

Family Blog

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Family Blog

“I can’t tell if you’re serious or not,” said the driver.
“I won’t know it myself until I find out whether *life* is serious or not,” said Trout. “It’s *dangerous*, I know, and it can hurt a lot. That doesn’t necessarily mean it’s *serious*, too.”

—Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

Name: Louisa D.

Age: 25

Location: lost in the English fog

Interests: Bitching

ANTHROPOPHOBIA

Posted: 05.01.200. . . , 23:33

For over a month now I've been locked up in my room and I feel great. I'm not looking for anything out there. I am sick and tired of taking bullshit from all sides.

I hate people and all their petty little problems and skirmishes and hopes and disappointments. They either bore me to death or get on my nerves—or both. Of all the species inhabiting this vast planet of ours (and there are quite a few slimy and smelly and yucky ones), I find humans by far the most unpleasant.

Which means, of course, that I don't particularly like myself, dear reader. I'm so typical I make myself cringe. Not that I would like to be someone else, God forbid, but really, putting up with ME hasn't been much fun.

Then again, if there's anybody I dislike more than myself, it's my two sisters and my parents. They are the epitome of a life spent lying and cheating and manipulating and harassing each other to keep the family from breaking apart. Talk about dys-

functional. Fortunately, I don't live under their roof anymore. In fact, I live thousands of miles away. You'd *think* that would relieve me, but it doesn't: I'm still depending on my parents' bloody charity to survive. They pay for my education, housing and food. They believe that higher education leads to a successful career, which in turn leads to a fulfilled life. Sometimes I wonder where their minds have been for the past decade or so.

When I moved to England for my useless master's degree in Comparative Literature about a year and a half ago, mother would ask me *every week* on the phone if I had been "looking for a part-time job" to cover some of my expenses. Plus it would allow me to interact with people, she said. How healthy. To be honest, I wasn't in the mood to work in some godforsaken pub or fast-food joint or retailer or call centre and "interact" for a handful of lousy pennies. It's degrading. But go explain *that* to parents. So I pretended I was not only taking loads of university courses, but also spending days in the library to keep up with the "demanding level" of an international academic degree and all. The only job I might have time for, I said, would be as a waitress at a local topless bar that opened after 10 p.m. on weekends—I told mum that the pay was pretty good. She advised me to "rather stay at home and get some sleep." That's what I've been doing ever since. I've even made it a habit to spend entire weeks in bed. It's done wonders to my mental health.

What mum doesn't know is that I hate my degree so much. And the colleagues, professors, lectures, papers, the whole bloody campus...As soon as you get out of the lecture room, you run into hordes of hype students rushing to and fro, imagining they're so special and have all these "opportunities" ahead of them, and with some luck you will manage to squeeze your way through and arrive at the foyer, where dozens of stands are

selling you useless stuff and there's always this bad, loud music blasting out from loudspeakers. Interestingly enough, I seem to be the only person bothered by these phenomena. I've concluded that I'm surrounded by idiots.

But being here in cold and dirty N. is far better than home. I don't miss it at all. I even managed to skip flying over for Christmas, which of course I loathe, with all the silly jingly songs and fatty food and always always always getting worthless little candlesticks and handbags and ugly sweaters from your relatives, because they haven't bothered to notice or ask about your tastes or needs. I claimed to be "drowning in work"—and even though it "broke my heart", I just couldn't afford to "lose a week" to sit next to the plastic Christmas tree and chat about my hair or my younger sister's latest outfit, stuff myself with roasted dead animals and cheap chocolate, and watch TV with my half-blind, half-deaf grandma between the meals.

Last time I saw my family, things were in a turmoil. I was happy to get the hell out of there. I didn't want anything to do anymore with my younger sister's drug addiction, my older sister's eating disorder, my father's infidelities, my mother's manic shopping sprees, my aunt's random crying fits, my uncle's frustrated career efforts, my cousin's mental retardation, my grandma's hip problem, etc etc etc.

But I couldn't care less. I'm actually sick of the whole story. If only I could think of other issues to bitch about!

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

Name: Beatriz D.

