everything I know about ~~parties~~, ~~dates~~, ~~friends~~, ~~jobs~~, ~~life~~, love ♡ dolly alderton

GLOBAL BEST-SELLER

Copyrighted Material

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Everything I Know About Love began as a wall of Post-it notes in the early 2010s. The wall was in a house-share with two of my best female friends and the house was a dilapidated, mouse-infested pile of yellow bricks in Camden. The majority of the stories in this book took place there. The yellow-brick house turned out to be my yellow-brick road, because those Post-its on that wall would change my life for ever. I think about this now in bewilderment, but I know that if I could go back to 2012, knock on that door and tell 24-year-old me that this period of her life would become a book that would spend over a year on the *New York Times* bestseller list and be the basis of a TV show, she probably would have just said, 'I knew it,' and returned to her housemates, the *Come Dine With Me* omnibus and her hangover mac and cheese.

I knew that the time I was living in was a special one even when the days felt boring and ordinary. I knew it was a time of growth and change; mistake-making and lesson-learning and, crucially, that it would be fleeting. When I submitted *Everything I Know About Love* to publishers, both in the UK and in America, there were sometimes conversations about whether the story was relatable. The relatability of memoir is potentially limited – a memoirist cannot represent everyone's experiences through writing only about their life. But I knew there were parts of this story that would feel the same for everyone, no matter who they were. I knew that loss and heartbreak feel the same for everyone. Trying to work out what kind of adult you want to be and feeling like you're not getting it right – I knew that this was a universal experience. And most of all I knew that every 24-year-old girl with a best female friend is entangled in one of the most romantic, challenging, fulfilling love stories of her life.

Copyrighted Material

The book took a few years to write (I was writing it and living it simultaneously) and by the time it was published in 2018, I was in the last year of my twenties and I was ready to say goodbye to that period of my life. I am now nearly thirty-six. Over halfway through a whole other decade. I've lived on my own for longer than I lived in a house-share, I've written more fiction than non-fiction, I've been in more relationships I haven't written about than those I have documented. I now only visit Camden when I need to go to the dentist (why do they make it so difficult to get a new dentist when you move to a new borough?) and I sometimes take detours to stand in front of the yellow-brick house, or the little flat that this book enabled me to move into and rent on my own – the flat I write about in the final chapter. It all feels like a long time ago.

And yet it's the time that I'm asked to talk about the most. In meetings, at parties, on planes, trains and buses, I am often told by women that they had their own house-share, their own disastrous dates and bad parties; that they have their own friendships which they recognized in the pages of my book. Every summer on Instagram, I'm tagged in wedding videos and photos of orders of service because couples have chosen a section of *Everything I Know About Love* as a reading for their wedding ceremonies. Every time I do a book signing, women will ask me to make out the note to their best friend. 'She's my Farly,' they will say. It always makes me happy. I will never get tired of hearing it.

What began as some ideas on Post-it notes became something else entirely. I could never have predicted how many people would read my story, and thank God I didn't otherwise I would never have been as candid as I was when I wrote it. This book is about my friendships, but it's about your friendships too. This book is about the people who lived alongside me in a very ordinary, very special time of life. This book is a love letter.

Dolly Alderton, 2024

Copyrighted Material



Dolly Alderton is an award-winning author, screenwriter and journalist based in London. She is a columnist for the *Sunday Times Style* magazine and has also written for *GQ*, *Red*, *Marie Claire* and *Grazia*. She is the former co-host and co-creator of the podcast *The High Low*. Her first book, *Everything I Know About Love*, became a top-five *Sunday Times* bestseller in its first week of publication, won a National Book Award (UK) for Autobiography of the Year and was made into a BBC One TV series. *Ghosts*, her first novel, was an instant *Sunday Times* bestseller. *Dear Dolly*, a collection of her agony aunt columns from the *Sunday Times Style* magazine, was published in 2022 and was also a *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her second novel, *Good Material*, was published in 2023 and was an instant *Sunday Times* bestseller.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Everything I Know About Love

DOLLY ALDERTON



FIG TREE
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

FIG TREE

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Fig Tree is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published by Fig Tree 2018
Published in Penguin Books with additional new material 2019
This special edition published by Fig Tree 2024
001

Copyright © Dolly Alderton, 2018

Author photograph © Alexandra Cameron

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Permissions: extract on page 42, copyright © Margaret Atwood, 1996, *Alias Grace*, Bloomsbury Publishing, plc; lines on page 83 from 'Lovesong' taken from *Crow* by Ted Hughes (Faber and Faber, 1972), copyright © Ted Hughes, 1970, 1972; lines on page 163 from 'Shelter from the Storm' by Bob Dylan, copyright © 1974 by Ram's Horn Music, renewed 2002 by Ram's Horn Music, all rights reserved, international copyright secured, reprinted by permission; and lines on page 327 from 'The More Loving One' by W. H. Auden, copyright © 1960 by W. H. Auden, renewed, reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–73520–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Copyrighted Material

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Florence Kleiner

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Everything I Knew About Love as a Teenager

Romantic love is the most important and exciting thing in the entire world.

