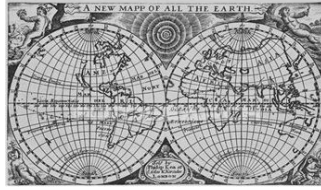


THE GIRL WHO'LL RULE THE WORLD



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by

Jolie Booth



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**In loving memory
of Terry Chapel,
Nanny & Granddad**

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.

Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.

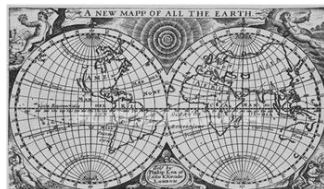
All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.

*Whatever you can do
Or dream you can,
Begin it.*

Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

BEGIN IT NOW!

Mistranslation by John Anster, attributed to Goethe.



LAMMAS

Esmeralda woke to the alarm on her mobile phone. It was 9.30am. She had been in the thick of a particularly vivid and prophetic dream, but the memory of it now slipped out of her mind like a well-spent member. She lay for a moment gathering her thoughts, watching the small black flies continually circling her lampshade, and tried to recall the reason for setting her alarm. Her room was dark. It always was. Only a pathetic trickle of light ever made it through the window from the lofty heights of the courtyard that her room backed onto. Every surface in the courtyard was dripping in pigeon shit, and the pigeons themselves squatted ominously in their own faeces, winking at Esmeralda through the window panes with their yellow beady eyes.

She wondered if it was her name that had led her to a penchant for ugly but intriguing men?

She always found amusement in people's inability to perceive parallel universes. "They're everywhere you look," she commented idly, watching a bird and a butterfly partaking in a dogfight, "and are as clear as the end of your nose."

"But the end of your nose is a blur," he replied.

"I was just telling everyone how you are the light of my life," he told her as he answered the phone.

"Why, thank you," she replied.

"I've decided that I'm going to write a book."

"I remember asking my tutor when I was at secondary school if he could tell me where I was supposed to use a comma. He told me to use it wherever it felt right..." She looked introspective for a moment before concluding, "I didn't go to a very good school."

"I don't like non-committal punctuation marks. Especially the semi-colon. " She snuggled down into his armpit.

"Don't worry, I've got you."

She woke up in his arms. She had been in a very lucid sleep, always aware that she was lying next to him. It took her a long time to get used to sharing a bed with a new lover, as she found it impossible to fall into a really deep sleep whilst she still fancied the pants off someone and was too sexually excited to be able to relax properly. Which was exactly how she was feeling right now, counting down the seconds until he showed signs of life, so that they could commence with the mating ritual that is the morning wriggle. That figure of eight frottaging on each other's legs, this way and that, until one of you could resist it no longer and finally raised your sleepy body against the mighty force of morning gravity and plonked yourself on top of the other.

"That girl's got custardy tendencies," noted Esmeralda.

As much as we try we can't escape from Mother Nature. We box ourselves in and try to make it feel safe, but she is always there, cooing at the window, and doing figures of eight around the lampshade at the centre of our world.

She was impressed that the computer's spell and grammar check insisted Mother Nature was spelt with capitals in the same way that God is. iPod sounds a bit like the name of a god.

Language is so patriarchal... the linear formulation of thoughts and feelings. Box it off, segregate it, and understand it. Fuck that for a laugh.

Esmeralda dragged herself out of bed, wrapped herself up in her blue towelling dressing gown and grabbed her Faith in Nature lavender and geranium shampoo and conditioner. Being the only girl in a house full of boys meant that she was the only one who ever bought toiletries, so she had to keep them squirrelled away in her room. And besides, if the boys did ever buy toiletries, they were always the big brand types or the dirt-cheap variety, both of which were full of harmful chemicals that Esmeralda had decided she wanted to avoid. Her shampoo was free of SLES. Esmeralda didn't know what SLES was, but she was certain that she didn't want it in her shampoo. She was happy to ply her body with harmful chemicals all weekend, but not in the safety of her own shower on a weekday, thank you very much.

She marched into the bathroom, took off her dressing gown, and began running the hot water tap. She pulled off her pyjama bottoms, went to the loo, and then set about the highly skilled art of balancing the taps. She was the only one in the house who had perfected the technique of nurturing the water flow to the exact temperature between freezing cold and scalding hot. The boys in the house had to either have baths or cold showers.

Once it was running to her satisfaction, Esmeralda stripped off her pyjama top and climbed into the shower. She washed her hair with the shampoo, and then

conditioned it with the conditioner. Then she used the shampoo to wash her body. No one had bought soap in an age. She lathered up under her armpits and shaved them. Then she lathered up her between her legs and shaved her bikini line. She could never decide one way or the other about her bikini line. Half of the men she shagged were the kind of men who expected shaved bikini lines and the other half were the kind who advocated the natural look. But Esmeralda had an obsession with preening and she could never resist the urge to neaten up her pubes, even though she never bothered shaving her legs. Plus, she hated hairy bum holes. She couldn't stand the thought of someone doing her from behind and being distracted by what looked like a spider trying to escape from her arsehole. After shaving, she rinsed herself down, turned off the taps, dried, and returned to her room. The whole procedure had taken less than fifteen minutes.

Bridget Jones can kiss my spotty arse.

"I love my daughter," said her mother, "because I'm always left feeling inspired after I've spent time with her."

"My daughter is everything I ever wanted to be!" said her father to her friends, much to her embarrassment.

"I did the whole 'Fury at the Father' thing when I was studying feminism," she explained to her friend, who was pouring vast quantities of sugar into her coffee. "You know... renounced my faith, stopped talking to my dad, dumped my boyfriend, that kind of thing. But then I realised that all that anger was giving them far more energy than any of them actually deserved."

"My mum," replied her friend, "once said that her world was created purely out of her relationships with other women. Any men who might enter her realm from time to time could only do so with her permission."

"Wow!" replied Esmeralda "Your mum sounds cool."

"The relationship between a mother and her daughter is the most important relationship in the whole wide world. Remember that, girls. Love your mothers!"

"I'm keeping your memory alive," she told the photo. "Now I don't know if you were a nice person, and quite frankly, you give me the heebie-jeebies, but I love your house and appreciate the artistic efforts that you went to in keeping your memory alive. I have your diaries and holiday snaps. I'm happy to be a vessel for your memory."

"Thank you," replied the woman in the photo.

They drove the Land Rover through the Broads, rather than along the motorways. It added two hours to the journey, but it provided much better views. It was nice to put a face to all the places she usually passed through on the train. She had spent time stuck at most of them in the past and had cursed their names. But now she discovered they were all quaint little villages, full of personality, and she felt a tinge of guilt.

After an hour or so, they pulled off onto a dirt track and christened his new vehicle. She liked the relationship she had with him. There was no question as to their intentions. It was purely sex when they were having sex, and the rest of the time they thought of each other as an awesome person and a good friend. She had lots of lovely men and women in her life who were like that. It would be tough breaking the news to them all the next time she went exclusive with someone.

"I'd never done it in a car before this summer," confessed Esmeralda.

Corrupting young people had become her favourite new pastime. She had even, for the first time in her life, been toying with the idea of breeding. But then she caught a train

during the school summer holidays and quickly thought better of it.

"I always give my lovers labels rather than using their names. At the moment I'm shagging the eighteen-year-old, the twenty-one-year-old, the rock star, the composer, and the porn star," she confessed, "I suppose it's a distancing technique."

Like the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

"Love is when their shit don't matter," he murmured.

"My slug heart feels like it has been rained on by salt," she wailed. "It burns, master!"

Tapping her fingers over the keyboard of the new laptop felt amazing, like slipping in between satin sheets after a lifetime sleeping in Hessian. She wondered why the computer was insisting that she spelt Hessian with a capital H. Had Hessian been a person with an appetite for coarse fibres or was she spelling it wrong?

The pigeons were mating again. She had woken to their strangled warble. *I'm in love and it's wonderful!*

"Hello, my lover!" he waxed lyrical down the phone.

"Hey, gorgeous, how are you?"

"I'm great. And you?"

"Wicked. Are you at work?"

"Yep."

"I'll be quick, then. I've got good news and great news. What do you want first?"

"Erm... the good news."

"He was wrong about the festival dates. It's not this Saturday."

"Excellent. And the great news?"

"I'm free all weekend, so I will come to yours whenever you want me to."

"Well then, come as soon as you can!"

"Of course. Can't wait to see you."

"You're like a crystal on a string that's spinning around my head," said her mother, making Esmeralda's heart wrench with joy.

"Well, I hope I'm not making you too dizzy." Esmeralda replied.

Every time she thought about the conversation it made her squirm and grin so inanely that people looked at her in the streets as if she were mad.

"I don't have to be sexy!" she shouted at the group of fat, red-faced men as she threw up outside the sex club in the centre of Amsterdam's red-light district. The mushrooms had worn off now and she realised she'd smoked far too much weed. Her puke was a luminous pink though which was rather exciting.

"You can take the girl out of Essex but you can't take the Essex out of the girl... cause she's had so much of Essex in her."

"I'm rubbish at remembering details. All I can go on is what I think and feel," Esmeralda mused.

"But it's all about the details," she snapped.

For yet another moment that evening, Esmeralda really hated her.

"If anyone feels like hitting themselves over the head with a coal scuttle... don't. It's not a good idea," he said.

She woke up thin. She loved it when that happened. Esmeralda set about choosing her clothes for the day. Without consciously meaning to, her clothes always reflected the seasons. In the summer she wore bright colours and in the winter she normally always wore black. Each season would be set around a different theme. This summer it had been polka dots in red and white or blue and white.

Last winter she had worn Goth Victoriana. Winter was starting to creep in again now, and it was all about black outfits with pink accessories. She had dyed pink chunks in her bleached blonde hair and was currently donning a pair of black pin-striped trousers, a black and white striped long-sleeved top, a black trilby, and a pair of pink sneakers. She looked like something out of a Tim Burton film.

"Who is your hero?" he asked her.

"My heroes are Sally Bowles from *Cabaret* and Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. To be honest, I've basically stolen their personalities... I don't know," she said, pushing back her cuticles with her thumbnail, "but I've always known that I'm better than them."

The train was delayed. She tried to remain patient whilst the stupid train squatted silent as the grave at East Croydon station. She began to think about all the times she had travelled towards the arms of a man that she was in love with. Once she had travelled forty-five hours from Sydney to Nottingham so that she could be with the man she loved. Upon arrival he had been playing his music so loud he couldn't hear her at the door. She had been stuck on his doorstep for nearly an hour, before one of his housemates showed up and let her in. In her earlier days she would have been beside herself with anticipation mixed with a little *souçon* of blind fear. Nowadays she just felt pain-free excitement. *This last year of being single is the best thing I have ever done*, she thought to herself.

"Drinking coffee gives me arthritis but it helps me shit. It's a real conundrum."

"There is no I in eye."

"The oranges of words and phrases, the lemons of past tenses."

"The world is my harem," he proclaimed.

The commune was cold and draughty, full of cat hair and screaming children, but it induced the feeling one gets from camping – that there is less need for washing, that you will never get a hangover, and that you have suddenly become a thousand times more resourceful.

