

NADIA AND GABRIEL

A Day in the Life

18.06.2008

Nadia and I had arranged the date on email, and then I rang to confirm a couple of times and did so through Nadia's partner Kay. Because I could only be there until early afternoon I got up really early in order to get the 7.30am train. I took a coffee and croissant on the train to wake myself up a bit, and look through my notes. The train arrived at its destination on time, where there was a long queue at the other end for the taxis as it was raining, but I still managed to arrive at Nadia's house at 9.40am. I had a friendly cabbie who managed to take me almost all the way there without directions, as they live in a slightly off the track road and some cab drivers don't seem to know it at all.

I walked up their quiet back street, where their front door is in this higher street, there was a window box outside the front window. The house is on three floors and this level is the middle floor, the bottom floor comes out on the opposite side in the lower street. I rang the old-fashioned metal bell pull and could just hear the jangling somewhere inside. Then I could hear some distant voices, and eventually the door opened and Nadia was there, welcoming me in with a kiss on each cheek. She was looking very trim in jeans and a t-shirt, and she later put on a hooded top to go out. She doesn't really have much of a bump even though she is due in six weeks on the 26th July. We went into the hallway to the top of the stairs, where Nadia was encouraging Gabriel to come upstairs and see me. I looked over the top and there was this little lad, climbing the steep stairs. Nadia told him that I was 'Sue', and we smiled at each other. He looked similar to how he was in October last, but much more the little boy, with a cheeky toothy smile and gingery blond hair. Nadia tells me that the plan is to go to Baby Gym, he usually goes on a Tuesday but they are going on Wednesday this time. We need to go in 10minutes so we go downstairs to the lowest floor of the house for a short while. This has completely changed from my visit eight months ago.

It had been Kay's idea that they move the kitchen, originally part of the large room, into what was the utility room so that they have all of the room as a lower lounge/diner/playroom attached to the kitchen and to a door to the outside garden. It has a couple of settees, a dining table with chairs, piano, bureau and a wall case of CDs, and of course, lots of toys next to one of the settees. They had also turned a cupboard under the stairs into a toilet with washbasin. Nadia told me that they have another lounge on the middle floor, which is only used by them, and which Gabriel is not allowed into. I got a peek in there when we passed and she went in to get something, and it looked very neat and nicely furnished. Normally the door is kept shut.

We got the stuff together to go out, and climbed the stairs again. As we went along the hall, Gabriel pushed something off the shelf onto the floor, and Nadia didn't scold him but made a comment to him, and I picked it up and put it back. Then when she was about to put his shoes on, she noticed he had odd socks on – they were very similar, stripy with a bird or animal on, but odd ones, and this clearly would not do so she went upstairs to get a matching pair. Gabriel was very friendly to me, and started calling me 'Mama',

which is what he calls his grandmother, and Nadia observes that I look a bit like her mother and this must be why he is calling me this. I assumed that he didn't really think that I was his grandma, but it certainly made for an easy and jolly interaction between us, and I was amused at possibly being mixed up with his granny. His calling me 'Mama' continues on and off throughout the day, although he sometimes calls me Sue as well, and I thought perhaps I was hearing 'Sue' when he was actually saying 'shoe'. He was very easy to be with and I liked him a lot. Gabriel is very affectionate and hugs me a bit and lets me put his socks and shoes back on when he keeps taking them off in the car. Nadia is giving him lots of encouragement about baby gym and that he's going to see his little friend Josh.

We drive to Baby Gym in the family saloon, with Gabriel happily in the back, kicking his shoes off. Driving to and from the Gym are the main times we have to talk, as the rest of the time Nadia is very focussed on Gabriel. I ask her about getting pregnant and how she feels, and what they are hoping for. It seems she must have been trying to get pregnant soon after I had interviewed Kay last October. Kay had mentioned then that they were making arrangements with the clinic. It was the same stored pool of sperm used, and Nadia said she in fact became pregnant straightaway, which was not exactly what they'd expected. As it had taken three attempts last time, she hadn't thought it would happen so fast, what with being older, so it doesn't quite fit in with plans to have finished her family therapy course at the end of the year. Now she'll have a new baby for the last three months of the course, although fortunately she'll have the summer months off. As before, Nadia and Kay don't want to know the gender of the baby, and say that they don't mind. Nadia comments that with Gabriel, as soon as he came out, it was like they had always had a baby boy – there was no question about gender, and she thought it would be like that again this time. She did comment that at the moment she didn't quite know how it would be with a girl, which I thought was quite funny really, considering her comments at their previous interviews before Gabriel about possible concerns if it might be a boy.