If you don't have it when you're a proper grown-up then you have failed, just like so many of my art teachers who I have noted are 'Miss' instead of 'Mrs' and have frizzy hair and ethnic jewellery.

It is important to have a lot of sex with a lot of people but probably no more than ten.

When I'm a single woman in London I will be extremely elegant and slim and wear black dresses and drink Martinis and will only meet men at book launches and at exhibition openings.

The mark of true love is when two boys get in a physical fight over you. The sweet spot is drawn blood but no one having to go to hospital. One day this will happen to me, if I'm lucky.

It is important to lose your virginity after your seventeenth birthday, but before your eighteenth birthday. Literally, even if it's just the day before, that's fine, but if you go into your eighteenth year still a virgin you will never have sex.

You can snog as many people as you like and that's fine, it doesn't mean anything, it's just practice.

Copyrighted Material

The coolest boys are always tall and Jewish and have a car.

Older boys are the best kind because they're more sophisticated and worldly and also they have slightly less stringent standards.

When friends have boyfriends they become boring. A friend having a boyfriend is only ever fun if you have a boyfriend too.

If you don't ask your friend about their boyfriend *at all* they'll eventually get the hint that you find it boring and they'll stop going on about him.

It's a good idea to get married a bit later in life and after you've lived a bit. Say, twenty-seven.

Farly and I will never fancy the same boy because she likes them short and cheeky like Nigel Harman and I like them macho and mysterious like Charlie Simpson from Busted. This is why our friendship will last for ever.

No moment in my life will ever be as romantic as when me and Lauren were playing that gig on Valentine's Day at that weird pub in St Albans and I sang 'Lover, You Should've Come Over' and Joe Sawyer sat at the front and closed his eyes because earlier we'd talked about Jeff Buckley and basically he is the only boy I've ever met who fully understands me and where I'm coming from.

No moment in my life will ever be as embarrassing as when I tried to kiss Sam Leeman and he pulled away from me and I fell over.

Copyrighted Material

No moment in my life will ever be as heartbreaking as when Will Young came out as gay and I had to pretend I was fine about it but I cried while I burned the leather book I was given for my confirmation, in which I had written about our life together.

Boys really like it when you say rude things to them and they find it babyish and uncool if you're too nice.

When I finally have a boyfriend, little else will matter.

Copyrighted Material

Boys

For some, the sound that defined their adolescence was the joyful shrieks of their siblings playing in the garden. For others, it was the chain rattle of their much-loved bike, hobbling along hills and vales. Some will recall birdsong as they walked to school, or the sound of laughing and footballs being kicked in the playground. For me, it was the sound of AOL dial-up internet.

I can still remember it now, note for note. The tinny initial phone beeps, the reedy, half-finished squiggles of sound that signalled a half-connection, the high one note that told you some progress was being made, followed by two abrasive low thumps, some white fuzz. And then the silence indicated that you had broken through the worst of it. 'Welcome to AOL,' said a soothing voice, the upward inflection on 'O'. Followed by, 'You have email.' I would dance around the room to the sound of the AOL dial-up, to help the agonizing time pass quicker. I choreographed a routine from things I learnt in ballet: a *plié* on the beeps; a *pas de chat* on the thumps. I did it every night when I came home from school. Because that was the soundtrack of my life. Because I spent my adolescence on the internet.

A little explanation: I grew up in the suburbs. That's

Copyrighted Material

it; that's the explanation. When I was eight years old, my parents made the cruel decision to move us out of a basement flat in Islington and into a larger house in Stanmore; the last stop on the Jubilee line and on the very furthest fringes of North London. It was the blank margin of the city; an observer of the fun, rather than a reveller at the party.

When you grow up in Stanmore you are neither urban nor rural. I was too far out of London to be one of those cool kids who went to the Ministry of Sound and dropped their 'g's and wore cool vintage clothes picked up in surprisingly good Oxfams in Peckham Rye. But I was too far away from the Chilterns to be one of those ruddy-cheeked, feral, country teenagers who wore old fisherman's jumpers and learnt how to drive their dad's Citroën when they were thirteen and went on walks and took acid in a forest with their cousins. The North London suburbs were a vacuum for identity. It was as beige as the plush carpets that adorned its every home. There was no art, no culture, no old buildings, no parks, no independent shops or restaurants. There were golf clubs and branches of Prezzo and private schools and driveways and roundabouts and retail parks and glass-roofed shopping centres. The women looked the same, the houses were built the same, the cars were all the same. The only form of expression was through the spending of money on homogenized assets – conservatories, kitchen extensions, cars with in-built satnav, all-inclusive holidays to Majorca. Unless you played golf, wanted your

Copyrighted Material

hair highlighted or to browse a Volkswagen showroom, there was absolutely nothing to do.

