

## **ANASTASIA AND DAVID**

### **A Day in the Life**

**15. 04.2008**

My journey to Anastasia's flat was uneventful as I had been there before and knew where to go in the corner of the square where her council flat was one of about 17 on that side of the street. It has a buzzer to get entry, I think there are three floors, and she is on the first landing. There are three flats on this side of the block, and she is in the middle. There are various things taking up space on the landing, pots of plants, and larger toys and on the furthest one, a load of rather unsightly bulging black bin bags, as well as pots of flowers. I was on time, it was 9.30 a.m. The door was open as I approached, and she was peeping out as she was only wearing a dressing gown and her pyjama trousers. She'd taken the opportunity to have a bath before I came. Her son David was still asleep. She had been in the process of finishing doing something on her laptop, which she asked if she could carry on with, which was fine with me, and I just sat down for 5 minutes or so.

Then we went into the kitchen for a cup of tea and a chat. Anastasia asked me if I took sugar and this immediately got us on to the issue of weight, as she is trying to get her weight down, so uses sweeteners, and had had a 'tummy tuck' operation earlier in the year. Anastasia described to me a film that she is creating from all sorts of video clips she has, and photos, to put on a DVD, which she said she will give me a copy. This takes her quite a while to do on her laptop computer. Her other ongoing occupation at home is putting a lot of clothes, and her mother's clothes, and (barely worn) shoes to sell on ebay, at which she seems quite successful. She had been taking photos of each item to put on the website.

In the neat and tidy kitchen, I looked at the two pages of contact prints on the fridge that were showing David's first and second year of life. Anastasia made us tea in a filter jug that also made hot water for drinks, which she said had been a gift. She pointed out David's fish tank on the kitchen windowsill, with two goldfish in, which had been a present from her brother. I also looked the cards that were arrayed on the back of the front door, which were a large mother's day card surrounded by the cards from David's relatively recent birthday.

Anastasia is very open about her life and feelings, and we chatted for quite a long time. She described being up most of the night (a usual occurrence), either watching soaps or making food, as in this case, when she had prepared the pasta dish for our lunch. Today, as David failed to wake up on his own, at about 10.30 a.m. she eventually went to wake him up. She said he was usually grumpy when he woke up, but he didn't seem too grumpy to me. David's cot was next to their bed in the small and crowded bedroom of their one bed-roomed flat. There were wardrobes and shelves all over the place, really leaving hardly room to move. One chest of drawers had all David's things in it, there were Winnie the Pooh cut-outs over the wall facing the cot, and lots of fluffy toys around. On a long shelf above the double bed were a load more large fluffy toys, which Anastasia told me had belonged to her.

Once David was up, she took him into the lounge to play while she prepared his porridge for breakfast. He pulled out a lot of trucks from his box of toys, and we played with them on the long black settee, which, together with a smaller one the same, took up all one side of the lounge, behind which was a wall totally filled with Anastasia's husband Richie's CDs. Opposite was a large TV, which was also switched on, I think it was the CBeebies, but David wasn't really very interested. When Anastasia came out with his bowl of porridge, she fed him wherever he was, which could be sitting at the table with the laptop.

Anastasia took David back in the bedroom to change his nappy and dress him. As a game she was chasing him round the bedroom, he hides under the bed – she told me she had got rid of their last bed with drawers because she was fed up with not being able to clean properly, so now they have a new bed on legs, so he hides under it. When she changed his nappy he was quite happy, he does pee in the potty sometimes, but not started to poo in it yet. They had had advice about this, one piece was to get a furry toy to look as if it is peeing in the potty, and show David the water in the bottom afterwards, so that he copies it, but she hasn't tried this yet. He seemed quite amiable about being changed. Then she dressed him as we were going to go out to Baby Gym, commenting that he hated things being put over his head but he didn't make a fuss.

Anastasia got the things together she needed to go out, and then dressed herself. She dressed David in jeans, a hoody t-shirt and a flying-type of jacket. She put on jeans, and a black jacket, and her shoulder length hair was tied back quite severely. While this was going on we talked in detail about her tummy tuck operation, which she had in January. She had tried to lose some weight before the operation as requested, but she could only manage losing a few pounds, but they still went ahead with the operation. Richie had not been keen at first but she really wanted it, and then he was glad once he saw how happy it had made her. It had cost a lot of money but it was worth it in that it made her feel so much better and more confident as she was saying she would never go to the swimming pool with her son looking like the way she was before. The operation usually takes a couple of hours, but in her case it took twice as long. She has a huge scar from one side to the other – they had to remove her belly button and sew it back onto her tucked tummy again! Now she can wear jeans and a t-shirts and is much more comfortable with herself.