It was still raining a bit when we got to the Baby Gym, after a 15 minute or so drive, and it was about 10.15am. As we got to the entrance, there was Nadia's friend Sally with her son Josh, arriving too. There were enthusiastic greetings, and then I was introduced as Sue, but no other explanation, which seemed fine, and as Sally asked me about the research when we were in the Gym, I knew that myself and the project had been discussed already. Josh and Gabriel are more or less the same age, and could be brothers as they have some similarities in hair and size and face. Sally looks a bit ex-hippyish, wearing jeans with a frayed multicoloured belt, and lowish top and lots of curly auburn hair and a big smile. They paid for the session and we went up and into the changing room, where we left our shoes and rucksacks, etc. Up more stairs into the Gym, where I must say that I was initially struck by the smell of sweaty feet, I think perhaps it always smells like this, because of the apparatus use. Here there were already about another eight or more mums with children all about the same age/size as Gabriel and Josh. I observed that most probably fell into the 25-35 age and many seemed to have longish hair tied back. They were all white apart from a Muslim woman with a headscarf, who was there with her daughter. At the risk of stereotyping, most appeared middle class in voice and attitude to me, with boys called e.g. Morgan, and Kaden, apart from one mum whose

little boy had very short hair and was being rather assertive. The floor was covered with bouncy stuff and various sorts of apparatus such as rings, a horse, trampoline at floor level, and a long length of bouncy trampoline. There was a man in charge, who seemed to enjoy his job and was cheerily helping people and also conducting about three group sessions with music where everyone got together to sing or go round in a circle.

I was generally mooching around, not wanting to be crowding Nadia and Gabriel, occasionally going over to where they were exploring some apparatus or mattress. I remembered that earlier on Nadia had commented that it was good to have company with Gabriel, although clearly they were absorbed with the gym now. Gabriel clearly enjoyed the gym and was confident on the apparatus. Nadia was very patient and encouraging. I could have felt odd, being the only woman there without a small child, but I didn't, as no-one took much notice of me, and I clearly knew two mothers there, and anyway, they probably thought I was a granny!

At one of the music sessions, Gabriel took me by the hand (Nadia had the other hand) and led me over to the session and we all went around pretending to be a train. Gabriel and Josh seemed to get on well, although in the gym they were almost totally with their respective mums, and there was one altercation when Gabriel took Josh's toy dog and wouldn't give it back to him. While we were in the gym Sally asked about the research and what we were doing and I explained a bit about it. I felt quite comfortable being there with both women and after the session, which had probably lasted about an hour (although we had only participated in about 45 minutes of it), we went down into the changing room, where we sat on the floor and the children had some biscuits. Meanwhile all the next session people had gone up into the Gym, and the mothers in our session had left, so we were the only ones still there.

It was now about 11 am. Sally asked more about the project, and commented that she'd always wanted to be part of a research project. Nadia seemed quite pleased, and joked about getting Mothercare vouchers for every interview. At this point Gabriel started being a bit fractious and throwing things around. He took Josh's box of sugar free biscuits and emptied them over the floor. Nadia responded very patiently, saying that he seemed a bit tired. At one point she told him to put something into the litter bin, and he went over and brought the litterbin over to them. Nadia commented about him being tidy, and Sally made a reference to her tidiness, causing her to retort jokingly, 'Oh, so it's my fault then!' This period seemed to provide a bit of time for Nadia and Sally to talk, especially as it was raining outside. She had described on our drive in, that the last time they were there they had all sat out for a drink in the sunshine afterwards. Overall, Nadia was very patient and tolerant with Gabriel, more so than I think I might have been able to be in the same circumstances. She tends not to get angry with him but to talk to him about whatever it is, and then distract him into doing something else.

We finally got up and left the gym, and there were lots of goodbyes and kisses between them and the children. Nadia does see Sally quite a lot, they meet up on Mondays and at baby gym. She told me Sally was a psychologist, and this then made sense to me about her questions about the research. They had met last year at a wedding where it turned out

they had some common links, such as her father and Sally's mother going to the same Italian class. She thought that it was 'serendipitous' that they had met and become firm friends. It was still raining when we drove back. We talked about childcare and working, and it seems that a woman who had been looking after Gabriel can't do so anymore so they have just found someone to replace her. Nadia's parents babysit every couple of weeks or so, when Nadia is on her university course. She thinks Gabriel is more mature than other children of his age. I am no expert, but he does speak quite a lot of words, he picks up how to do things quite easily, he eats and sleeps very well, and he doesn't cry if he falls down. She asked me if I knew a word (it sounded like 'feel'?), which might be Yiddish, that meant being fluffed up with pride, which she said is how she feels about Gabriel, and I wondered if she had assumed I was Jewish.