This was particularly true if you were a teenager at the mercy of your mother's availability to cart you around in her aforementioned Volkswagen Golf GTI. Luckily, I had my best friend, Farly, who was a three-and-a-half-mile bike ride away from my cul-de-sac.

Farly was, and still is, different to any other person in my life. We met at school when we were eleven years old. She was, and remains, the total opposite to me. She is dark; I am fair. She is a little too short; I am a little too tall. She plans and schedules everything; I leave everything to the last minute. She loves order; I'm inclined towards mess. She loves rules; I hate rules. She is without ego; I think my piece of morning toast is important enough to warrant broadcast on social media (three channels). She is very present and focused on tasks at hand; I am always half in life, half in a fantastical version of it in my head. But, somehow, we work. Nothing luckier has ever happened in my life than the day Farly sat next to me in a maths lesson in 1999.

The order of the day with Farly was always exactly the same: we'd sit in front of the television eating mountains of bagels and crisps (though only when our parents were out – another trait of the suburban middle classes is that they are particularly precious about sofas and always have a 'strictly no eating' living room) and watching American teen sitcoms on Nickelodeon. When we'd run out of episodes of *Sister, Sister* and *Two of a Kind* and

Copyrighted Material

Sabrina the Teenage Witch, we'd move on to the music channels, staring slack-jawed at the TV screen while flicking between MTV, MTV Base and VH1 every ten seconds, looking for a particular Usher video. When we were bored of that, we'd go back on to Nickelodeon + 1 and watch all the episodes of the American teen sitcoms we had watched an hour earlier, on repeat.

Morrissey once described his teenage life as 'waiting for a bus that never came'; a feeling that's only exacerbated when you come of age in a place that feels like an all-beige waiting room. I was bored and sad and lonely, restlessly wishing the hours of my childhood away. And then, like a gallant knight in shining armour, came AOL dial-up internet on my family's large desktop computer. And then came MSN Instant Messenger.

When I downloaded MSN Messenger and started adding email address contacts – friends from school, friends of friends, friends in nearby schools who I'd never met – it was like knocking on the wall of a prison cell and hearing someone tap back. It was like finding blades of grass on Mars. It was like turning the knob of the radio on and finally hearing the crackle smooth into a human voice. It was an escape out of my suburban doldrums and into an abundance of human life.

MSN was more than a way I kept in touch with my friends as a teenager; it was a place. That's how I remember it, as a room I physically sat in for hours and hours every evening and weekend until my eyes turned

Copyrighted Material

bloodshot from staring at the screen. Even when we'd leave the suburbs and my parents would generously take my brother and me for holidays in France, it was still the room I occupied every day. The first thing I would do when we arrived at a new B&B was find out if they had a computer with internet – usually an ancient desktop in a dark basement – and I would log on to MSN Messenger and unashamedly sit chatting on it for hours while a moody French teenager sat behind me in an armchair waiting for his go. The Provençal sunshine beat down outside, where the rest of my family lay by the pool and read, but my parents knew there was no arguing with me when it came to MSN Messenger. It was the hub of all my friendships. It was my own private space. It was the only thing I could call my own. As I say, it was a place.

My first email address was munchkin_1_4@hotmail.com which I set up aged twelve in my school IT room. I chose the number 14 as I assumed I would only be emailing for two years before it became babyish; I gave myself room to enjoy this new fad and its various eccentricities until the address would expire in relevance on my fourteenth birthday. I didn't start using MSN Messenger until I was fourteen and in this space of time would also try out willyoungisyum@hotmail.com to express my new passion for the 2002 winner of *Pop Idol*. I also tried thespian_me@hotmail.com on for size, after giving a barnstorming performance as Mister Snow in the school's production of *Carousel*.

Copyrighted Material

I reprised munchkin_1_4 when I downloaded MSN Instant Messenger and enjoyed the overflowing MSN Messenger contacts book of school friends I had accumulated since the address's conception. But, crucially, there was also the introduction of boys. Now, I didn't know any boys at this point. Other than my brother, little cousin, dad and one or two of my dad's cricketing friends, truly, I hadn't spent any time with a boy in my entire life. But MSN brought the email addresses and avatars of these new floating Phantom Boys; they were charitably donated by various girls at my school – the ones who would hang out with boys at the weekend and then magnanimously pass their email addresses around the student body. These boys did the MSN circuit; every girl from my school would add them as a contact and we'd all have our fifteen minutes of fame talking to them.