Esmeralda spent the morning picking plums from the wilting tree dripping heavily in fruit. It was an absolute treat. She had not had a garden to work in since she had left home ten years ago. September had sneaked in an extra week of summer and Esmeralda bopped around amongst the stinging nettles to the tunes on her iPod, plucking the plums from the branches that she was able to reach. Her hands were feeling arthritic. She had drunk too much coffee the day before, but the pleasure she was feeling from the sun on her face took precedence over any ailments. Her father had told her on the phone earlier that it had been a bumper year for crops and would be a vintage year for wine. There were certainly plenty of plums. She had managed to harvest three carrier bags full.

I hate people who copy me. I'm obsessed with individualism. If I had twins I'd send one to a boarding school and one to borstal.

"I'm a mean, not very lean, on the hammers machine," she explained. "My body is not a temple. It's a skip," she announced.

When she woke up she was still as drunk as a skunk. After an hour or so of writhing and staring into space she thought that it might be time to get up and brave the world. Picking the sleepy dust from her eyes she raised herself weakly, climbed out of bed, stumbled dramatically into the corner with her arms flailing, had a little giggle, and then went for a cold shower.

They kept shagging harder and deeper. All she wanted was for him to crawl up inside her and snuggle up around her heart.

A life without passion is a fate worse than death.

Esmeralda looked at the young man that she had fallen in love with. He was tall, thin, and incredibly good-looking. His dark hair flopped over his dazzling blue eyes, full of stars. There was so much fire burning in his belly it was part of the very fibre of his being. Like hell was missing an escaped fire pixie.

"This is the most comfortable my bed has ever felt."

"My bed isn't comfortable any more. I need to find something the same size and shape as you," he said down the phone.

She wondered how many women he had been with.

A pigeon dive-bombed her head as she sat minding her own business in the park. Pigeons were always dive-bombing her head. She wondered if that ever happened to anyone else.

"Hi... Yes, I want to make a complaint... Right. I've just been dumped in the middle of fucking nowhere because I had been given the wrong information by one of your lot and went and got on the wrong train going in the wrong direction. So the ticket guy told me I needed to swap trains and told me I needed to buy a ticket to make up the difference on my ticket, because I was now two stops away from where mine was valid. But the fucking rail service doesn't accept the cash cards I've got, which means I couldn't pay for the ticket. So he tells me to get off on the next stop and that I'll have to try my luck going the other way. I wait for half an hour to get on the train going the other way, but when it arrives the ticket guy won't let me on because the bastard on the last train had radioed through to

him to say that I wasn't able to pay for my ticket and to not let me on the fucking train!"

No one likes a jobsworth.

The guy sitting opposite her on the train was really cute. She moved her leg a little bit closer to him.

"What do you want from me?" he asked her.

"I want you to be interested in my past but not to buy into any of my baggage. I want you to believe that I will be everything that I believe I will be and yet also excited to discover how things actually pan out. But most of all... I want you to be fearless and brave about love. Will you do all of that for me?"

"I promise you I'll try."

That conversation never really took place. In reality they had never once discussed their liaison. He made her go all tongue-tied.

Playing it safe dulls the heart and blunts the senses.

"I don't like saying I love you," she explained to her friend, "because I believe that my feelings are going to be growing deeper and deeper. Which means that if I tell someone that I love them now then I'll have nothing left to say to capture the strength of my feelings in the future. It means I'll just have to keep saying 'I love you' and 'I love you' all the time until it becomes like a punctuation mark and loses all of its meaning."

"You think too much," said her friend.

Esmeralda suddenly had the idea of moving out of her house-share with the cast of *Planet of the Apes* and into a flat on her own. As soon as the thought crossed her mind she became flooded with fear. The thought of living on her own terrified her. *That's interesting*, she noted. *I guess that means I should do it?* Esmeralda got quite a kick out of facing her fears.

I'm going to move out and write a book, Esmeralda decided. It's probably not going to be a very good book, but it will be my book and that's all that matters.

Destiny: "You know in your heart it will be an amazing book."

Experience: "You're so full of shit."

The insufferable disgust of the optimist...

Esmeralda found herself stuck at Wymondham train station. It had taken her two hours to travel less than ten miles and even that was in the wrong direction. To say she hated the train services was an understatement. It was a shame, she felt, because she was actually rather fond of trains and train stations. Wymondham was wonderfully quaint, with its overflowing hanging baskets and hand-painted signs. It oozed all that was yummy about the country. But the service she had just received from the ticket guards and the rail enquiries phone line had oozed with all that was malignant about England. Privatising the rail service, handing it over to businessmen who were completely void of integrity and had no interest whatsoever in the common man or the effects their crummy services had on people's lives, was a mistake from beginning to end. *Just think*, thought Esmeralda, *how many opportunities have been missed, relationships left in tatters and uncomfortable nights spent in dangerous empty train stations, all because of the incompetence of the privatised rail service. That Margaret Thatcher has a lot to answer for.* Esmeralda breathed in the fragrant evening air of Wymondham station and imagined all of the tears that had been spent on behalf of that wretched woman. *This country has cried more than a river over you*, she thought to herself.

"The saying 'It's not cricket' has become obsolete because it doesn't mean anything anymore. Nothing is 'cricket' these

days. It's all gone down the pan. Damn willynillyness. It pisses me off," she moaned.

"I hate willynillyness. That's why my love for you will never die," he replied.

After all that no one even came to check her flaming ticket. Although she had technically got the journey for free, it had cost her two hours of her life.

She chomped down on the stumpy piece of liquorice root, her substitute for the never-ending stream of tobacco she had always smoked.

Hastings was like a time-warp, with empty throbbing arcades and grease-ridden fish and chip shops. But she liked the feeling of dilapidation. The town was full of possibility. Brighton had won city status for the Millennium, but since then it had lost its charm as a washed-up seaside community and had become a badly-managed culture shock.

The train pulled into an empty station in the middle of nowhere. Looking out of the window she noticed that the standard long thin signs that normally announced the name of the station was just a blank white rectangle. *This looks like my kind of a stop*, she decided, and alighted from the train. She had never been to Orpington, but one of her true loves had gone to college there.

She lay next to him, with the cold autumn light blaring in through the open window bringing with it cool air that delicately lapped at her exposed skin. She realised that for the first time in her life, she felt completely free. The past no longer created her present. She was exactly where she wanted to be and with whom she wanted to be with. She was falling in love and although it was still terrifying, she was feeling fearless. Everything that had led her to where she was now had been an adventure, a journey, a rallying of

experience and insight. The time was now, the place was here and nothing was anything other than it should be. She turned and looked over at his tanned lithe back and inhaled his sexy pungent smell. Mixed with the morning air, it tasted of complete contentment. Everything was perfect and she felt as free as a bird.

"I hate falling in love. It makes me think of a farmer sticking his hand up a cows arse and pulling out a gushing, bewildered, mucus-covered calf," she told her friend.

She wondered what star sign he was. Her birth chart was all fire and earth, hence the important people in her life were either water or air signs. It also meant that she had a penchant for water, always living by the sea. *He must be a water sign*, she decided. *Hence our mutual attraction and his penchant for fire.*

"The duvet is covered in love juice."

"It's covered in sex juice?"

"No... I said love juice."

The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return - Moulin Rouge.

Breakfast was divine. For years she had thought that breakfast was spelt breakfast, because it was a feast at the break of day. It made sense, she guessed, that it was when you broke your fast, but she didn't like the idea that a fast was being imposed upon her by a word. Surely fasting was a choice one made for religious or health reasons, or to raise money for charity? *And I'm sure that sometimes I eat in my dreams*, she thought to herself.

Noting the books on his bookshelf, Neil Gaiman, Brian Froud, *Where the Wild Things Are*. *I could be happy here*, she thought.

"She's a gorgeous ball of sexiness," he said.

"I'm in love and it's glorious!" she wailed.

Esmeralda woke to the sound of the tarpaulin crashing with the wind against the sides of the cart they slept beneath in a makeshift shelter. It was the middle of summer and they were all working at a Tudor re-enactment that was held annually at an old house in Suffolk. She snuggled up closer to the young man she was sleeping next to, one of those friends whom she considered her brethren, having spent every summer with him at the re-enactment since they had been young children. She desperately tried to go back to sleep. The visitors would be arriving soon and she wasn't feeling anywhere near capable of conversing with the public.

Unfortunately the damage she had done to herself the night before began to creep into her consciousness and all she could think about was drinking cool fresh water. Still, she managed to ignore her thirst for about an hour, before finally caving in. Eventually she untangled herself from her friend's gangly limbs and located an old tonic bottle they had filled with water. Gulping down half a litre, she looked around at the dishevelled mess under the cart where they were sleeping. Bodies and cans were strewn everywhere, along with bits of Tudor costume, and it stank of wood smoke and stale beer. She looked down at her sleeping friend and recalled how he'd rather unexpectedly tried to kiss her last night after they had left the campfire. Esmeralda was glad they hadn't gone and messed that one up. It would have been a tragedy.

It was the same with breakfast. In the summer she always wanted to eat muesli with soya milk, drizzled in honey. In the winter, without any conscious thought, she suddenly only fancied porridge made with soya milk, drizzled in honey and sprinkled with raisins.

She decided to get off and wait for the next fast train. It was a huge risk but she was feeling rather reckless.

They went to the pub for a pint and she told him all about songlines.

"Knob end," she slurred.

"We could just sneak off to bed?" he suggested.

"We could actually do that, couldn't we?"

"Damn straight. I mean, I know we are the party, but we are also entitled to an early night once in a while."

"Gosh. I've never even considered that as an option..."

"Come on, let's do it."

"I feel so naughty!"

They had cuddled up next to each other, in their sleeping bags, under the cart. Then he had rather unexpectedly tried to kiss her.

She thought about the man she had last been in love with. He was tall, ginger and filling out a bit at the sides, but she had always loved the way that he managed to pull it off. He was somehow still very sexy and the girls all went mad for him. She'd loved his artwork and his passionate drive. Even though he had cheated on her three times before she'd finally come to her senses and dumped the arsehole, he had taught her to call herself an artist, and this fact alone meant that she would always consider him a dear friend.

Everyone comes into your life for a reason.

"The baker's hand's smelt... because he kneaded a poo," she laughed.

"When was the last time you washed? You smell of cat piss," he asked her.

The risk had been a success. The train slid in between the platforms like a silk tie between two smooth thighs.

Esmeralda crawled out from under the cart and stumbled to her feet. *Fucking hell, I'm still pissed*, she thought to herself.

The bright morning light burnt her eyes as she staggered a few feet away from the cart, undid her trousers and flopped down onto the grass for a piss. She had never understood why women squatted down to piss. It meant that it went all over your shoes, legs and dribbled down your bum. If you sat straight on the grass and pissed slowly then it just seeped down into the ground and you'd only get a bit of a damp bottom. Plus it meant you could do it anywhere, as you only needed to drop your trousers a little way and no one ever suspected you were pissing, especially if you looked them straight in the eye as they walked past. Esmeralda sat on the thick grass enjoying the sensation of relieving her extremely full bladder whilst comfortably partaking in her favourite view in the world - a tree that looked like a witch, whose large hooked nose and pointy chin waved in the wind, looking as if she were cackling at Esmeralda's toilet exploits.

