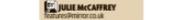


AS A MUM-OF-3 PREPARES FOR START OF TERM...

In my state of complete exhaustion, I dreamed of the day my triplets would be at school... now that time is here and I can't stop crying

▲ NEWBORNS Triplets in hospital at two weeks old



▲ JULIE MCCARTHY
julie@mcmedia.co.uk

SIX shoes are buffed to a shine, three pinafores pressed to perfection and 60 tiny nails are trimmed. And the number of name tags I've sewn into shirts and painting aprons must run into millions (at least, that's how it feels).

Today is my triplet girls' first day at school - and my first with an empty nest.

This is the day I hallucinated about in my zombie state of exhaustion during the first few months as a mum.

Breakfasting Lily, Clara and Elsie every four hours, which took up to 90 minutes didn't leave much time for sleep. And in those harry days my weary mind imagined their future school as utopia.

This is my day of being able to have a hot cup of tea uninterrupted, read a newspaper before it's days old and have a break from simultaneously holding three conversations that all begin with "Mummmmm".

It's the launch day of my new lease of life, when I'll proudly follow nursery gate goss who I'll whop with joy and dander out of their classrooms as soon as I drop off my mini girl gang. So why am I crying?

My first well-up came as a shock in the schoolshop shop. Seeing my girls try on their blazers, which are the dinkiest size yet still too big, made my chin wobble and tears fall.

The girls shrieked with excitement and twirled for the sales assistant to admire them, while I sobbed, dabbed at my eyes and wondered: "Where have my babies gone?"

Suddenly colour is everywhere. Their wardrobes, now now full of soft fabrics, a riot of rainbow colours, are lush with sponges grey and stretchy white.

The arts and crafts table in the playroom is now called the homework desk. And breakfast time is as long as a party.

But a military operation lined with precision. It has happened so many times I can't recall the first. Reaching this milestone has sent me reaching back into my memories. I thought we're lost among the clutter and chaos of daily domestic life.

Four and a-half years ago, seeing them born at 34 weeks at Kingston Hospital in South West London, was the most euphoric moment in the lives of my husband Michael and me.

MEDICAL students watching my 11-section sabbie my huge grin was almost as memorable as seeing three tiny sisters born one minute apart.

Recollections of the neonatal care unit - where our newborns, all weighing just under five, spent a fortnight - are vivid.

Our immense gratitude to each staff member there has never faded and never will.

But I remember nothing of packing up our London flat and driving our six-week-old babies to start our new life near family in Perthshire.

It was the best move we made because our families have played a vital part in bringing up our girls and preparing us through nursery and baby. It isn't unusual to have three children. But having



▲ BABY I still made for time



▲ CALLED UP in costume



▲ CUTE Pretty matching pink outfits



▲ PROUD TUDBLE Julie with, from left, Lily, Elsie and Clara

Breakfast will no longer be a pyjama party but a military operation

I slept off the bed when I was told we had three babies. I was positively shocked to lie down again so the songifier could think if there were four.

We've muddled with love on separating our three personalities. My eldest daughter, a group hug, beamed with pride at all their friends and cried laughing at their attempts to impersonate their Geordie accent.

We've endured love to a depth well beyond experience until inheriting the super sensitivity of parkinson. Coming devastatingly close to losing Lily twice to bronchiolitis as a memory that still haunts and hurts.

Lily remembers nothing of her time in hospital of nursing over and over in her bed and winding around her body like spaghetti on a fork. Of turning blue then grey.

BUT I will never forget how I slept through into a buggy stroll turned into a blue-light ambulance dash to hospital twice in a month. Again, we were deeply indebted to the NHS.

Now they'll be in the care of their school, where their teacher will no doubt learn to spot the difference between identical Clara and Elsie. I've already heard them plotting name-swappping tricks, so I apologise in advance.

They'll be wearing the same clothes for the first time ever, so telling them apart might be just as tricky for their friends. This has already caused an upset. When a boy begged his mum to let him wear a kilt to nursery so he could marry Elsie, he burst into tears to realise he'd inadvertently become betrothed to Clara.

Despite the usual worries (will they announce their teeth, or will they announce their Mumsey wears black knits?) I'll feel sure they are ready for school. Lily's brainy has some quick answers.

She's obsessed with Pageant and the picture of her own name. So who's writing the letters of the alphabet? I've already awarded "Lily" on the living room "Dad's According to Me" book. "We'll write 'Clarke'." Clara is keen to tear up school reports as she runs every where at lightning speed. Asked her name, she'll tell you "Clara Daisy Butler". Elsie will learn that perhaps only half her ambition to become a "princess warrior" is achievable though study.

They might also discover eating fish won't make them swim faster - and that Mumsey is not really 21.

I will miss my girls madly. Their girl silliness, ready cuddles and snuggly laughs. Even the fact they've been best friends to wrestling opportunities. But since I'll have spare time for the first time in their lives I might join a gym to tackle my triple-stroke mum.

My heart has done best to handle the motherhood hand I've changed my body by trying to be a mum and a professional. I'll be able to watch something, other than *Cherries, Red*, I could even try to film.

I now realise I won't want to do joblast star after kissing my girls goodbye on the first day of school. I'll be able to sit on the gym ball which has been set up for the first time. I'll try to blank back tears until I get back to my house, which will be plunged into silence. Then I'll try my luck in a huge box of tissues.

▲ READY TO GO! Julie with the girls in their new school blazers

▲ KUNING IN THE FAMILY Sisters splitting

▲ SEEING MY GIRLS TRY ON their blazers made my chin wobble and tears fall

▲ MOST MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye

▲ MUMS have a widge as you go waving goodbye