Where the boys were sourced from broadly fell into three categories. The first: a girl's mother's godson or some sort of family friend on the outskirts of her life who she had grown up with. He was normally a year or two older than us, very tall and lanky with a deep voice. Also lumped into this category was someone's schoolboy neighbour. The next classification were the cousins or second cousins of someone. Finally, and most exotically, a boy who someone had met when they were on a family holiday. This was the Holy Grail, really, as he could be from absolutely anywhere, as far-flung as Bromley or Maidenhead, and yet there you'd be, talking

Copyrighted Material

to him on MSN Messenger as if he were in the same room. What madness; what adventure.

I quickly collated a Rolodex of these waifs and strays, giving them their own separate label in my contacts list, marked 'BOYS'. Weeks would pass talking to them – about GCSE choices, about our favourite bands, about how much we smoked and drank and 'how far' we'd 'been' with the opposite sex (always a momentously laboured work of fiction). Of course, we all had little to no idea of what anyone looked like; this was before we had camera phones or social media profiles, so the only thing you'd have to go on was their tiny MSN profile photo and their description of themselves. Sometimes I'd go to the trouble of using my mum's scanner to upload a photograph of me looking nice at a family meal or on holiday, then I'd carefully cut out my aunt or my grandpa using the crop function on Paint, but mostly it was too much of a faff.

The arrival of virtual boys into the world of our school friends came with a whole set of fresh conflicts and drama. There would be an ever-turning rumour mill about who was talking to whom. Girls would pledge their faith to boys they'd never met by inserting the boy's first name into their username with stars and hearts and underscores either side. Some girls thought they were in an exclusive online dialogue with a boy, but these usernames cropping up would tell a different story. Sometimes, girls from neighbouring schools who you'd never met would add you, to ask straight out

Copyrighted Material

if you were talking to the same boy they were talking to. Occasionally – and this would always go down as a cautionary tale in the common room – you would accidentally expose an MSN relationship with a boy by writing a message to him in the wrong window and sending it to a friend instead. Shakespearean levels of tragedy would ensue.

There was a complicated etiquette that came with MSN; if both you and a boy you liked were logged on, but he wasn't talking to you, a failsafe way of getting his attention would be to log off then log on again, as he would be notified of your re-entry and reminded of your presence, hopefully resulting in a conversation. There was also the trick of hiding your online status if you wanted to avoid talking to anyone other than one particular contact, as you could do so furtively. It was a complex Edwardian dance of courtship and I was a giddy and willing participant.

These long correspondences rarely resulted in a real-life meet-up and when they did, they were nearly always a gut-wrenching disappointment. There was Max with the double-barrelled surname – a notorious MSN Casanova, known for sending girls Baby G watches in the post – who Farly agreed to meet outside a newsagent in Bushey one Saturday afternoon, after months of chatting online. She got there, took one look at him and freaked out, hiding behind a bin for cover. She watched him call her mobile over and over again from a phone box, but she couldn't face the reality of a meet-up in the

Copyrighted Material

flesh and legged it back home. They continued to speak for hours every night on MSN.

I had two. The first was a disastrous blind date in a shopping centre that lasted less than fifteen minutes. The second was a boy from a nearby boarding school who I'd spoken to for nearly a year before we finally had our first date at Pizza Express, Stanmore. For the following year, we had a sort of on-off relationship; mainly off because he was always locked up at school. But I would occasionally go to visit him, wearing lipstick and carrying a handbag full of packets of fags I'd bought for him, like Bob Hope being sent out to entertain the troops in the Second World War. He had no access to the internet in his dormitory, so MSN was out of the question, but we remedied this with weekly letters and long calls that made my father age with despair when greeted with a three-figure monthly landline phone bill.

At fifteen, I began a love affair more all-consuming than anything that had ever happened in the windows of MSN Instant Messenger when I made new friends with a wild-haired girl with freckles and kohl-rimmed hazel eyes called Lauren. We had seen each other around at the odd Hollywood Bowl birthday party since we were kids, but we finally met properly through our mutual friend Jess over dinner in one of Stanmore's many Italian chain restaurants. The connection was like everything I'd ever seen in any romantic film I'd ever watched on ITV2. We talked until our mouths were dry, we finished

Copyrighted Material

each other's sentences, we made tables turn round as we laughed like drains; Jess went home and we sat on a bench in the freezing cold after we got chucked out of the restaurant just so we could carry on talking.