This technique is called "sneaky weeing" and Esmeralda had been taught it by an amazing old witch who had been the mother of one of her friends when she was just a teenager. Unfortunately the woman had succumbed to alcoholism and came to a rather untimely end, but her legacy lived on in Esmeralda's sneaky wees. It even worked on Brighton beach, where afterwards she only needed to roll over a few stones to cover the damp patch and everyone was left none the wiser. It was better than having a dick even. Men still needed to go somewhere to piss. She need only move a few feet away.

"Men treat you completely differently when you have blonde hair. I'm embarrassed for them. It's like watching a moth butting a window pane," Esmeralda told her friend.

"I think conflict makes you evolve. Wars boost the economy and every time I get dumped I get a new haircut,

do a bit of exercise and make darn sure I'm a lot sexier than I was when the bastard was fucking me," she told them.

The gaggle of women cackled in unison.

"There's no plot or story."

"The Aborigines," she explained to him, "believe that the ancestors, who were animal-like spirits, rose up out of the earth and travelled across the land singing all of the landmarks, elements and living things into being. When a pregnant woman first feels her baby kick, she remembers the land features of where she is standing and then goes to tell the elders. They believe that the song of the ancestor jumps up through the legs of the mother and kick-starts the baby into life, which means that the baby's spirit belongs to that songline, rather than to the tribe or its family. The elders know all of the songs of the ancestors and the paths that they took, so when the child is born, they teach the child the songline that it belongs to, then when the child has grown up, it will go on walkabout across the barren landscape of the outback, using the song as a map. They will meet others on the same songline as themselves along the way. They are their brethren and they will help each other out with information about food and watering-holes, but they'll also spend some time hanging out together and enjoying each other's company."

"I think it's important to keep one's love as far away from one's self as possible. Both age-wise and geographically," Esmeralda told her friend.

"You say 'one' a lot, don't you?" he said.

"I know," she replied. "That's because I'm a bit of a cunt."

It was one of those moments when a person chooses to cross over from one universe and into another. She had met up with one of the guys from her course. He was a lovely

chap, very talented and, from time to time, she took him as one of her lovers. He was looking very dapper and she had made an effort too, in her pin-striped suit and trilby. The show they went to see was thoroughly enjoyable and afterwards they sauntered down the stairs of the theatre and into the bar, content with an evening well spent. But when they got into the bar, they discovered a loud gang of crusties, all of whom turned out to be her friends. One of the crusties, a little androgynous skinhead girl by the name of Little Teddy, had also, from time to time, been one of her lovers, and had been living up a mountain in Spain for the last three years, so they were very pleased to see each other.

The next thing she knew, he had gone home on the last train, kissing her on the cheek goodnight, reassuring her that he expected nothing less. Esmeralda suddenly found herself drinking cheap red wine from a shiny silver sack, in a big top tent, surrounded by circus types, dogs and small children. In the morning she peeled herself out of the soft arms of Little Ted, located her clothes and caught the train home.

"Where have you been?" asked her housemate as she walked in through the door.

"I ran away with the circus," she replied.

"Oh... That was quick."

The shower was freezing cold, but it was exactly what she needed after a night at the circus.

"Wow. That's amazing!" he said, visibly impressed with the idea. "So they believe that the world is created out of songs?"

"Yep."

"That's wicked."

"And I really believe it's true. If you think about it, we are born on the same wavelength as some people and not

others. And the reason why the world seems like it's such a small place is because when we go on walkabout around the globe, we visit the places that call to our particular songline and we meet like-minded people along the way, who exchange information with us about other places we'd enjoy and hang out with us for a bit. You'll inevitably know all the same people too, all of us being of the same songline."

"Cool," he said, "I've never thought of it like that before."

She decided to stop off in Cambridge and visit an old friend. "I'll meet you at the station and we'll go straight to the pub."

"Great plan."

"Can we ride on the roof?"

"Go on, then. But don't stand on the bonnet, and hold on tight."

"Excellent."

"And it can only take eight of you."

"OK."

She wondered if it was the mother who sat down to teach the songline to her baby or if it was the elders?

They had recorded her snoring. She had passed out at some point and couldn't remember the later part of the evening. She woke up on the seating area in the trailer. His brother and sister had slept in the bed and he was asleep on the seating opposite her. She was sure that he had arranged for them to have their own caravan. Either everyone woke up in unison or the noise of their movements had woken her up, but they were all awake now, sitting up and already tucking into the booze left over from their pilfering expedition at the party the night before. She remembered being at the party, but didn't remember getting back to the trailer.

"You passed out," his sister told her, "and were snoring like a bastard... I recorded you." But luckily she couldn't find the recording on her phone.

She had found the entrance to fairyland. It wasn't quite what she had expected, but it would have to do. The next day, she left him, safe in the knowledge that something special was flourishing.

A cloud of sparrows swooped down and caught onto the telegraph wire.

"Do you remember when sparrows used to be the most common bird in the country?" she asked him.

"No. It's always been pigeons in my lifetime..." he replied.

"I guess you're too young," she mused. "It used to be sparrows, hands down."

He called her his summer girl, which had made her heart skip several beats. Donning a trilby, she entered the balmy evening.

She realised that she hadn't listened to music for ages. When they finally reached the entrance to the new poncey "place to be" club in London, they found that they weren't all on the guest list. Whilst she ended up having to pay £20 to get in, several of the lithe, blonde, success stories she was with had already sauntered their way through. Inside, the club was wall-to-wall with tossers. Everyone was so busy trying to look good, they had completely forgotten about enjoying themselves. She pushed her way through the stench of perfume and cigarettes to the bar and ordered two vodka and Red Bulls. Three women stood on her feet in stilettos on the way and not one of them apologised. When the barman had finished pouring the drinks, she handed him a £20 note. He stood and stared at her with contempt.

Embarrassed, she produced another tenner and waited for her change. He gave her two pounds back.

They ran away from that soulless hole and made their way to a proper club - one that was open all night, sold cheap drinks and was wall-to-wall with hot South American guys laden with pills. She and her mate scored a couple and then danced their arses off. They soon gathered quite a following of suitors and picked their way amongst them, snogging some, getting drinks off others and giving the odd lucky one their number.

Her head was full of cotton wool. *I'm too tired to sleep*, she thought to herself. *I'm too stoned and too broken. I'm going to have to watch porn and frig myself to sleep*. She wished he were there with her. A warm pair of arms would be lovely right now, along with a slow cosy screw. That's the only trouble with being single - the lonely nights when you just want a bloody cuddle. She would have really fancied her mate's boyfriend if he hadn't have been her mate's boyfriend.

Esmeralda woke up. The pigeons were mating again. She had woken to their strangled warble a million times. *I need to move to the countryside*, she thought to herself.

"I've got another car that needs christening."

"Great."

She donned her bright pink pants and her low-slung jeans, which allowed her pants to peep slyly out of the top of them. She liked the fact that her pants matched her hair. They were exactly the same shade of pink.

It had turned out that the man she loved was an Aries. He was all fire. She was suddenly aware that there was a chance she might get burnt. Being fearless in love isn't the same as being reckless.

"Sweet dreams, fire child."

It's time to write a book, she thought, but if I'm going to write a book, then I will need a room of one's own. If those twats can write a book, then so can I. I'm going to write a book about writing a book.

"We were just talking about shooting things, then about tinnitus and then about blowjobs. I just love the conversations I have with my family..." he snorted.

"I don't want the summer to end," she mused.

"You can't fight time."

"I know, but why does it insist on going so fast?"

Esmeralda had felt an old enemy creep up on her over the course of the weekend. A twinge of jealousy had leapt up whenever he had mentioned a woman he had been with. He wasn't being an asshole mentioning them, he was just being normal, but it had made her uncomfortable. She hated the feeling of jealousy. It was her least favourite emotion in the world and she hadn't felt it once in the whole time she had been single. She hated it so much that it was almost a good enough reason never to allow herself to fall in love with anyone ever again. But she knew that was stupid. The whole point of falling in love is so that you allow someone else into you innermost bubble, which of course is going to make you feel vulnerable. Besides, Esmeralda had an addiction to facing her fears that far outweighed everything else. The whole time she had been single she had been having trouble remembering the word "compromise".

Esmeralda sat around the table with the female trinity. The Crone – a midwife and a mother of three who had just gone through her menopause; The Mother – a musician, songwriter and a single mother of four; then there was Esmeralda – residing somewhere in the undefined realm between Virgin and Mother, which she liked to call Slut. They talked, over many cups of tea, about their lives. They

shared stories, supporting each other's points of view and congratulating one another on their voyage of discoveries. Calmly they shared out their nuggets of gold around the table.

People can only intimidate you with your permission - Eleanor Roosevelt.

Esmeralda felt like she had been lost in a bubble of hedonism all summer. She was looking forward to settling back into her routine bubble again. Well... sort of.

She was on her way to see one of her oldest friends. It was always weird seeing her because their paths had taken such different directions over the years, but at the same time it was good because they both could see the whole distance of where the other had travelled from over the other one's shoulder.

Whilst chatting to her oldest friend, she smiled as she realised that she was talking in metaphors again and her friend had always laughed at her for doing this. She knew that her friend would be thinking this too, but there was no need for either of them to physically acknowledge the situation in any way. They both knew what the other one was thinking.

There was a fairy caught on her jumper.

Esmeralda listened to one of her best friends rutting with her housemate in the next room. *How sweet*, she thought to herself. It was obvious that they still liked each other.

"I love dancing. When I dance I feel like the sexiest person on the planet," she told him.

"You are the sexiest person on the planet," he reminded her.

"Oh yes... You're right," she agreed.

She missed the sea, but she was loving the countryside.

The smell of woodsmoke engulfed her and permeated every pore in her skin and every fibre of her clothing, in the way that only woodsmoke can.

Her world was made up of bubbles, each with its own location, group of friends and season. Not to mention the bubbles of her past that she still possessed a membership to, even if just in memory. Each bubble was formed of a thin film separating each of them, one that she passed through as easily as a ghost through a wall. *No wonder it's all so confusing*, she thought to herself. *I'm like a glob of cuckoo-spit hanging on the bush of life.*

The landscape of his bubble passed out of view. The nourishing feminist rants, the parties with his youthful vivacious friends, the crystal healing and the organic home-grown food, all disappeared into the darkness. Now she was heading towards the landscape of her routine bubble, with its squirrelled-away toiletries, her cynical housemates, her Nathan Barley studio and a long list of unanswered emails.

She was looking forward to partaking in a bowl of frozen Acai with muesli and a drizzle of honey.

She loved honey.

And the word drizzle.

Her longest relationship had been with an extremely attractive man who had been her brethren for many years. There had always been a strong chemistry between them and they had loved each other very deeply. But they had been with each other during the chrysalis stage of development and as they had turned into beautiful butterflies, they had found that their love for each other had been caught up in the empty chrysalis shell they were leaving behind. She was aware that the man that she loved

now was still a chrysalis and she didn't want to go through all that again. *I'll meet you on the other side*, she decided.

"Hi Mum!"

"Hello gorgeous, how are you?"

"I'm great, thanks. I'm stuck at a station, so I thought I'd give you a call."

"Where are you?"

"Deepest, darkest Norfolk."

"How's the last few days been?"

"Er... it was good, but it's put it all into perspective a bit more."

"In what way?"

"Well... I can see that for it to work, we need to spread what would normally happen in six months, over a few years."