Anastasia has her routines for the week – for example, it is baby gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and something else on other days, although she did say she did washing etc. on Mondays at home. When we were all ready we set out to walk to the place where the Baby Gym was held, going through her estate and then through the streets until we got to the Centre where it was held. Sadly it was not on today, because it was half term, which we hadn't realised, so I wouldn't be able to see the gym or her inter-relating with the other mums she meets there. She asked if I'd like to see what was inside so we went in and had a look. It is a custom built place for activities with babies, children and young people, for example, some young girls were doing gymnastics in there, and others doing martial arts. Anastasia decided we should go to the City Farm instead, and as it was still quite a nice day, we walked on there, through the city streets, pushing David in his buggy. For most of this time he had the hood on his t-shirt up. We stopped at a parade of

shops to go into one to buy bread for feeding the ducks at the farm, but Anastasia also bought a cake for each of us, somosas, and even some chocolate eclairs.

The City Farm wasn't that busy today, although there were a few families with young children around. There were chickens and ducks and geese, but we walked right past the ducks, and David potted off on his own. Moving on past some goats, we went on round the corner where there was usually a horse, but today he wasn't there. However, there were a regular supply of trains going past, as the farm was next to and over the railway, and David clearly was rather more interested in trains than animals. Walking back, we passed a huge black pig basking in the sun, and wound our way round to where the sheep were kept, and where there was a place to sit down. Here we ate our somosas and cake, and fed the sheep (instead of the ducks) who were very tame, and standing on their back legs up to the platform to be fed. Anastasia was talking to David a lot through all this, and lifting him to show him both the animals and the trains.

We potted back along the streets and when we were nearly back at Anastasia's block of flats, I was pushing the buggy into the lift area when I noticed that her jacket, which she'd taken off and laid on the buggy on the way back, was no longer there, it must have fallen off at some point. The leisurely atmosphere suddenly changed, Anastasia was understandably anxious and panicking as her mobile phone was in the pocket. We rushed back, and to our relief it was lying on the pavement not too far back the way we'd come, but nearly in the road, and the phone was still in the pocket. She said something to me like 'you always bring me luck', as though I was the reason it was still there, but I'm not sure what she really meant. On our rush to look for this we had also met Richie's mum's best friend, an elderly black woman, who waited while I ran over the junction and retrieved the jacket. She asked Anastasia if I was her mother, to which Anastasia said, no, she's a friend.

While we were out, Anastasia's brother had called and they arranged he should come round later to the flat. Over the course of the day, I was impressed how often her phone rang. When we got back to the flat, she got the lunch together that she had already prepared during the night. It was pasta and salad and BBQ chicken wings. The pasta dish was delicious. She filled two plates, one was for me and the other she fed David with, but also eating from it herself. She told me David loves fruit and vegetables. She said she tended to try and only eat one big meal a day herself and that would be with Richie in the evening.

Anastasia's brother arrived soon after we had returned from our walk when she was preparing the lunch, but he said he didn't want to eat (although quietly ate some of it later). The atmosphere changed a bit when he was there. He was clearly a regular and familiar visitor, coming in saying 'Hey Big Boy!' several times to his little nephew, and they were clearly fond of each other. He made himself at home on the settee, putting his feet up, using Anastasia's laptop, and putting an Eric Clapton concert DVD on the TV at quite a high volume.

After I had eaten my lunch, and she had fed David (and she finished what he left of his plateful) she took him into the bathroom to clean his teeth and then put him to bed for his nap, by then it was after 3.30pm. With David down to sleep, we had tea with her brother, out on the balcony, where it was possible to smoke. Anastasia asked if she could put the photos that I'd taken today on her laptop, which we did. After we'd looked at them she showed me lots of pictures from over the last couple of years, taken of her and Richie and David, and some events and celebrations they'd been to. Many showed her friends at parties or a marriage, and they seemed quite ethnically diverse. Quite a lot included women she had met at school or college and remained in touch with. I saw a couple of photos of her mother, who looked younger than I'd imagined her, although I'm not really sure how I had imagined her! Some other pictures were of Anastasia working in a bar round the corner (around Christmas I think) as a friend had worked there. She said she had enjoyed doing it and working and getting away from domestic routines, and she looked quite comfortable behind the bar. There was also a photograph of her cat, which she had loved and doted on before having the baby. She misses her but it was cat hairs that led her to take the cat to live at her mother's home, but she said it must have been traumatised at some point, possibly by builders working on scaffolding outside her mother's windows, and is now less friendly and hisses at David, so she's not sure if it will be coming back to live with them. The flat on the other side of them is occupied by a guy who Anastasia says begs and does drugs in his flat, and she has complained to the council about all the rubbish that he has outside his flat on the balcony but they do nothing. And because of this she tends to keep the Venetian blinds down in her kitchen so no one can look in.

Later in the day it felt the right time to leave, it was about 4.30pm, and she had a friend arriving around 5 o'clock. During the day I had felt very much that I was out with a friend rather than a project interviewee. I never felt that I was inhibiting her at all as a 'researcher' and it felt very relaxed and comfortable. I enjoyed the day, we had chatted a lot and I hope she enjoyed my company too. This made me not feel at all like a 'shadow', but someone who she invited in on everything she was doing, while talking about everything and I felt very much included, rather than marginal. We finally said goodbye and she said I was welcome to come around at any time for a coffee with them.