She was a guitarist looking for a singer to start a band; I'd sung at one sparsely attended open-mic night in Hoxton and I needed a guitarist. We started rehearsing bossa nova covers of Dead Kennedys songs the following day in her mum's shed with the first draft of our band name being 'Raging Pankhurst'. We later changed it to, even more inexplicably, 'Sophie Can't Fly'. Our first gig was in a Turkish restaurant in Pinner, with just one customer in the heaving restaurant who wasn't a member of our family or a school friend. We went on to do all the big names: a theatre foyer in Rickmansworth, a pub garden's derelict outbuilding in Mill Hill, a cricket pavilion just outside of Cheltenham. We busked on any street without a policeman. We sang at the reception of any bar mitzvah that would have us.

We also shared a hobby for the pioneering method of multi-platforming our MSN content. Early on in our friendship, we discovered that since the conception of Instant Messenger, we had both been copying and pasting conversations with boys on to a Microsoft Word document, printing them out and putting the pages in a ring-binder folder to read before bed like an erotic novel. We thought ourselves to be a sort of two-person Bloomsbury Group of early noughties MSN Messenger.

But just as I formed a friendship with Lauren, I left

Copyrighted Material

suburbia to live seventy-five miles north of Stanmore at a co-ed boarding school. MSN could no longer serve my curiosity around the opposite sex; I needed to know what they were like in real life. The ever-fading smell of Ralph Lauren Polo Blue on a love letter didn't satisfy me any more and neither did the pings and drums of new messages on MSN. I went to boarding school to try to acclimatize to boys.

(Aside: and thank God I did. Farly stayed on for sixth form at our all-girls school and when she arrived at university, having never spent any time around boys, she was like an uncut bull in a china shop. On the first night of freshers' week, there was a 'traffic light party', where single people were encouraged to wear something green and people in relationships wore something red. Most of us took this to mean a green T-shirt, but Farly arrived at our halls of residence bar wearing green tights, green shoes, a green dress and a giant green bow in her hair along with a mist of green hairspray. She might as well have had I WENT TO AN ALL-GIRLS SCHOOL tattooed across her forehead. I am for ever grateful that I had two years on the nursery slopes of mixed interaction at boarding school, otherwise I fear I too would have fallen foul of the can of green hairspray come freshers' week.)

As it turns out, I discovered I had absolutely nothing in common with most boys and next to no interest in them unless I wanted to kiss them. And no boy I wanted to kiss wanted to kiss me, so I might as well have stayed

Copyrighted Material

in Stanmore and continued to enjoy a series of fantasy relationships played out in the fecund lands of my imagination.

I blame my high expectations for love on two things: the first is that I am the child of parents who are almost embarrassingly infatuated with each other; the second is the films I watched in my formative years. As a child, I had a rather unusual obsession with old musicals and having grown up absolutely addicted to the films of Gene Kelly and Rock Hudson, I had always expected boys to carry themselves with a similar elegance and charm. But co-ed school killed this notion pretty fast. Take, for example, my first politics lesson. I was one of just two girls in the class of twelve and had never sat with as many boys in one room in my entire life. The best-looking boy, who I had already been told was a notorious heart-throb (his older brother who had left the year before was nicknamed 'Zeus'), passed a piece of paper to me down the table while our teacher explained what Proportional Representation was. The note was folded up with a heart drawn on the front, leading me to believe it was a love letter; I opened it with a coy smile. However, when I unfolded it, there was a picture of a creature, helpfully annotated to inform me that it was an orc from *Lord of the Rings*, with 'YOU LOOK LIKE THIS' scribbled underneath it.

Farly came to visit me at the weekends and ogled at the hundreds of boys of all shapes and sizes wandering around the streets, sports bags and hockey sticks flung

Copyrighted Material

over their shoulders. She couldn't believe my luck, that I got to sit in pews every morning in chapel within reaching distance of them. But I found the reality of boys to be slightly disappointing. Not as funny as the girls I had met there, not nearly as interesting or kind. And, for some reason, I could never quite relax around any of them.

By the time I left school, I had stopped using MSN Messenger as religiously as I once had. My first term at Exeter University swung round and, with it, the advent of Facebook. Facebook was a treasure trove for boys online – and this time, even better, you had all their vital information collated together on one page. I regularly browsed through my uni friends' photos and added anyone who I liked the look of; this would quickly accelerate into messages back and forth and planned meet-ups at one of the many Vodka Shark club nights or foam parties happening that week. I was at a campus university at a cathedral city in Devon; locating each other was no hard task. If MSN had been a blank canvas on which I could splatter vivid fantasies, Facebook messaging was a purely functional meet-up tool. It was how students identified their next conquest; lined up their next Thursday night.