Age: 27

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Interests: soft music, poetry, historical novels, jogging, friends and family, my degree

MY OPEN PAGES

Posted: 09.01.200. . . , 10:47

Last night I watched this film on TV about a woman who wrote down all her deepest worries in a diary and then intentionally left it in a public library, where another woman of a similar age picked it up and started adding her own thoughts. The film showed how they went on using that same diary on separate occasions, without ever meeting personally. Still, they ended up deeply influencing—even helping—each other.

This was before blogs.

I had been wanting to start my own journal for a very long time, but was somehow embarrassed to indulge in talking to myself. The idea that I might reach somebody else appeals more to me. I don't have much to offer, but I want to try to be as honest as possible about myself. My true self. That's all I have to give.

So, let's see: who am I?

Well, that's what I hope to find out. Maybe other people's comments will reveal more to me. But for the record: I am a Portuguese woman in her late twenties, I live in the capital, Lisbon, and am currently involved in a doctoral research project at university. I have a degree in Microbiology. I share a flat with my two sisters. Actually, at the moment I live with only one of them, the youngest, as my other sister is studying in England. The flat is very nice and cosy, it has big windows overlooking lots of other buildings all the way to the sea, and I just love sitting in my room and watching the people down there, ten storeys below, going about their business.

I also enjoy catching the commuter train and stepping out in downtown Lisbon, going to a café and just experiencing the hustle-bustle of life. I usually take my laptop or a book and sit for hours on my own at a table. When the weather is nice, I like to go to parks and museums. Most of my time, however, is spent at university, doing research with five colleagues. It is monotonous work, but I am excited about our findings. I think science is beautiful.

I have a boyfriend, Artur, who recently graduated in Marketing studies. We're very close, he is my best friend, but lately we've been having some problems. I think he is under stress because of his difficult life situation. His family is always in financial difficulties, particularly since Artur's brother and his wife have had their second baby. They all live together in a small flat. On top of that, his father drinks and his mother is very ill—she suffers from arthritis.

Artur is now looking for a job. He received training with a pharmaceutical company here in Lisbon, but they let him go after six months. That was last summer. He didn't even get paid for his work, it was part of his degree. Now he has a diploma

and is trying hard to get hired in his field, looking through the newspapers, sending his CV to various companies, going for job interviews. I think he's put down by all the rejections.

He's such a gentle person, I love him and want to be there for him. Sometimes I become impatient, especially when he slackens and sits in my living room for hours, watching TV. We both like cartoons and entertaining films, board games and some good laughs—I just wish he were more interested in reading and talking about serious issues.

Artur wants to marry me as soon as he starts his career, and then we can rent a flat closer to the centre. He's a bit reluctant to leave his mother, though. I like Artur's mother, but I don't know how to communicate with her. She's continually crying about her unhappy life. Only her little grandchildren can make her smile now and then.

Sometimes I just want to stay in bed and not see anybody. But this is a weakness I have to overcome.

Sometimes I fear that everything I do will be a failure and I won't manage to finish my research and find a decent job afterwards. I owe it to my parents to receive my doctorate as soon as possible and start earning my own money. At the moment I get a scholarship, but it only runs for another three months. I can apply for it again, although there's no guarantee that they will grant it once more: my research has been going on for almost two years and I have hardly any results.

I feel bad for my parents. They have lots of expenses with us girls. They bought this flat in Lisbon five years ago and are still paying to the bank. But it was a good investment—mother says that there are better employment opportunities for my sisters and me here in the capital. Right now things are a bit tight:

my sister Lou didn't manage to get a grant for her expensive master's degree in England, and my youngest sister Jo is lagging behind in her Business Administration degree.

My mother worries excessively about us girls. I think this is the legacy of the years our family spent in war-torn Angola, when we were children. That wasn't a safe environment. Mum always had to drive us to school and back, even though it was within walking distance from our home, because so many people were robbed or kidnapped. She also made sure we didn't venture beyond our street when we played outside. And she had to constantly remind us not to accept food or drinks from strangers, avoid the filthy toilets at school and stay away from stray dogs and cats (who might carry all kinds of parasites).

She is a caring mother. She calls me every evening from G., a small town in the east of Portugal, where our family settled after escaping the war in Angola. She needs to check if her babies are doing alright. Sometimes she gets on my nerves, even though I know she only wants what's best for us.