"Right?"

"Because there are limitations at the moment on how well we can communicate with each other. We get on really well when we are around other people and the connection between us is incredibly strong. But when we are on our own, we don't really have much to talk about."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Well, there's the age gap, obviously. And then, because he didn't finish school, he can feel a bit threatened by stuff that seems too academic. And then also, he hasn't flown the nest yet and experienced what's out there in the world. All we really have to talk about is the few memories we have created thus far and whatever is happening at the present moment."

"Do you think that's going to be a problem?"

"Well, no. He is an amazing guy and as soon as he gets out there and has spent some time in the world then we will have loads to talk about. Our communication will grow the

more we build a backlog of experiences together. And he knows that I totally adore him and I know that he adores me. We're on the same wavelength and all that, but this can't happen now. It's too big an age gap."

"It's good that you can see the limitations at the moment and that that doesn't mean anything's wrong."

"No, 'cause in some ways it's great, 'cause our communication is completely grounded in the present, which is extraordinary. It's something really special. It's not about stories and old baggage. And it's good not to be over-analysing the situation, or trying to define our feelings with words; we are going completely on our own instincts. And people don't listen to them enough. At the moment my instincts are telling me that this is something fun and light."

"And you will know when it's the right time for it to move into something more serious. Are you exclusive to each other then, or don't you know?"

"I don't know. I think that it might be a good idea for us to just carry on as we have been. I'll see him again loads next summer, but in the winter it's probably best if we just get on with our own thing. I like the idea of him being a fair weather friend."

"And that means you are taking your time with it."

"Yeah, that's it. Listen, the train is coming. I'll call you back in a bit."

"OK, darling."

"Thanks for that, Mum. It's weird 'cause I don't have anyone else I can talk to about this. I can't talk about it to any of his friends and none of my friends know him. It's like a dream I keep entering in and out of."

"Well, you know I'm always here."

"Sure do! Love you lots."

"Love you too, darling. Speak to you soon."

"Bye!"

"Bye."

It was nearly a full moon. *My period didn't really happen this month*, noted Esmeralda. It only lasted a day and the blood never even turned red. She wished her periods would go back to normal again. Damn contraceptive pill. She had liked it when her periods had coincided with the full moon. It made her feel in tune with things.

The train pulled into Brighton station. It was the only place she had ever lived that she loved coming back to. It always made her smile. A much-needed sea breeze cooled the sweat between her nose and her sunglasses.

The air was full of fairies. Not the winged variety with breasts, but the fluffy stars that float around the place, having begun their lives on thistles. Esmeralda wondered why we couldn't be satisfied by the magic and wonder of these fairies and had to go around making up fake ones.

She wasn't saying that she didn't believe in fairies, by the way.

There was a cute guy on the opposite platform and he kept checking her out. She smiled at him.

Esmeralda listed her plans for the next year in her notebook...

- Move into a room of one's own.
- Learn to drive and get a van.
- Get *uber* fit.
- Enjoy my last year at school to the max.
- Be a space for "Anything is Possible" in the next year.

Esmeralda felt old. She had just had the best summer of her life, but her body was bearing the brunt of it now. She certainly wasn't as young as she used to be, plus she had spent the whole summer with people who were five to ten years younger than her, which had been a constant

reminder of her own mortality. But it had been good fun. They had fed Esmeralda the powerful optimism she had been in desperate need of. One thing was for sure, though, and that was that this summer she had noticed something settling inside of herself. She had settled into womanhood and who she was as a person. Her 28th birthday was looming and she knew that the next two years of her life were going to be the most exciting yet. Great changes were afoot as she was entering the next stage of life. Esmeralda smiled at the door to her future and her fingers twitched like antennae with anticipation. It had been one hell of an adventure so far and the next ride looked set to be even more exciting than the last.



ITALY

"I think I was about eleven years old. I owned a pair of bright pink fluorescent dungarees – I had a real thing for fluorescent colours and these dungarees had neon-yellow pockets and buttons all over them. They were quite a sight – and I lived in them.

"We went to Italy, where Dad had been working for the last year. Dad seemed to me to be very important and did very important things. He was a computer programmer and I didn't know what that meant. He worked in London, which was a big important place, *and* he worked for a year in Paris and a year in Milan, and I didn't even know where those places were! This made him a very important and special person. Far more impressive than Mum, who was training to be a teacher and everyone knows what a teacher is and all the teachers I'd ever met had not been very exciting people. I liked my Mum but she did normal things.

"I was dead excited about going to Milan and seeing all the exciting places where my Dad had been hanging out. We spent a few days in Milan. I can't remember where we stayed, but I can remember trying to visit the Duomo and not being allowed in because my Mum and me had bare

legs and shoulders. This was my first brush with orthodox religion and I didn't like the way it made me feel. As if my skin was dirty or something. Instead of going in the Duomo therefore we went up on the roof and enjoyed the amazing views. There were lots of statues of little naked cupids that had lost their heads and Dad put his head on one of the empty necks so it looked like he had a little cupid body. Then he stuck his finger between the little cupid's legs so it looked like he had a little willy and I thought that was really funny. I liked it when Dad was naughty. I remember there being a statue of the Madonna on the roof. She was white and gold. I wondered why they had a statue of a pop star up there and was confused as I was sure the cathedral was older than her.

"In the square in front of the cathedral was a man selling fresh broken-up bits of coconut in a beautiful fountain of ice and running water. It was cold and refreshing and exotic. I got addicted to lemon sorbet and we had to stop every time we passed the multi-coloured ice cream stalls, piled with unusual exciting flavours.

"We also went and camped for a few days by a lake at the foot of Mont Blanc, which we thought was a funny name as it sounded like Mont Bonk. All the way there we listened to Madonna's new album and I learnt all the words to *Little Jessie* because I thought it was a brilliant song. I remember my arm got sunburnt from where I was leaning it out the window. We camped by a lake called Lake Maggiore, which was partly in Italy and partly in Switzerland. We went for a drive around Switzerland and I remember seeing someone cut their grass with a scythe, and all the houses looked like cuckoo clocks. The lake was beautiful. It was fresh water so my brother and I used to run down to the lake every morning to swim in it, instead of having a shower. It was

full of little fish that would nibble your toes if you sat still for long enough. One time we met some Italian kids who jumped in and swam around with us. They were a girl and a boy. I really liked the boy. When I got back to England we found we had a photo of him and I lied and told everyone he was my boyfriend. We took our airbeds down there and used them as lilos. I think I remember Mum and Dad not getting on for some reason on that day. In these situations I would always think that Mum was being a spoilsport. I was a real daddy's girl.

"Dad hired a speedboat and we drove it around the lake. We went really fast, which was exciting. We all had a go at driving it. I love driving speedboats.

"We ate lots of great food. There was a waiter at the local bar at the campsite who kept flirting with me and who I kept going to for Coca-Cola, which I would ask for in Italian. We went to a restaurant next to the water and I wore my pink dungarees and a new headscarf I had bought in Milan that had lots of different acid men faces all over it. There were punk acid men, flamenco acid women, lots of acid faces in a row like acid traces, pirate acid men and baby acid men. They were each their own bright fluorescent colour. At the restaurant I had folded-over pizza for the first time. We bought some fishing rods and sat on the decking and tried to catch some fish. I can't remember if we actually caught anything.

"We had driven all the way to Italy in my Dad's Triumph Acclaim, which was much cooler than my Mum's clapped-out Opel, and at one point a huge lorry drove into the back of us and we all got whiplash. I think we also ran out of petrol another time and Dad had to walk for miles to go get some more."

"That was the first family holiday we ever had abroad and it was such an adventure. But the most exciting thing was how Dad was making money now, and there was a whiff of success hanging over the family. We had moved out of our council house, which Margaret Thatcher had allowed us to buy, and we had moved into a new house on a new housing estate. We had two cars and went camping abroad instead of camping in Robin Hood's Bay. It felt great. Although I wasn't really old enough to understand debt, I knew we were in a lot of debt, and Dad would sometimes shout at the computer, head-butt the walls or the steering wheel in his car, setting off the hooter for all the neighbours to hear.

"Not long after that, the recession hit. I didn't really know what a recession was, but I knew it meant that my Dad's computer programming company folded and he had to sign on the dole. He was very ashamed and didn't like the fact that Mum had become the breadwinner. She was a fully fledged teacher by now.

"My Dad got a job at the local college, plugging in light bulbs and that kind of thing. Then he had an affair with my drama teacher and left us. It didn't matter financially; Mum could look after us on her wage and we soon got used to living on a small amount of money again. He had left her with all the debts though, which was mean.

"It took many years for me to go back to doing drama again."



MICHAELMAS

She woke up in her own bed. She hadn't slept that deeply in ages. Esmeralda lay there stretching her arms out, relishing the comfort of her own smell, her own surroundings and her own lovely bed.

The house was full of pigeon mites.

Get your own fucking shampoo, Shane! was scrawled in biro on the side of the empty Head and Shoulders bottle.

"It's so depressing and so incredibly right-wing. It's an example of the abused child becoming the abuser. They formed the 'Promised Land' to escape from the labelling and the ghettos, but they have created a world where they label people and put them in ghettos," her friend told her.

"Yeah, I'd recommend going there... for less than a week and if someone else is paying."

"Live in London once," exclaimed Esmeralda, "but leave before it turns you into a hard-headed knob-end. Live in Brighton once, but leave before it turns you into a soft-headed knob-end."

"Can you help me dye my hair?" her friend asked.

"I really want to lose a stone in weight," moaned Esmeralda.

"If I get jowls like my father and my sister... then I'll consider surgery," mused her friend.

"I'm dreading my tits turning into spaniel's ears if I breastfeed, which I'm sure they will. But I refuse to make my child suffer just so I don't have weird-looking tits."

"You have to allow yourself to ease into the pain," explained the older woman, who did not appreciate the term 'Crone'. "By the time I had my last child, I had learnt to connect with the baby and I was in tune with her every step of the way. I could feel exactly what was going on in my birthing canal and she came out with her eyes wide open and took straight to my breast. It was the most spiritual experience I had ever had."

Her friend who was a midwife taught a technique called "Orgasmic Birthing".

Esmeralda was quite a hippie, but she thought she might have found her line.

"There's this indefinable time after the menopause, when you're meant to be the Crone. I'm fifty years old but I may live for another fifty years. I'm only half way through my life. Am I really expected to be a Crone for half of my life?"

The thorn bushes were bulging with blackberries. Winter was on her way.

She loved the sound of his voice. He sounded like the chap from *The Good Life*, who was always doing voiceovers for commercials. He sounded like autumn and apple pies.

The yellow Lamborghini slid along the road like a slice of processed cheese.

"I'm full of cheese and tea," scoffed her friend, as soon as she answered the phone.

"That's weird," replied Esmeralda. "I just wrote the word cheese."

Esmeralda respected midwives. She had met two in the last year and they were both totally sorted women, working in the shadows of the towering pillars of modern medicine and stupid politicians who thought they knew best. These women worked hard towards making the most natural thing known to mankind seem as normal as possible, despite the attempts of medicine to turn it into a "medical event".

Facilitating what is happening, rather than lead to what you think ought to be happening. If you must take the lead, lead so that the mother is helped, yet still free and in charge - Tao-te Ching

They sat drinking tea in a bohemian eatery that was done out like you had died and gone to Harvest Festival heaven.