By the time I left university and returned to London, I had firmly given up my habit of cold-calling potential love interests on Facebook with the persuasive aggression of an Avon representative, but a new pattern was forming. I would meet a man through a friend or at a

Copyrighted Material

party or on a night out, get his name and number and then form an epistolary relationship with him over text or email for weeks and weeks before I would confirm a second real-life meet-up. Perhaps it was because this was the only way I had learnt to get to know someone, with a distance in between us, with enough space for me to curate and filter the best version of myself possible – all the good jokes, all the best sentences, all the songs I knew he'd be impressed by, normally sent to me by Lauren. In return, I'd send songs to her to pass on to her pen pal. She once commented that we sent good new music to each other at a wholesale price, then passed it on to love interests as our own, with an 'emotional mark-up'.

This form of correspondence nearly always ended in disappointment. I slowly began to realize that it's best for those first dates to happen in real life rather than in written form, otherwise the disparity between who you imagine the other person to be and who they actually are grows wider and wider. Many times, I would invent a person in my head and create our chemistry as if writing a screenplay and by the time we'd meet again in real life, I'd be crushingly let down. It was as if, when things didn't go as I imagined, I'd assumed he would have been given a copy of the script I'd written and I'd feel frustrated that his agent obviously forgot to courier it to him to memorize.

Any woman who spent her formative years surrounded only by other girls will tell you the same thing: you never really shake off the idea that boys are the most

Copyrighted Material

fascinating, beguiling, repulsive, bizarre creatures to roam the earth; as dangerous and mythological as a Sasquatch. More often than not, it also means you are a confirmed fantasist for life. Because how could you not be? For years on end, all I did was sit on walls with Farly, kicking the bricks with my thick rubber soles, staring up at the sky, trying to dream up enough to keep us distracted from the endless sight of hundreds of girls walking around us in matching uniform. Your imagination has the daily workout of an Olympic athlete when you attend an all-girls school. It's amazing how habituated you become to the intense heat of fantasy when you escape to it so often.

I always thought my fascination and obsession with the opposite sex would cool down when I left school and life began, but little did I know I would be just as clueless about how to be with them in my late twenties as I was when I first logged on to MSN Messenger.

Boys were a problem. One that would take me fifteen years to fix.

Copyrighted Material

The Bad Date Diaries: Twelve Minutes

The year is 2002. I am fourteen years old. I wear a kilt skirt from Miss Selfridge, a pair of black Dr Martens and a neon-orange crop top.

The boy is Betzalel, an acquaintance of my school friend Natalie. They met on Jewish holiday camp and have been speaking on MSN and giving each other 'relationship and life advice' ever since. Natalie is in the market for new friends, having just lost hers by spreading a rumour that a girl in our year self-harms when actually it's just bad eczema, and I am one of her targets.

She knows I want a boyfriend so suggests she sets Betz and I up on MSN Messenger. I am more than happy with the unspoken agreement that Natalie gifts me a new boy to speak to and in return I occasionally eat lunch with her.

Betz and I are basically going out after a month of speaking with each other every day after school on MSN. He thinks everyone his age is immature, as do I, and he's also tall for his age, as am I. We chew the fat of these shared experiences constantly.

We agree to meet in Costa, Brent Cross shopping centre. I ask Farly to come, so I am not on my own.

Betz arrives and he looks nothing like the photo he's

Copyrighted Material

sent me – he's shaved all his curly hair off and has put on stacks of weight since camp. We wave at each other across the table. Betz orders nothing.

Farly does all the talking, while Betz and I stare at the floor, embarrassed, silent. Betz has a shopping bag – he tells us he's just bought *Toy Story 2* on video. I tell him that's babyish. He says my skirt makes me look like a Scottish man.

I tell him we have to leave because we need to catch the 142 back to Stanmore. The date lasts twelve minutes.

When I get home and log on to MSN, Betz immediately sends me a long message I know he's already written on Microsoft Word and copied and pasted into the chat window in his trademark italic purple Comic Sans. He says he thinks I'm a nice girl but he doesn't have feelings for me. I tell him it's out of order of him to write a speech and sit at home waiting for me to log on, when he lives so near Brent Cross and my bus is twenty-five minutes from home, just because he knows I fancied him less than he fancied me and he didn't want me to say it first.

Betz blocks me for a month but he eventually forgives me. We never have a second meeting, but we become relationship confidants until I am seventeen.

Free from my contractual obligation, Natalie and I never eat lunch together again.

Copyrighted Material

The Bad Party Chronicles: UCL Halls, New Year's Eve, 2006

It is my first holiday home after my first term at university. Lauren, also home for Christmas, suggests we go to a New Year's Eve party in the UCL halls of residence. She's been invited by Hayley, a girl she went to school with and hasn't seen since prize-giving.

