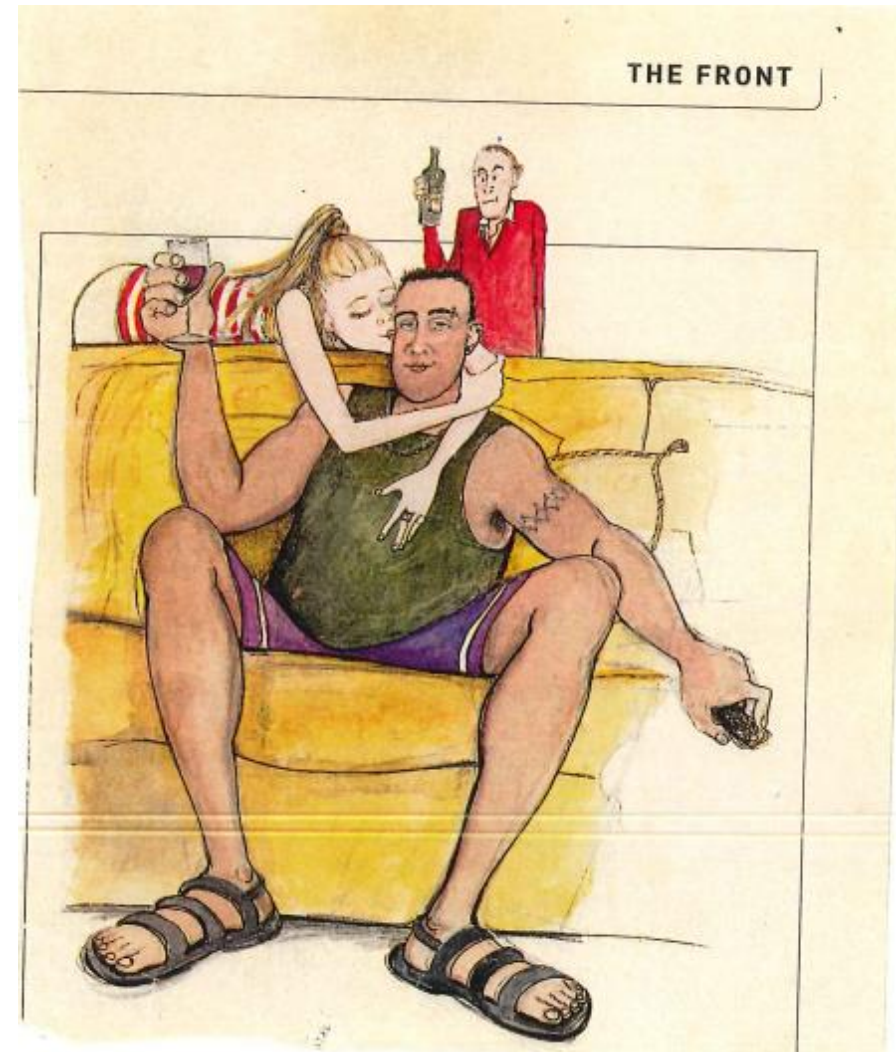
Xenia offers to design the project's presentation on the computer: 'Darling, you can't, it'll look too professional. We need your writing, and keep in all the spelling mistakes, otherwise Miss Atters might think we helped you.' They're furious when Xenia gets only three stars. *To buy original Social Stereotypes drawings and limited-edition prints, see smseditions.co.uk or call 01981-500670*



The Awful Boyfriend

Dean is Australia's revenge for all the slacker Etonians who have been sent over to the little antipodean island on a gap year. He is a hairy-armed, eyebrow-bolted, singlet-wearing, horny-toed nemesis. Never did the Bracegirdles imagine that their ewe lamb, the divine Candida, would bring home this affront to their sensibilities. Dean comes from Brisbane; the Bracegirdles do not know anyone in Brisbane. Candida met Dean in a pub; the Bracegirdles do not go to pubs (other than the Fur and Feathers for the shoot lunch). Chuffy Bracegirdle wonders, he really does, why he spent thousands sending Candida to St Mary's when the result of three A-grade A-levels is Dean. Perhaps Dean is a dismal barometer of the total lack of intelligence now required to pass public examinations. Dean drinks beer, Chuffy drinks vintage claret. 'Although he tucks into my Leoville Barton as if it were Kangarouge.' Dean smokes, which sets off Granny's asthma. Dean watches sport on television, which means Veronica Bracegirdle feels all six