"How old are you?" asked the thirty-something with two kids.

"Twenty-seven"

"Ah, so you have to take that into consideration. You're coming up to your Saturn Returns."

Esmeralda looked at her confused.

"Have you heard of that?" she asked.

"No. What is it?"

"It's when Saturn returns to your chart, which happens after every 28 years in total, but some people are also affected by the seven year quarters of its movement as well. It's when people tend to go through really big changes. Most people can think of something significant that happened in their lives when they were 7, 14, 21, 28, etc. It's when a lot of big things tend to happen, like getting married or divorced or having kids. I was 28 when I had my first child."

Esmeralda had only realised she was a woman two years ago. Before that she had thought that she was a boy. Not only did she think she was a boy, but she thought she was the alpha of all alpha males, with the biggest balls in Christendom. She had been proud as punch the day that she received the highest marks in a masculinity test she had taken in her A-Level psychology class. She always hung out with guys. She was competitive with men, and was currently living in a house full of alpha males, trying to give as good as she got. Being a radical feminist and all, she used to think that men and women were basically the same creature - that everyone had a varying degree of masculinity and femininity in each of them and this had little to do with whether they actually possessed balls or tits. But in the last few years she had realised how different she was from the men in her life. They had grown up to be very different creatures indeed. Her male friends were patriarchs and she now felt every bit the matriarch.

"If you hate women you're called a misogynist, but what are you called if you hate men?" asked Esmeralda.

"Don't know. I've never heard of a word for that before," replied her friend.

"What about pasogynist?" offered up Esmeralda.

"Did you just make that up?" asked her friend.

"Yes..." admitted Esmeralda.

"That's quite good," her friend commended.

"I love porn. It makes me imagine how much damage I would do if I had a cock."

A rat scurried across their path.

"That's the second rat I've seen in as many days," she observed to her friend.

"Life is without meaning. But that isn't a bad thing. It's like having a blank slate... You can chose to put whatever

you want on it. I believe in all gods, fairies, and that I've got bigger balls than any man I've ever met."

"Hanging out with eighteen-year-olds looks like it's done you the world of good."

"Are you taking the piss?"

"No. I mean it. You're glowing. Are you pregnant?"

"Don't fucking say that. That wouldn't be funny at all."

"It will be the third time I've got it right."

"Great."

She had a mosquito bite on her leg the size of a side-plate.

"I can't think of a single famous person alive today whom I could call a hero."

"Steve Irwin used to be my hero."

"My friend came up with the term spooking," she explained. "A spoon and a fork are both useful instruments, but you put them together and they become utterly useless. Well that's just like a couple when they first get together. Separately, they are both fantastic people who are real laugh to have around, but you put them together and they become utterly useless. They have become a spook. It's an absolute tragedy, but it's happened to the best of us."

"The ridiculous thing is that when I split up with my last boyfriend I said that I wanted to be single for at least two years. And it was like I cast a spell. Immediately things came into my life that were going to take two years to complete. My course, the projects I've taken on, my 'Saturn Returns'. They're all going to take the next two years to happen. The universe is supporting me with my wish. But I'm doing everything in my power to sabotage myself. I look for love in every man I meet. I'm acting like a naughty school girl, trying to pull one over on myself."

"But you get those disposable spoon-like forks", she contested. "Like baby forks. And they're well useful. You can spoon the maximum amount of food into your mouth and they're round with soft edges so they're safe for babies to use."

"I know. That occurred to me as a hole in the argument too..." she conceded. "Well, I guess then it boils down to a case of design. Normal forks and spoons are beautifully designed, individual and durable. Whereas those spoon-fork things are homogenised, tacky and disposable."

They looked at each other for a moment and then began to laugh.

"Before you have sex, tell him he's not allowed to make a sound, because it makes you feel sick. They respect you so much more."

"Relationships are like playing a game of Jenga. You keep giving up parts of yourself until it all crashes down around your ears."

She could feel herself becoming more powerful every single day. She could feel the discomfort and uncertainty of her twenties ebbing away - being replaced with resolution, boundaries and a sense of purpose.

"I realised it wasn't working when I read him a poem I'd written for him and he took it the wrong way. He thought I was saying that he is a slapper."

"But if you think about it, you didn't like it when your last boyfriend described you as having a potty mouth, did you? You said you didn't want the man you loved to see you in that way. Maybe he just didn't like the way you were describing him?"

"That's a good point."

"I wonder how he does want you to see him, then?"

"That's what is doing my head in." whined Esmeralda, "I have no fucking idea."

She was concerned that she had never had a secret. Every event, conversation, and thought she had ever had in her life had been shared with everyone that she had ever met. She suddenly felt very exposed.

She took her nose ring out and she didn't mention it to anyone. She knew that no one would notice, even her nearest and dearest. At last she had a secret.

"Rohypnol is wasted on men", she explained at the pub. I live with four boys. If I had some rohypnol I'd spike them all and dress them up in pretty frocks. Then I'd take photos of them sitting around having a tea party with fancy cakes and touching each other. They'd know nothing about it until I'd invited them all to the opening night of my exhibition."

Esmeralda had always been into science. Her favourite toy as a child had been a science kit, until one day her brother poured all of the chemicals down the toilet, to see what would happen. She had never quite forgiven him for that.

She had woken this morning with her science head on her shoulders. Esmeralda had been roused from a very, very deep sleep. She was loving her bed at the moment. For the last week builders had been working on the flat downstairs and had roused her from her dreams with drilling and hammering, every morning, right under her head. She didn't mind, though. It made a change from the pigeons, plus she was back at school and celebrating her freedom from the cycle of hedonism that had consumed her for the summer months. Already this morning she had got up and spent half an hour exercising, grounding herself in the moment, opening up her breathing and putting herself back into her body. Now she was in the bathroom inspecting

herself in the mirror. Her roots were showing, which meant that her hair had grown about half a centimetre since she had last dyed it at her mother's house. Her nail varnish was all chipped off and had grown away from her cuticles, leaving little pink islands sprinkled in glitter, floating in a sea of nail. Her nails had only grown about two millimetres. She had painted them on the same day that she had dyed her hair. This meant that her hair had grown at twice the speed of her nails. She also cut her toenails on the same day and so she now inspected them. She found that they hadn't really grown at all. She wondered if that meant the sun stimulated hair and nail growth. She had once read in a girlie magazine that the expectation of sex stimulated hair and nail growth, but she didn't know if that was really true. Her hair did grow quickly and she was always expecting sex, but she thought that girlie magazines were the spawn of Satan, so it was probably safe to assume that it was a load of old bollocks.

Esmeralda brushed her teeth and put on her dressing gown, accidentally knocking a cross off the shelf above the mirror with her sleeve. She had made the cross six years ago for a photo shoot. It was covered in glitter and had a sentence from the Bible written across the top which read: *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. Genesis 3:16.* A Barbie doll was nailed to it in the place of Jesus. Esmeralda was also really into religion. Even though she had renounced her faith in the Christian God over a decade ago, she still believed in something greater than herself, but she didn't have the audacity to presume what in hell it could be. Smoothing the hair down on the Barbie doll, she replaced it on the shelf, unlocked the door and returned to her room.

Do not read beauty magazines, they will only make you feel ugly - Baz Luhrmann.

"When I was growing up," Esmeralda discussed with her chums, "we had a female Prime Minister and then of course the Queen. It couldn't help but instil an enormous sense of self worth in a young lady."

"Have you ever wondered if you could handle chopping up a body?" asked her friend, changing the subject.

"Yes."

"Do you think that you could?"

"I hope so," she replied, " because it's the kind of thing that you'll only ever know for certain when the situation arises, but will inevitably be the kind of situation where it's vitally important that you can handle it."

Thank God for that, thought Esmeralda, as she found the toilet roll down the side of the toilet. She had just relieved herself of a coffee-fuelled poo, before noticing the toilet roll holder was empty.

"The trouble is with matters of the heart, dear brother," - she was giving her brother advice again - "is that you can't for love nor money ever know what is going on in your heart of hearts. Knowing is a cognitive process and the heart does not work on this frequency. The heart is part of the body, so the only way to understand what your heart is actually after is by looking at your actions and weighing these up with your intellect. For example, physically, you know that at the moment you are not going to be meeting your intellectual, fun-loving, ambitious or worldly wise equal, so any relationship that forms, no matter how overwhelmed with love you may feel in the present moment, isn't really what you are looking for. Your soul mate is not in Essex. Now you're moving, at first you aren't going to be playing as big as you want to be, but in time you

will be taking life by storm and will be meeting bright young things who really get your juices going. Until your actions fit with the kind of person you believe yourself to be, you can't be meeting the kind of partners that your heart truly desires. Until you feel like your actions match with your view of yourself, stay fucking single. Simple really."

"What other people think of you is none of your business," she told him.

His eyes lit up.

Her brother was her best friend now, though.

"Girls with brothers are useless," explained a mate of hers. "Their friends are all blokes and there is always that one guy hanging around that's her 'good mate' when really he wants to lay her. Girls with brothers are definitely easier to pull, though. Whereas girls who have sisters are much higher maintenance, but it's worth it 'cause they're always surrounded by a flock of knickers. She'll slag you off to them all the time, but they'll all fancy you anyway, so it doesn't matter."

She realised that it was always going to be hard for her to be in a relationship again, because she was an active member of so many different realities. Whoever she ended up with would have to see her in all of her different worlds for him to fully grasp the kind of person she was. Although she remained the same person whoever she was with, it was the fact that she got on with such a wide range of people, from different backgrounds and age groups. That was one of her greatest assets, one that could not be overlooked by someone who was in love with her. There was no way though for him, or her, to fully grasp this asset without spending time with her in all of her different worlds. And they wouldn't enjoy doing that unless they were that kind

of a person too. She'd only met one other person who was like that and he lived a million miles away.

The soundtrack to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* began to play on her iPod and it transported her back to her last relationship. After watching that film together they had wept bitterly into each other's arms. They had both known the end was nigh.

"I am gay," announced her mobile phone as a text message came through. She realised that one of her new fifteen-year-old best mates had been tampering with her phone.

"I think there is something to be said for homosexuality being hereditary."

"Why's that?"

"Well, my dad is bisexual," she explained, "and so am I."

"Your dad is bisexual?" he queried.

"Yes. He realised just before he got married to my drama teacher, but decided that it didn't matter and went ahead with the wedding anyway. But it meant that he had spent the whole of his life denying his inner artist, in case anyone thought he was a soft sissy and suspected that he was gay. Now he doesn't care and is embracing himself as an artist."

"Poor bloke."

"Yeah, but he's happy now."

"Janis Joplin had the same problem. She struggled with her sexuality and her art."

"I think it's quite a common theme. I guess it's what happens when you feel society won't allow you to fully express yourself."

"I'm not sure if it's a case of nature or nurture though. I suspect its more nurture. I don't buy into this idea of a gay gene."

"The pink gene?"

"Yeah," she laughed, "apparently it's bent." They all chuckled.

"I don't see religion and science as polar opposites, I think they are two halves of a circle," explained Esmeralda as she folded up her sheets. Her friend sat on the edge of her bed smoking a roll up. "Science explains how the car works and religion tries to figure out who invented the car and why."