We arrive at the large communal flat in a dilapidated building on a backstreet in between Euston and Warren Street. The party attendees are an even mix of UCL stoners, Lauren's school friends and opportunistic passers-by who see the door open and hear R. Kelly's 'Ignition' on repeat for the best part of an evening. Lauren and I have a bottle of red wine each (Jacob's Creek Shiraz, because it's a special occasion), which we drink from two plastic glasses (not the bottle, because it's a special occasion).

I scan the room for boys with working limbs and a detectable pulse. I am, at this point, eighteen, six months into my sexually active life and at a uniquely heightened stage of sexuality; an ephemeral period where sex was my biggest adventure and discovery; a time when shagging was like potatoes and tobacco, and I, Sir Walter Raleigh. I couldn't understand why everyone wasn't doing it all the time. All the books and films and songs that had been written about it were not enough to cover all corners of

Copyrighted Material

how great it was; how did anyone see the opportunity in any evening for anything other than having sex or finding someone to have sex with? (This feeling had insidiously evaporated by my nineteenth birthday.)

I spot a familiar, friendly face on a tall body with broad shoulders and quickly identify him as a boy who was the runner on a sitcom I did work experience on after my GCSEs. We'd flirt and bitch about the diva cast members during furtive cigarettes behind the studio. We approach each other now with outstretched arms for a hug and almost immediately start snogging. This is how I operated when my hormones were pumping through my bloodstream so thick and fast; a handshake became a snog, a hug became a dry hump. The social markers of intimacy all climbed up a few steps.

After a couple of hours of sharing Shiraz and rubbing up against each other, we lock ourselves in the bathroom to seal the deal. We begin fumbling around each other's respective jeans and skirt, drunken teenagers trying to fix a broken fuse box, when there is a knock at the door.

'THE LOO ISN'T WORKING!' I shout, The Runner gnawing at my neck.

'Doll,' Lauren hisses. 'It's me, let me in.' I button up my skirt, move to the door and open it a crack.

'What?' I say, poking my head round. She shuffles in through the gap.

'So I've been getting off with Finn –' She notices my friend in the corner of the bathroom, now sheepishly zipping up his jeans. 'Oh, hello,' she says to him breezily.

Copyrighted Material

'So I'm getting off with Finn but I'm worried he's going to feel my knickers.'

'So?'

'They're control pants,' she says, lifting up her dress to show me a flesh-coloured girdle. 'To hold your stomach and back fat in.'

'Well, just take them off. Pretend you weren't wearing any,' I say, pushing her towards the door.

'Where do I put them? Everyone is in every room, I've been into every room and there are groups in every single one.'

'Put them there,' I say, pointing behind the loo's grubby cistern. 'No one will find them.' I help Lauren pull them down her legs, we stuff them behind the loo and I shove her out.

Sadly, due to the vast vats of alcohol we have consumed and the shared spliff, The Runner can't perform. We make several attempts to remedy the situation, one of which is so frenetic we accidentally unhinge the shower unit from the wall, but all are futile. So we cut our losses and amicably go our separate ways – he leaves for another party and we hug goodbye. It has just gone midnight.

Lauren and I reunite in the room where the most marijuana is being smoked to catch up on our respective venery. Finn has also departed for the promise of a better party in the inky-black first hours of a new year. We toast the proficiency of friendship and endless disappointment of boys, before spotting and swiftly befriending an emo band we've met on the Whetstone open-mic circuit. She

Copyrighted Material

takes the singer with Robert Smith hair, I take the bassist with Cabbage Patch Doll cheeks. We all slouch against a wardrobe, passing Silk Cuts and spliffs up and down our factory line of four and taking turns to put our iPods into the speaker dock to play an even mix of John Mayer and Panic! At The Disco. The music suddenly stops.

'Someone has broken the shower,' Hayley announces imperiously. 'We need to find the person who broke the shower because they need to pay for it, otherwise we'll get into huge trouble with the warden.'

'Yeah, we need to find them,' I chime in with a slur. 'I think it was that short guy with the long hair.'

'Which guy?'

'He was here a moment ago,' I say. 'It was definitely him, he came out of the bathroom with a girl and they were laughing. He's gone outside to have a cigarette, I think.'

I lead a witch-hunt of the halls' residents out into the street to find the made-up man, but quickly lose interest in the decoy when I see Joel, who is looking for the party. Joel is a famous North London heart-throb; a Jewish Warren Beatty with gelled spikes and acne scars; Danny Zuko of the suburbs. I offer him a cigarette and immediately we are snogging like we're making small talk about TFL. We migrate back into the flat where I enjoy publicly snogging Joel, a fair few kudos points higher than The Runner of yore. I am only sad that I can't colonize the bathroom once more, now crowded with Hayley and her half-baked *Silent Witness* team of

Copyrighted Material

party-pooper forensics, trying to deduce who broke the shower and how. I am looking for a new hiding place when Christine, a beautiful blonde (the Sandy to Joel's Danny), asks if she can have a word with him. I graciously leave them to it because, as the old adage goes, if you want to shag something, let it go.