Back at the house it was shoes off and downstairs, where I played with Gabriel with his spinning top and his giant two-piece jigsaw bits while Nadia made us a cup of tea. The next activity was for Gabriel to make a birthday card for his grandma (Nadia's mother). Gabriel sat up in the high chair at the table, which she had spread with newspaper, and put out his pots of yellow, red, blue and green finger paints, and some pots of glitter, that she had bought specially. The tube of glue she'd bought didn't work at all well, and kept squidging glue out of the wrong end. Gabriel started off using brushes that he wielded in a very haphazard way and was all over the place, so Nadia eventually took these off him, and he used his fingers instead, much more successfully, making colours on the paper. Then came the glue, and then he shook bits of glitter on it, and on the newspaper as well. In the end he'd made a really good and colourful card.

A messy fingered Gabriel was then put on his stool in the little toilet with the basin tap running and he and Nadia washed his hands, and the brushes. She is so patient, and I'm very impressed, she stays calm and gets him to do everything in the end. He spent ages afterwards playing with the running tap and a Jeye cloth, squeezing it out, and then putting it under tap again, while she started making some lunch. She asked me if soup would be OK, and as I hadn't brought anything I thanked her and said it would be perfect. After a while we got Gabriel away from the basin, and she set out a bit of simple lunch for us all on the table.

We all sat back at the table for lunch. Gabriel was in his high chair with a bib top on. He had the same as us for lunch – a little gluten free soup (originally bought for the child carer), bread, cheese, and some tomato and cucumber cut into pieces. Gabriel ate very efficiently, spearing pieces of bread, and cheese with a small fork. He ate everything on his plate, and asked for some of the (homemade) chutney, which he clearly enjoyed and wanted more, so in the end Nadia had to put it away. She said he seemed to like vinegar based things, and also ate olives! Over lunch we also talked about various things including her expectations for the birth. Once again they are hoping to have a home birth, they still have the inflatable birthing pool, but she commented that as it takes an hour to fill it, she didn't know if it would be used if happened too quickly. She is hoping for a faster and easier birth than the first, and is still reassured by having the hospital literally up the road. We also talked about Kay's and her respective parents. It seemed Kay's mother is soon to go on a cruise with her friend, who is going to pay for it all. Nadia

commented that the friend doesn't have children so is spending her money on travelling. Asked whether either of the parents wanted them to have a girl now, she said her parents claimed they didn't mind, even though her brother has got two boys, whereas she had overheard Kay's mother on the phone saying that they were hoping for a girl now, which Nadia thought was a little ironic in the sense that this granny had not thought she was ever going to be a granny at all, let alone wanting a particular gender. It will be Gabriel's second birthday tomorrow, Nadia and Kay are both working, but later on Nadia's mother is coming over for tea, and she hopes her father will be able to come as well. It appears that Kay has changed her job since last year, and now works for an advice agency, but she can still be at home at least one day a week to look after Gabriel.

At the end of lunch Gabriel started to get a bit fractious again, throwing his drink bottle around and Nadia said he was tired. She cleared up the table and went to wash up, telling Gabriel, 'you show Sue the horse and stable'. The horse and stable were two parts of large jigsaw pieces that he had to slot together, so we played together with these. After a short while Gabriel was clearer getting rather hyperactive, running around and falling over and spinning round and round, which Nadia commented he did when he was tired. After one fall he rather sweetly came over to me on the sofa to have his arm kissed better which Nadia was rather amused about. After finishing his pre-sleep bottle of milk on the settee next to me, Nadia took him up to bed. I took a few pictures of the lounge and the birthday card while she was doing this.

When she came back down shortly afterwards I gave her our thank you vouchers. She had previously booked me a taxi to the station for 2.45pm, which arrived on time and we said goodbye with a kiss on both cheeks. It had been an enjoyable day. At the station I was there half an hour early so I had a coffee and started making my notes, which I continued to do all the way back to London on the train.