"The engine is science and Ford is God?" asked her friend, for clarity.

"Something like that."

"I love happy accidents," Esmeralda exclaimed.

"I'm pregnant... It was an accident," fretted her friend.

Esmeralda went with her to the clinic. Both of them had been down this road before. They both knew how unpleasant an experience it was. She was going to try the tablet this time, thinking that it might possibly be less fucked up than the operation. It turned out that this was not the case at all. She had a horrible old time. If ever you're going to get it done, let them knock you out cold.

"I love sex."

"Sex with him was amazing, but he always wanted to do it in the same position," she mused.

"Which one's that?" her friend asked.

"With me on top."

"Well... at least it wasn't with him on top the whole time..." she noted.

"Good point."

"My favourite position is doggy style, with my face rammed down into the pillow."

"That's Tracy Emin's favourite position too."

"How in the blue blazes do you know that?" she asked her.

"I read it," she replied.

Another of her friends had a shelf of cute yet screwed-up-looking kitsch dolls, one for each of her abortions. She had six dolls and had given birth to one child. She thought nothing of it and didn't find the experience in the least bit unpleasant. But she also assigned to the 80's mode of feminism that was all about the mastery and then denial of the female condition. Plus she went private.

The phone said "Private Number" on the display. *I'm not answering that*, thought Esmeralda. *It's probably my cult.*

Her family had a history of following cults, because they were the kind of people who liked to believe in the things that are greater than themselves. They weren't really cults, though, they were just groups of people taking some time out of life to reflect on things for a bit. However this always tended to attract a lot of lost souls whose behaviour would then freak other people out a bit. These days most people see religions as evil and distrust anyone who is deeply passionate about anything. Cynicism is the new world order.

"Why not just believe?"

She felt like a queen bee. All she wanted to do was dance her arse off or be filled to the brim with cocks. She sat squirming in her seat, doing secret circles.

An Irishman had once broken her heart. She didn't trust Irishmen anymore.

"The worse way to be dumped is when the bastard just stops ringing you or answering your calls. You're left deserted on the merry-go-round of romance, going dizzy with denial."

Good girls go to heaven, but bad girls go wherever they like! was scrawled on the toilet wall.

"Suicide is so selfish," he bitched as he strode towards her, "Imagine jumping in front of a train at rush hour. If you going to kill yourself, you could at least do it quietly."

Eat your taboos.

His eyes were glazed over as he walked along the street. He was plugged into his iPod and lost to the soundtrack of his own self-masturbatory movie, making love to his own ego.

"Can I fuck you up the arse?"

"No, I only do anal sex with people I'm in love with. I think it's crass otherwise. Can I fuck you up the arse?"

"What with?"

"I've got a strap-on."

"A strap-on? Let's have a look!"

"Say hello to my little friend! This is Bert Murphy."

"Your strap-on has got a name?"

"Yep. It's the same name as my teddy bear and it's what I'm going to call my first born child."

"Even if it's a girl?"

"Damn straight."

"Poor kid... It's huge."

"Are you up for it?"

"Go on then. If I'm going to let anyone shag me up the arse, it might as well be you."

"Loving your logic."

She couldn't stop herself from writing. The floodgates were open now and it was all pouring out. She had written all the way from Cambridge to Brighton yesterday and then had continued writing when she got home. It was now the next day and she was writing again. It was 3.23pm, she had been writing since 10am and she still hadn't even broken her fast.

"Never let a man fuck you in the arse unless he lets you fuck him in the arse first," she advised her friend. "That also goes for going down on him."

She used to hate Thai women because her ex-boyfriend had been obsessed with them. It was daft, though, because she had exactly the kind of features that most Thai women coveted. With a little cute round nose, huge eyes and perfect lips, she looked like a Manga character. She didn't have a problem with them any more though. She had got over her issues with them as quickly as she had got over the fella.

"I sometimes prefer bad works of art to good works of art, because... they're so full of possibility."

She hated women who drove Land Rovers.

Intelligent women scare the blue blazes out of men.

She thought it was tasteless the way that famous feminists behaved. Germaine Greer parading her love for young men like it deserved some kind of medal and Julie Burchill taking pride in her fascism. She thought that it made them worse than men, because they really ought to know better. She had become a simulacrum of herself. It was a tragedy. She is more hack than human now.

And I never... not once... put myself in a position where I'd be around young adolescent boys to any significant degree. I'm 50 years old now, and I still think about boys. But I've kept it under control for all these years and led a pretty dammed good life. I hope SADBOY can do the same. Been there, didn't do it - Anon.

Esmeralda got home from school and found the living room empty for a change, so she flung herself on the coach and switched on the TV. There was a film playing. She had found the end of a pure weed spliff in her pocket earlier in the day. She hadn't smoked a shred of tobacco all summer and had hardly touched weed in the last year. Being stoned didn't mix well with school and she was at school almost

every day, plus she was trying to conquer her asthma, but the summer holidays had bought with it her usual pageant of bad habits and it would take Esmeralda a little while to shake them all off again. This was the last of her weed, though, so that sorted that one out. She sparked it up and sucked the stinging smoke down deep into her wheezing lungs.

She was reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and was deliberating on the theory of eternal return.

She was a little bit like all of the characters.

Postmodernism rules, OK.

Postmodernism rules, OK?

"Are you looking at my tits?" she asked the Georgian.

"No," he replied in his sexy eastern European accent.

"Why not?" she sulked, "I love men who look like they could kill me with their bare hands."

One of the sexiest moments in her memory was when she pulled a guy in a hot tub at a festival and they went for a shag in the shower. She offered up her gorgeous rump for him to dishevel whilst she gripped tightly onto the shower pipes. There was a moment, as he grabbed hold of her hips, just before he plunged himself deep into her expectant vagina, where he brushed his left thumb over the tattoo at the base of her back. This moment of acknowledgment, through the haze of the drugs and booze, was a moment when she felt like he had truly seen her. He had noticed something unique and special about her, probably the only discerning feature he'd recognise on her if they ever met again, and it drove young Esmeralda wild. That moment became the inspiration for many a future wank.

We are caught in a perpetual groundhog of All Fools' Day. Imbeciles rule the world, dozy muppets parade themselves as celebrity gods, knuckleheads look down on

bohemians with patronising scorn and willynillyness prevails.

"This decade was called the naughty noughts," Esmeralda pointed out to her mother, "Well, it's lived up to its name. We've all been very naughty indeed and there is naught left for us to believe in or value."

"I am the devil queen! I can do anything!" she screamed into the night.

She was fed up of having to keep quiet while she masturbated or when she was fucking. Back in the day she had been a right screamer. When had that stopped? She couldn't wait to have a room of one's own.

"Whey hey!"

"Yo, beast! Where are you?"

"I'm at home. Where are you?"

"We've just parked up outside your house."

"Excellent!"

The group of attractive young men had turned up to play with her for the weekend. How wonderful, she thought to herself!

She didn't like to over-use the exclamation mark.

"Do you want to fuck me in the arse whilst I'm looking like an eight-year-old?"

"I'm not a paedophile."

"That's all right, I'm not an eight-year-old."

"I was reading *Where the Wild Things Are* out loud to him whilst he has fucking me," she boasted later that weekend.

"Let the wild rumpus begin!"

"I think women should be allowed eight-year abortions," decided her friend. "Gives you the chance to get to know them first, see if it's going to work out or not."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. You did have a period, even though it was really light, and they are regular. But I can give you a pregnancy test if you want, just to put your mind at rest..." The nurse began to search through the cupboards in the room.

"That would be good. It's just a friend said that they thought I looked like I was glowing and that they've guessed correctly that their friends have been pregnant twice before," said Esmeralda weakly. She hated mainstream health practitioners; they always made her feel stupid.

"Have you been suffering from morning sickness or anything?"

"No."

"And do you have any reason to think that you might be pregnant?"

"No..." said Esmeralda, although with her kind of sex life, it was always a bit of a grey area. It's not that she wasn't careful, it was just that the sheer volume and lack of routine made her forever uncertain.

"I can't actually find any tests. You could always buy one from the chemist, but they're expensive. Have you used one before?"

"Yes."

"Oh... I wouldn't worry about it till your next period is due, though. It's not going to change things, whatever the outcome is and whatever you decide to do...don't worry," she conceded, "I'm sure you're fine."

She was surprised at the state of the living room. It had seemed like a quiet night in yet the floor was covered in empty wine, gin and beer bottles, plus the annoyingly messy fiddly remnants of spliff-rolling.

She discovered the joy of wanking without fantasizing, focusing on nothing but the sensation of her pleasing herself. Imagining the tentacles of her clitoris extending right up inside of her body, throbbing like an electrical pulse. It gave her the deepest orgasm she had ever experienced.

She was in a capital mood.

"How was your summer?" she asked her pal, back at drama school.

"Shit. I've been working the whole time. I feel like my soul has been sucked out of my body."

"You're kidding?"

"No. Sometimes I manage to find work that keeps me ticking over in my head, but this job is so brain-numbing."

"Why don't you sign on?"

"I've always tried to avoid that."

"Listen, signing on is nothing to be ashamed of. This country doesn't support artists, yet our art is one of its main exports. Fuck it! Let the country support you. As soon as you get the money to pay it back in taxes, then you can do it then. Or at least make sure you support another artist in getting their shit off the ground one day. Seriously, you deserve it. If we lived in France the government would be paying us a wage. In this country, we are treated like shit. Normally when I see you, you are so full of ideas and inspiration. It's a crime to see you like this."

"I fucking hate feeling like this."

"They're closing down the theatre museum."

"What will happen to the archive?"

"It's getting locked up in the Victoria and Albert."

"Why on earth?"

"The building is going to the Royal Opera House. I think they need a new dressing room."

"I fucking hate this country."

"I used to get a sadistic pleasure from signing on, because the people who work at the Job Centre did everything in their power to make your life hell, but at the end of the day they had to spend their lives talking to annoying shits like me, whilst I got to spend all day drinking cider in the sun."

"I used to take acid and sing *Phantom of the Opera* into my mirror, willing him to appear and rescue me from life."

The wind was in a particularly tricky mood.

"Please mind the gap."

She thought about her first love. He had proposed to her outside school and had bought her a gorgeous engagement ring made of emeralds and diamonds in the shape of a little flower. They had thought their love would last forever. She hadn't seen him for years now. The last thing she had heard about him was that he'd gone mad and thought that she had put a voodoo curse on him, which was a little extreme, she thought, but was secretly rather flattered.

It had rather taken the wind out of her sails.

Her feedback session had thrown things into disarray. She had gone in with a sense of foreboding, but she certainly hadn't seen this one coming. Esmeralda was expecting a grilling for missing classes, but she actually received a painful mirror, revealing her greatest inadequacies as a human being. They told her that her work was too showy. That she always had to stick in a bit of pizzazz into everything she did and that this lacked delicacy, truth, beauty or intelligence. It was all too much of a performance. That wasn't really what they said, but that's how she took it. She then went that extra mile and translated this into a reflection of the rest of her life. She suddenly decided that her whole personality was cheap and

over the top. That her bawdy and showy behaviour was a smokescreen, covering up her vulnerability, her true self, the gold within her. This revelation had left Esmeralda feeling very stupid and exposed. How could she possibly produce good work if she was incapable of being honest? She looked at her clothes, her pink hair and thought about her list of exploits over that summer. She suddenly felt very ridiculous.