Lauren and I reconvene for a fag – on to the Mayfairs now.

'They used to go out when we were at school,' she tells me. 'Very up and down, very intense.'

'Oh,' I say.

I look across the room to see Christine and Joel holding hands and leaving the flat. He waves at me apologetically on his way out.

'Bye,' he mouths.

Lauren is preoccupied with the emo singer and they're talking about chord progressions; a sure sign she's committed to the idea of sex. It is nearly four a.m. and I need to wake up in two hours to get to my job as a sales assistant at an upmarket Bond Street shoe shop where I am on one per cent commission that I cannot afford to lose. I go in search of a piece of carpet in a darkened room to sleep on and, to my delight, find a vacant single bed and set my alarm for six.

Two hours later I wake up with the worst hangover of my life; my brain feels like it's been turned inside out, my eyes are glued together with mascara and my breath smells like a Sauvignon-swilling rat has crawled into my mouth during the night, died and decayed. I look down

Copyrighted Material

at my brown Topshop miniskirt, bare legs and pirate boots, remembering that I haven't brought my work uniform with me.

'Hayley,' I hiss, prodding her body with my big toe as she sleeps on a pile of jumpers on the floor next to me. 'Hayley. I need to borrow a dress. Just a plain black dress. I'll bring it back later today.'

'You're in my bed,' she says flatly. 'You wouldn't get out of it last night.'

'Sorry,' I reply.

'And Lauren told me it was you who broke the shower,' she mutters into the jumpers. I say nothing, leave quietly and regret the altruism I displayed only a few hours earlier in finding a notebook of Hayley's sad little poems under her pillow and not reading it cover to cover.

'You look like a homeless person,' my witchy-faced boss Mary snarls at me as I walk into work. 'You smell like one too. Get down to the stockroom,' she says, waving her hand at me dismissively as if batting away a fly. 'You can't be near customers today.'

When I get home that night, after the longest day's work of my life, I log on to Facebook to survey the photographic damage from the night before. There, at the top of my homepage, is a close-up photo of Lauren's enormous knickers loaded by Hayley into an album called 'Lost Property'. Everyone from the party is tagged. The caption reads only: 'WHOSE PANTS ARE THESE?'

Copyrighted Material

A Hellraiser Heads to Leamington Spa

The first time I got drunk, I was ten. I was a guest at Natasha Bratt's bat mitzvah along with four other lucky chosen girls from our year. In the sun-flooded marquee in their Mill Hill back garden, the wine was flowing and the smoked salmon was circling; the women's hair was blow-dried into aggressively undulating trajectories, their lips a uniform frosted beige. And for reasons I will never understand, all of us girls – clearly prepubescent in our Tammy Girl strapless dresses and butterfly clips in our hair – were given glass after glass of champagne by the catering staff.

At first, it just felt like a wave of warmth flushing through my body, my blood sprinting, my epidermis humming. Then like all the screws in all my joints had been loosened, leaving me as springy and light as just-proved dough. And then came the chatting – the funny stories, the dramatic impressions of teachers and parents, the rude jokes, the best swear words. (To this day, this three-step progression is still how I experience initial drunkenness.)

The father–daughter dance to Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl' was brought to an abrupt and premature finish when one of the girls, slightly further along than the

Copyrighted Material

rest of us, threw herself belly-first on to the dance floor and wiggled manically underneath the legs of both parties, like a flapping fish out of water. I quickly followed suit before we were both removed and told off by an aggrieved uncle. But the night had only just begun.

Flooded with newfound confidence, I decided it was time for my first kiss, followed by my second (his best friend), followed by my third (the first's brother). Everyone got stuck in, swapping and trying out kissing partners as if they were shared puddings at a table. Eventually, this suburban child orgy was broken up and we were all taken to the front room and given black coffee; the door was locked and our parents were called to come pick us up. So unprecedented was the bad behaviour, we were reprimanded a second time by our headmistress on Monday and scolded for 'representing the school in a bad light' (this was often an accusation thrown at me during my scholastic years and it always struck me as a slightly weak takedown, particularly when I had never chosen to represent the school; rather my parents had chosen the school to represent me).

I was never the same after that night, the contents of which provided enough material to fill the pages of my diaries well into my teens. I had, at far too young an age, got the taste for alcohol. I begged for small, diluted glasses of wine at any family event. I'd slurp the sweet, throat-catching syrup from the bellies of liqueur chocolates at Christmas in the hope of a hit. At fourteen, I finally found out where my mum and dad hid the key to

Copyrighted Material