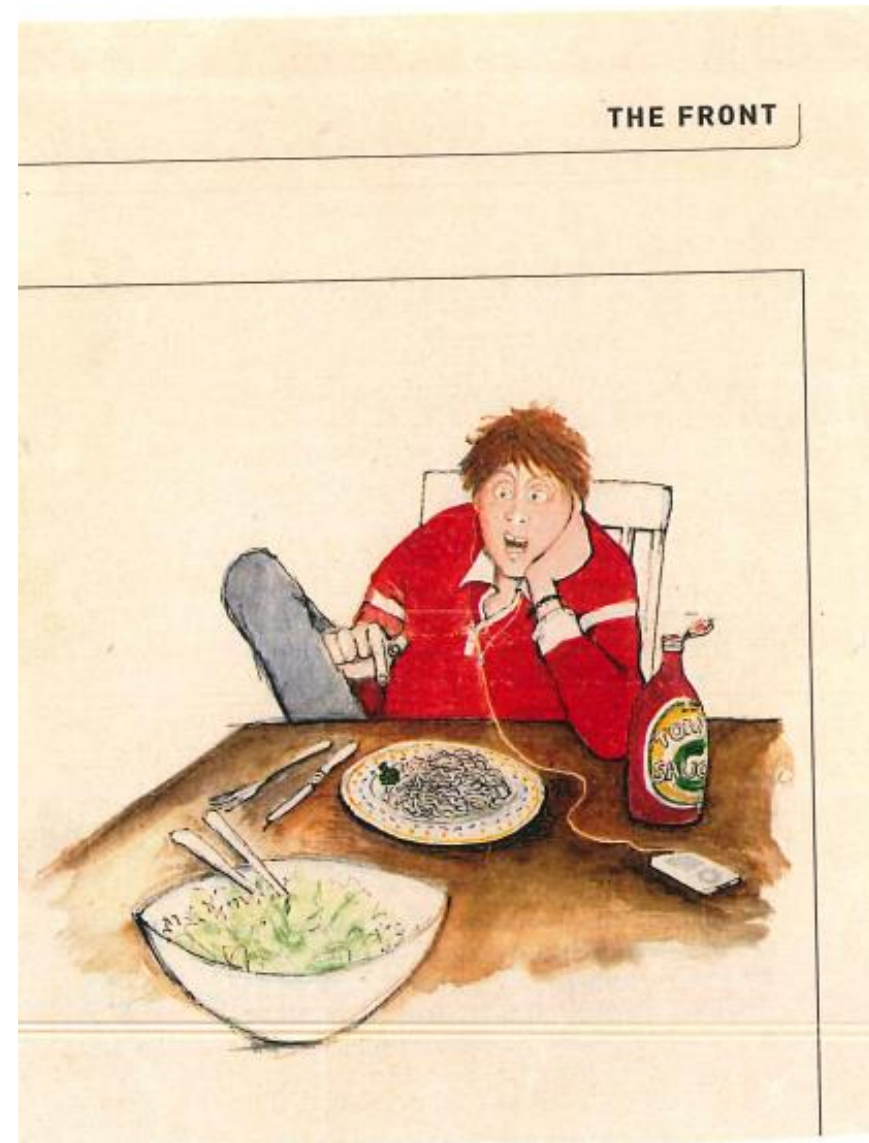
nations have scrummed down in The Mitre House. 'But Chuffy, I wouldn't mind anything as long as he didn't write in his food.' Granny says beadily that perhaps the knife and fork are new to Australia. Chuffy says he really finds heavy petting in his drawing-room a bit much. 'That bloody gorilla all over Candida, just when I wanted to watch the news. And it upsets the dog.' The labrador, never previously known to do anything other than wag sociably – who includes postmen and burglars among his favoured acquaintances – does growly-growly at Dean. Candida, doe-eyed with love, is sublimely oblivious to the hackles raised all over her house. Dean is a sex god; she wants to abandon her Italian art course, live with him in a bedsit in Earl's Court and surf off into the sunset while her parents are still muttering about Dean's ignorance of the thank-you letter. Forcefully shipped to Florence, Candida discovers Italian waiters, and the Bracegirdles suddenly have fond memories of Dean, who at least spoke a version of English.



The Fussy Eater

Harry adamantly sticks to white food. Only the tentative suggestion that he might remove his iPod at the dining-room table pierces his surly hormonal teenage indifference like an aberrant piece of broccoli. 'What's this, Mum?' 'It's good for you, Harry.' Harry does not do good-for-you, or foreign, or mushrooms, or green. Especially green. Harry is pasta, pizza and Pringles. And chips. Preferably pasta or pizza with chips. When his long-suffering mother cooks free-range roast chicken (white) and roast potatoes, he drowns the lot in ketchup. She has been known to weep in the kitchen. After breast-feeding, Magimixing Harry's baby food and sending him to kindergarten with lunchboxes of hummus and carrot sticks, she is harbouring a nutritional serpent, Jamie Oliver's worst nightmare. Her sister says all teenagers are like this. 'Which is not an excuse, I know, Louisa, but 80 per cent of households in some godforsaken part of northern England don't even have a table, they just graze at the fridge.'