The very best word in the whole world is goo.

"By the time I'm 40 I want to be living in a Gaudi apartment with a dwarf for a butler," proclaimed Esmeralda.

"Wouldn't life be great if it was like a musical? If on cue, everyone burst out into song and a well-choreographed dance routine?"

"That sounds like my idea of hell," he said.

"OK, so I'm being a little hard on myself."

"OK, so am I being a little hard on myself?"

Genius is mainly an affair of energy - Matthew Arnold.

"I'm concentrating on being calmer and quieter. Less over the top and silly."

"So... basically you're going to stop being Esmeralda?"

She realised that she hadn't looked at any porn for months.

"It's the thing that I keep coming back to. I've been told before: talk less, be serious. Every time I set off to try and be less over the top, I go off on an adventure, learning loads of amazing things along the way, but I always miss the point of being small and come back to this same point again. Maybe if I try to achieve something else I'll manage to learn to be small by accident?"

"I don't think you should think of it as being small," said her Mum. "Think of it as being still. There is a quote in the Bible that says: Be still and know that I am the Lord."

"I think that's it. It's where my gold is. I'll find it when I find the space to be silent. When I stop trying to survive and allow myself to just be."

"I don't mean to get all Christian on you, but there's another good quote in the Bible that says: Be still and you will hear a small voice."

"I don't mind, Mum. It's good advice."

A mentor had once told her that one day she would have to choose between one side of her personality or the other. At the time she hadn't understood what her friend had meant, but as she grew older, she realised exactly what she was saying. Half of Esmeralda's personality was a hippie who liked being drunk in a field and hanging out with beautiful people who were full of love and knew what was really important in life. The other half of her personality was an ambitious young woman who wanted to take over the world and surround herself with go-getting successful people who were having it all and knew what was really important in life. Over the summer she had immersed herself in the hippie world and had loved it. This was a nourishing world, free from stress and inferiority. But now she was back in the rat race world, she was driven once more to be world famous, better than her "friends" and proving that she was "worth it". This wasn't a nourishing world. This was a world that made her feel anxious and inferior, but a big chunk of her personality really did give a shit about playing this game and winning. She was torn. If she gave up the rat race she would be much happier. Yet winning the rat race had been the engine of her life and she had always believed that she could do anything she wanted.

herself from it yet, although she was very happy and that's all that really mattered. Esmeralda couldn't wait till her best mate got down to some serious nesting and began breeding. However, her mate had already made Esmeralda promise to never put anything into the mouths of any of her children, which she thought was a little unfair.

"If you do the ground work in your early twenties then you'll have the time of your life in your thirties."

"I wouldn't be in my early twenties again for love nor money."

"Imagine what it must be like for women who have spent all of their lives worrying about what they look like or what men think of them? Their lives must be a slow torture from thirty onwards. How unbearable."

"Stop lezzing off at me."

"In your dreams, bitch."

Fascinating though they were, the men she surrounded herself with on a daily basis were complete arseholes.

"We're like square pegs in round holes," she told him.

Esmeralda did look forward to the next time she entered into another spook with someone, but now wasn't really the right time. Although that's normally when it sneaks up and bites you on the arse...

Not only did she love the word vivacious, she made damn sure that she only surrounded herself with people whom she believed deserved the label.

"I think the way you should see it is that this is an opportunity for you to really concentrate on your listening."

You cannot travel on the path before you have become the path itself - Gautama Buddha.

She was tired. She was stressed. She was skint. She was "crass". She was pissed off.

Esmeralda wanted to be still. This is going to be a winter of peace and quiet, she decided.

Coffee had started to give her arthritis in her feet as well as her hands.

Someone had once told her their thoughts on war and women. They believed that women were as much to blame for wars as men, because they had brought the men up. At the time she had thought that this was a fair enough point, taking pride in her openness to give men the benefit of the doubt, but as she watched her brother grow up from a boy into a man, she decided that this just wasn't true. There was a point in his mid-twenties where he had rebelled against their mother. Although he was still inherently a good person, he had changed from someone who she didn't think could ever hurt a fly, into someone she thought that could.

Nothing is impossible, in my own powerful mind - The Levellers.

Esmeralda got on her bike and rode like the clappers to the studio. She picked up the money from her friend and then got a cab to the estate agents.

She really wasn't in the mood for that song so she skipped the track.

She loved songs that made her recall past love affairs.

Esmeralda sat up in bed and drew out a floor plan of the flat from memory. It had matched everything on her list of wishes bar three. It wasn't overlooking the sea, it wasn't in a Regency building and it wasn't in the same area that she was living in now. But it did have lots of light, it was dry and warm, had old features, there was room for people to stay, it was near to her friends and free from any pigeons. Pretty good going, really.

She dug out her book on Feng Shui. There had been no way of being able to Feng Shui her current room because the

layout of it dictated where she had to place things. For example, the bed had to go in the alcove by the window or it would take up the whole room, which meant it was like sleeping next to an open fridge door in the winter and she regularly woke to sound of pigeons shagging right next to her head. Upon drawing out the floor-plan of her new flat though she was rather excited to discover that all of the rooms were laid out in such a way that they fitted exactly the right areas for good Feng Shui. *Excellent!* she thought to herself.

That night Esmeralda couldn't sleep, she was so excited about her new flat. She spent the whole night planning how she was going to decorate it and arrange everything. One thing Esmeralda loved above all else was the process of nesting. She didn't mind how disposable the nest was - she had lived in plenty of squats in her time and had shared scores of houses - but whenever she moved in anywhere, she would always enjoy making it into her own little sanctuary.

Her body had gone into shut-down.

I'm so tired - I wonder if I'm a manic depressive?

Every other word he said was "fucking this" and "fucking that". She wondered if it was really good for her well-being, hanging around with someone like that. At the same time, though, there was nothing she hated more than insipid people.

"If I was a famous celebrity, then I'd almost certainly think that I was a cunt."

The guy in front wore a grey hoodie. As they had walked towards the queue in the post office, he had turned to look at her for a moment and she saw in his eyes the haunted look of a skag addict. *Poor fucker*, she thought to herself. Those eyes had peered back at her from more than one of

her dearest friends. The temptation to go that extra leg had never enticed Esmeralda. It was a boundary that she did not feel compelled to cross. Even though she wanted to try everything life had to offer at least once, she thought it was wise to put heroin and crack at the bottom of her list, so that she could get everything else done first. If her children put her in an old people's home, she'd take up a hard drugs habit.

The poor boy in front of her was shaking like a leaf. He was waiting to cash his Giro and the unmoving queue was torturing him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and make it all better. Suck out the poison and set him free. When he finally collected his money he asked politely what the time was. As she left the post office she saw him sitting on the steps of a closed pub, drinking a banana-flavoured Yazzoo, waiting for his saviour to come and absolve him of his suffering.

"He was incredible to work with. He wants you to be amazing." Esmeralda was cooing over her most recent director.

"I'm not trying to be anything. I am whatever I am."

"How many people have you slept with?"

"It's not appropriate for a lady to discuss numbers. I'll tell you one thing, though: all those cocks never filled my hole."

I used to be the tight one, the perfect fit. Funny how those compliments can make you feel so full of it. - Dresden Dolls

Do I belong? Thought Esmeralda.

She looked at herself in the mirror. *Is that me?* She asked herself.

Another word she was fond of was "cuttlefish".

"What does idiosyncratic mean?"

She looked up “idiosyncratic” in the synonyms tool. It told her that it meant “characteristic”. She then looked up what synonyms meant, but there were no results for that word.

She woke up and knew that she needed magic mushrooms.

“They’re not in season yet,” he told her.

“But I thought the season is from the end of September to mid-October?”

“I know, but my mate went out two days ago and said there was nothing. You should speak to him, he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Apparently they grow near silver birch trees.”

“Really? That’s interesting. They’re really magical-looking trees.”

“I hate boys,” moaned the tired lady.

“Still? God... Get over it.”

Esmeralda told the girls at the party about the theory of creating your world through your relationships with other women and that the men who enter into your world from time to time, do so only with your permission. They were impressed. The rest of the evening was passed having the most intense and enlightening conversations with her female friends. They hadn’t talked like that in years. The men tried to woo her with a tirade of anecdotes about her misdemeanours. Even though this topic was her favourite in the whole wide world, it didn’t manage to divert her energy away from the women. Suddenly the power of womanhood made sense to her in a way she had never got her head around before.

All that you know and all that you don't know -Jonathan Kay.

“Get out of your box!” shouted the young man.

It was a new moon and everyone had gone mad. Two of her friends separately returned to the house having had a huge row with someone. One had fallen out with a friend over whether women were smoking before the 1920's and if they had only taken up the habit because they saw men doing it and had thought it was cool. The other had been arguing about the chances of anyone doing anything to turn around the environmental disaster we are facing. Once they had all reconvened in the living room, they then spent the rest of the evening arguing with each other over whether Sonic Youth had been an awesome band or not.

"It's true that people can only intimidate you with your permission" - over a cup of coffee the next day - "but it's also true that people are only more powerful than you with your permission too. That's where the activist movement breaks down. I'm behind them one hundred percent in theory, but the pitfall is that they are acknowledging the brick wall and banging their heads against it. Whereas if you don't acknowledge the existence of the brick wall in the first place then you can walk right through it and piss on their parade."

She still hadn't got her period. It was nearly time to do a test.

The next day she got her period. "Wooooo hooooo!" she shouted in the toilet, "I'm not pregnant!"

"I had to quit my job as a lollipop lady because the drivers didn't take me seriously," she moaned.

The papers said that the eight-year-old had hanged herself because she had got the idea from a film. The judge had said at the hearing that it must have been impressed upon her somehow because an eight-year-old was too young to have a proper understanding of death. Esmeralda thought about this. She remembered fearing death when she

was five or six and had first asked her parents about their religious beliefs. They had told her that they had asked Jesus into their hearts and that they believed this meant they would go to heaven. She had run upstairs and woken her brother up and told him that they had to pray to Jesus now and ask him into their hearts, or they wouldn't be with Mummy and Daddy in heaven when they died.

"Now that you've left Mummy and you're in love with someone else, what will happen when you die? Will you still be together in heaven, seeing as you were married in the eyes of God?"

Not only did she lose the sanctuary of her family when her Dad had an affair, but she also lost her faith in God. And her belief in unconditional love. But she did gain overwhelming respect for her mother, who chose daily to be an amazing human being.

"I first snogged someone when I was eight, I started smoking when I was nine, smoked dope when I was eleven and took acid when I was twelve. By the time I was fifteen I'd given up drugs and had got engaged," she confessed.

"And I had a born-again experience when I was eleven. I was walking through Colchester town centre when I saw an older guy that I had seen around the place and who I had made up this ridiculous story about in my head, that he was a Satan worshipper. He had red rings round his eyes and a piercing stare, but when I eventually got to know him years later, it turned out he was one of the loveliest guys on the planet. Anyway, it triggered me to start thinking about Jesus and what it must have felt like to sacrifice yourself for the good of others and how awful it must be when people don't appreciate what you're doing for them: both the physical pain of being nailed to a cross and the emotional pain of being persecuted. I burst into tears and stood still in

the street. Then I felt as if someone had turned on a tap in the top of my head and mineral water started pouring through my body, cleaning me, all the way down to my feet. It was so overwhelming that I couldn't move. After the sensation had passed, I felt like I was glowing. I told my parents about it and they said it sounded like a born-again experience."