Harry would be thrilled. How often does he mooch into the kitchen, hands stuffed in the pockets of his filthy combats, and say, 'Chelsea are playing Fulham tonight, Mum, I really need to eat in front of the telly'? Just when she's laid the table and lit candles. The result is an apocalyptic explosion by Harry's father on manners and how, if this is just a stage, Harry had damn well better get over it, 'and take that bloody thing out of your ears when I'm speaking to you'. The anti-magnetic force of Harry's vast indifference engulfs family meals. Seeing him bend down to his plate, the better to shovel in the spag, Louisa finds it hard to imagine a future upstanding young man with whom it'll be possible to eat in public. What Louisa, her husband and her sister are agreed upon is that the teenager who slouches in his chair, puts his elbows on the table, feigns ignorance of how to use a knife and fork, is umbilically linked to the ketchup bottle and eats with his mouth open for the full tumble-dryer effect, is inevitably at Eton.



The A-level Student

Poppy has worked really hard all morning. She's downloaded lots of iTunes, and that was so tiring she, like, had to read about Brad and Angelina in *Hello!* Now Chloe has rung to say that business studies really sucks, and won't it be awesome when they get to Corfu, and did Poppy know that Tarquin is coming? Poppy says that's so cool, and wonders, as she varnishes her toes, if she should have a little dolphin tattooed on her ankle. Mummy wouldn't really notice.

The Voice of Doom is currently calling up the stairs, 'Are you working, Poppy? I promised Mrs Hatchet that if you came home this weekend you would work six hours a day.' And Poppy shouts back, 'OK, Mum, yeah, like I'm doing some really good research on *As You Like It* on Google.'

This is guaranteed to fob off the parents, who are in despair about Poppy's English. 'Dad's really, like, annoying, Chloe, 'cos he keeps saying he did *As You Like It* at O-level, you know, like, back in pre-history, and our spaniel could understand it. He doesn't, like,

get, like, how really hard stuff is.'

Poppy's father is convinced his daughter's Shakespearean expertise consists of thinking Romeo is a Catapult who died on the Titanic. 'And when I consider the amount of money I've spent on her education... Might as well not have bothered.'

Poppy's got lots of notes she's borrowed from India, who got an A in the mocks, so that's really cool. Mummy said would she like to go to the library and get some books 'so you can read round the subject, darling?' Poppy recoiled as if bitten by a puff adder. Books are so not cool, besides being, like, long. What she needs are, like, the answers to the questions. That's the way, like, to do exams. Her father fulminates about original thought, and Poppy says, 'Whatever, Dad' and fiddles with her LK Bennett shoes.

Mummy says she's sure Poppy's doing her best and Dad says Poppy understands less about Robert Frost's poetry than a three-toed sloth. Poppy's vagued off; she's yearning for her hair straighteners and *Vogue*. She'll get an A.

THE FRONT



The Dropper-in

Social stereotypes

The dropper-in. By Victoria Mather.
Drawing by Sue Macartney-Snape

When the doorbell clangs deep in the heart of the Old Rectory, Miles and Claire look at each other appalled. Surely not the gasman coming to read the meter on a Saturday? Perhaps Mrs Gilpin with her petition about saving the village post office? Or a burglar checking whether they are in? When they cautiously open the front door, there is Elaine. 'Coo-ee! I was just passing, and thought I'd drop in on the off-chance. Dying to see your new house. You don't mind, do you?' Miles and Claire mind very much, but it's too late. Elaine is already in the hall – 'Are these flagstones original?' – handing Miles her coat. Claire furiously wonders how Elaine, who was their neighbour in Clapham, could possibly be just passing in Dorset. 'Claire, I can bring the dachsie in, can't I? You remember Banger, he adored your Mimi.' Claire indeed remembers Banger as a flatulent hairbrush who yapped horribly at her Siamese. She weakly fills the kettle. 'An Aga, Claire. How marvellous, although it's a shame it's cream. It shows the dirt so. But probably you'll be taking it out when you

redo the kitchen?' Miles replies crisply that they have just redone the kitchen, that the subtle arts of Mr Farrow and Mr Ball have been deployed at some expense to make it look as if it has always been like this. Switching off *From Our Own Correspondent*, which he particularly enjoys, he inquires what brings Elaine to these parts, hissing under his breath, 'Nothing permanent, I hope.' Claire scrabbles for Rich Tea biscuits, last deployed for nice Mr Waters, the plumber. As Elaine rabbits on about her Aunt Violet's 80th birthday in Piddletrenthide, both Miles and Claire stand as if about to go somewhere. Claire, grinning aimlessly, is aware that the clock is ticking up to lunchtime. Elaine sits firm. 'Er, do stay, only got pasta, missed the organic farm shop now. Miles will show you the drawing-room, where *Sense and Sensibility* was filmed. Won't you, Miles?' In doing so, he steps in a poo Banger has deposited on the Aubusson. *'The Perfect Family'*, the latest collection of *Social Stereotypes*, is now available for £9.99 (plus 99p p&p) from Telegraph Books Direct on 0870-155 7222