To practise a religion is a beautiful thing, but to believe in one is almost always dangerous - Tom Robbins.

"I'm in love with you but I don't think that you're too sure about me." The gentleman said to her.

"The King would dress as the Fool and the Fool would dress as the King. Everyone knew that the Fool wasn't really the King, but they had to obey him because the King was in the same room dressed as the Fool. This is the twin aspect that we all have inside of ourselves. We have a physical power and a more spiritual power, but these are both disguised as each other and the real power often lies in the opposite aspect to the one that is being directed at the world." The new director had inspired her greatly.

"I think you've been floundering for the last two years, trying to work out if you're doing the right thing or not, but recently something has clicked and now you're more sure about the choices you've made and are clear about what you're doing," he told her.

The writing on the wall screamed: NIGGERS OUT!

Underneath someone had written: BUT WE'LL BE BACK IN FIVE!

"You will find the silent you by addressing the silent aspect in other people. By seeing everyone as the same creature, rather than their hierarchical role, or the colour of their skin, or their gender. Instead, talk with their concerns and fears, essentially that which is beyond the defences, and

you will find that it is the silent you, the one that comes out when you are alone, that will be communicating with them. Then you will meet somewhere half-way and really talk with each other," shared the director.

The Composer cooked her dinner.

She lay back in his arms on the sliding futon.

"You make me nervous because I think that you're very talented and I admire you. I get scared that at some point you're going to realise that I have no talent and that I'm a fraud," she admitted.

"My only talent is not having any talent," he replied, making her laugh. "Seriously, I'm very talented at making people think that I know what I'm doing, when really I haven't got a fucking clue."

He stared into her eyes and stroked the hair from her trembling face. "Promise me something," he asked.

"What?"

"That you'll stop being nervous around me."

"I met this amazing African midwife who told us this incredible story about a woman living in Africa who, because of the culture she lived in, would give birth on her own, naturally, at home. Unfortunately she kept going into labour prematurely and giving birth to still-born babies. This happened so often she grew used to it and would dispose of the bodies herself. One time, she gave birth to a baby and it wasn't breathing, so she placed it in a box and left it on the doorstep to her house. After a while her sisters came to visit her, to see how she was doing and to comfort her in the loss of yet another child. When they came to the doorstep, they found a long trail of ants crawling up and into a box. They looked inside the box and found a newly born baby, and it was wide-awake. The ants, who had been carrying away the placenta, bit by bit, to their nest, had

crawled across the baby's face and stimulated its breathing. The baby had been resuscitated back to life. And it turns out that the woman telling us the story had been that very baby."

"We've decided," shouted Esmeralda, "that in an emergency, we should all eat Bob. 'Cause you know he's only going to be a liability anyway, so it will save on rations and will help curb future disaster... So remember; in an emergency... eat Bob."

She spent the most amazing week with the Georgians. They truly are a race of such raw emotion, depth and artistic wealth. She felt like she was simmering in a rich beef stew of cultural yumminess.

"I'm angry with you."

"Why you angry with me?" he asked her with a big grin on his stupid face.

"You never told me you have a new wife and a young child," she yelled at him.

He dropped his grin. "How you know this?" he asked her.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you didn't tell me!"

He sighed deeply and rubbed his hands across his face. "You never gave me the choice. If you had given me the choice, then I wouldn't have done it."

"You are strong woman."

"I know."

"Last night felt like something strong feelings with you."

"I felt it too."

He was a great big hairy bear of a man. He looked like he could kill her with his bare hands. "You are the kind of girl I could easily fall in love with."

The man on the stage said 'My only talent is not having any talent.'

Esmeralda felt like she had been tricked. His good friend had written the play and the character was based on him, plus he was the director of the play. Had the writer stolen the line from him or had he stolen the line from the play? Either way, did it matter that he had then used the line on her?

"I'm no boo-hoo-er."

She was very proud of her friend's writing, it was incredibly brave.

"You're very brave"

"Are you taking the piss?"

"No seriously, you are very brave!"

Somehow she had managed to have an affair with three men under the same roof for a whole week, but she had conducted herself in such a way as to avoid offending any of them. Maybe they hadn't even noticed, but she assumed that they must have.

His performance was incredible. He was the most amazing actor she had ever seen.

They left to catch the plane. She walked out of the station and her heart was singing.

Her mentor had the most stunning bright orange eyes.

He played her pussy the way he played the piano, delicately composing her orgasm like a piece of music. At first he circled her clitoris, using her own moisture to lubricate his finger, so it glided over the nub of nerves. Her mouth and nose filled with a metallic taste, as if she had placed her tongue on the end of a battery. She didn't normally like her clitoris being touched, the sensation was too much for her, and she would butt off any clumsy trespassing fingers. But his fingertips stroked with such

precision and delicacy that she relinquished her strength in his arms, which were gripping her body tightly. Slowly, methodically, he wound up every nerve in her body like a tightly coiled spring. Her muscles were aching and her head was beginning to throb, but still he circled his fingers round and around her. Then he decided it was time. Like a conductor's baton he plunged his powerful finger deep into her vagina. With absolute certainty he fucked her hard and fast with his finger, playing out his crescendo, orchestrating her bucking thrusts, her screams and her moans.

Then, when she had finally spent the last drop of kinetic energy he had twisted up tightly inside of her, she curled up in his arms, feeling a complete sense of safety. His competence reassured her deeply. "Thank you," she whispered. "I've fallen in love with you a little bit."

"I love you, little one," he whispered into the darkness.

"Have we ever had sex?"

"No."

"Have you ever? Had sex?"

"Rest assuredly"

"So, why haven't we had sex?"

She failed to catch his answer. In that moment she saw that their lives were inexplicably and irrevocably linked.

How many people can you be in love with at the same time? Is it possible to be in love with more than one person at a time? How many different types of love are there? What is love?

"Did you know that a group of bears is called a sleuth?" asked Esmeralda.

How had he managed it? He had somehow tricked her into telling him that she'd fallen in love with him. It was true, she did, but it didn't need to be said. He agreed it didn't need to be said. But it had been said now. He

confessed he was a little bit in love with her as well and then they spent the next few days wondering what the fuck was going on. He told her he was trying to work things out. He was sorting things away into the filing system in his head. She understood: this was all a bit unexpected, besides she was also in love with a few of her other lovers at the same time. They'd had the sense not to mention it to each other, though. Just because he'd tricked her into saying it, didn't give him any rights over her.

"Don't call me," he said.

"Don't worry," she laughed, "I won't."

His text read, *I'm covered in bruises.*

Good, she replied.

She felt funny that she had told one of her lovers that she loved him and not the others. It felt like she was treating them unfairly suddenly, that she ought to tell them all that she loved them, because she did love them all a bit. She cared for them in their own different ways. Telling him she loved him had upped the ante. She was now dealing with bigger and deeper emotions. This was all new territory. She had been "in love" before, in the normal exclusive sense of the word, but here she was in love with several people at the same time and she didn't understand what that meant. How long would this situation be able to go on for, before problems arose? Was it possible to avoid the problems? Unlikely.

The lack of exclusivity was not due to an inability to commit. Rather it was a clear understanding of the pros and cons of each lover. She was divided from one, whom she adored, by a gulf in years, one that would not be remedied for a decade at least. Her other lover was a complete eccentric whom she couldn't quite picture having a full-blown relationship with, but whom she felt inexplicably and

irrevocably connected to; she could imagine him being in her life for many years to come. Another lived in Georgia and was married. Another had never left Essex. Another was nothing more than a floozy. Another she just simply didn't fancy enough. Then there were the ones that she wasn't in love with at all, but whose company she enjoyed. It may mean that she hadn't met the right person yet, but she suspected that really it just wasn't the right time. When it was the right time, she would fall in love and be ready and willing to spook. Maybe this would be with a new person, or maybe with one of her current lovers. Who knows? Her only concern was that she wanted to avoid hurting the feelings of any of the people she was involved with currently. She cared deeply for everyone in her life and was not in the least bit interested in spoiling anybody's fun.

Her housemates could have been a little less excited about her moving out.

"It's great she's going to take my room. It covers my back and they all like her more than me anyway."

The move was obviously the right thing to do. It all happened like a fairy godmother's spell. Everything she wished for clicked into place.

Her mother very kindly came and stayed for a few days and helped to get the "room of one's own" sorted out. Mothers are such generous creatures. She knew that her daughter was shifting a gear by braving this new challenge and she wanted to do everything in her power to help ease her passage. This is a mother's love.

Within a few hours of her mother leaving, a shelf fell off of the wall and smashed its way through a plug socket on her wall. Esmeralda became wracked with fear. Was the place going to burn down? Or was she going to be found, weeks from now, fried to cinder from an electrical shock?

The huge pipe of pollen she had just smoked certainly didn't help matters.

It was going to take a little while to get used to living in a room of one's own.

"There are two things to worry about in life..." warned the shaman, "and these are fear and ego."

What if the place burns down?

What if I lock myself out of the house?

What if I fall and hurt myself?

What if I leave the cooker on?

What if I drown in the bath?

What if I go mad on my own?

What if the place is haunted?

What if the ghost takes a dislike to me?

What if I get lonely?

What if I've made the wrong decision?

"One thing I get really annoyed about..." said Esmeralda.

"Only one thing?" he interrupted.

"Shut up and listen," she said. "One of the things that really annoys me is that the English are always being accused of being repressed. Every time I go on a workshop I'm told that I'm repressed and that I wouldn't know what to do with freedom if it came up and punched me in the jaw. But it's becoming ridiculous. How many workshops do I need to go on before someone says to me, 'You know what? You strike me as a really liberated person!'"

She had suddenly lost the desire to suffer fools gladly.

For a week after moving into her new flat, her inner dialogue was rife.

This was by no means the first time in her life that she resented the fact she had to spell out to her friends that she needed their support - friends she felt that *she* had

supported, without being asked to, on so many occasions. She also guessed, though, that we've all felt like this from time to time. Sometimes we are the best friends the world has ever seen and sometimes we are the worst. Sometimes we need the support of those that we love and sometimes we forget that they even exist! At the end of the day, we are all a bunch of cunts.

She cried and cried and cried.

"Do you want to Christen my flat?"

"Really?"

"Well someone's got to."

Casting your pearls before the swine. Watch your back or he will suck you dry.

Life was getting a little bit on top of her. She was in a world of pain.

"It's time to get back into integrity."

They went to *Lost Vagueness* at the Coronet for Hallowe'en. He was there too. She had been looking forward to seeing him so much. She had not seen him for a couple of months now. But he had not come back to the flat with her. She had lost him along the way in a drug-fuelled stupor. It had been a fun night, but she couldn't remember anything. It annoyed her. It was a waste of brain cells. Apparently she hadn't been making any sense by the time he had left her, which was embarrassing, especially because he didn't take drugs.

Sometimes naked,

Sometimes mad,

Now the scholar,

Now the fool.

Thus they appear on earth:

The free men - Hindu Verse.