We are a very united family. In fact, we're almost like an old-fashioned clan. Just a few steps down the road, in a residential neighbourhood, lives my mum's kin: that's my granny, my uncle Mario, his wife Silvia and their son Carlito. They've been together for ages in granny's house, this is the centre of our clan's frequent meetings. I also had a little room there when I started university. That was before my parents decided to buy a flat for my sisters and me in this newly erected block.

Back then Carlito was still a small kid and spent a lot of time in hospitals, because of all the operations he had to undergo to help him breathe normally. So I was glad to be around: we all kept each other company in the evenings, watched films

together and discussed the TV news reports. Granny and auntie are very talkative and interested women, I enjoyed living with them. And uncle Mario can be really entertaining when he's in a good mood—unfortunately, he's often under stress and tends to spend a lot of time on his own, locked up in his bedroom upstairs, watching TV or playing solitaire on his computer.

Aunt Silvia and uncle Mario have had some marriage problems lately, but I think this is only a phase. They miss their son, that's all. Carlito has been sent to a special school in Spain, so we only see him on holidays. He's an adorable kid—he just has difficulties adapting to normal classrooms, where other teenagers always poke fun at his big body size and facial features. Carlito isn't ugly or anything, but his several nose operations have left him with some scars and a slight speech disability. He's been making a lot of progress in his new school, which is on a farm outside Barcelona.

Mum and dad frequently drive over on weekends from G. and are put up in Lou's bedroom. They're happy to lend a hand to mum's family, especially now that granny is getting old, Carlito is no longer around, and uncle Mario has been fired from his job as an accountant in a big trading company. On Sundays we all get together for a big meal at granny's.

It's nice to be surrounded by so many people who love and care about you, but sometimes I imagine what it would be like to take off for a while and explore the world.

Sometimes I just want to be on my own.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

SUCCESS STORIES

Posted: 11.01.200... , 20:14

I wonder how my sisters turned out to be such idiots. You can't trust them to form a reasonable thought.

Take my older sister, Bea: if you meet her, she seems like the sweetest creature in the world. She has this broad smile on her chubby face all the time—and although she's in her late twenties, she talks as if she were five. I mean, the tone of her voice as well as the content of her conversations would make you think she has some kind of mental handicap. She doesn't. In fact, she's the little genius in the family, if ever there was one.

Ask my mother about Bea, and she will probably tell you how “successful” her daughter is at university. All it amounts to, though, is one of those boring research projects where a bunch of geeks in white coats conduct funny experiments on other creatures for the advancement of mankind. She's specializing in Microbiology. But not even that is as exciting as it might sound: she just collects data from their abstruse experiments and feeds it to the computer.

I once asked Bea how she felt about the possibility that one day she will develop the next generation of biological weapons, and she looked at me as if I were a nutcase (I told you she isn't

stupid). *She* has never heard of weapons being created in university laboratories! In fact, she's proud that her research group deals exclusively with "microscopic creatures"—so she doesn't "affect the little mice at all". Infecting various types of small caged mammals with weird lab mixtures is the job of another department. Bea's working on fermentation, experimenting with "harmless bacteria" which are supposed to be added to processed meat products, so that the stuff "tastes like meat". Therefore she is innocent. She's just concerned with turning plastic food into something you would naturally want to eat.

Now that we're on the subject of substances developed in laboratories, I might as well introduce you to my younger sister Jo, who has indeed profited much from all kinds of scientific advances. She began with ordinary prescription pills in her early teens, little painkillers and sedatives that mum and dad kept for their sleepless nights. Jo wasn't just killing headaches, she was getting high. I remember that her mood improved considerably in those days. One can only recommend these drugs.

But her exploration of the wonders of chemicals hardly stopped there. For the past decade or so, my little sister has smoked, slurped, popped, snorted or injected just about anything psychoactive you can imagine. And let me tell you, there's a lot to choose from nowadays: legal, illegal or a good mixture of both. God bless the lab geeks and their guinea-pigs.

Don't get me wrong here, I don't mind if you routinely knock yourself out in order to endure life. I myself like to escape to my nicer private world. Reality sucks.

For the rest, Jo really is as mainstream as the most square person you can imagine, believe me. I have spent enough time in

her company, watching her do her little drugs. I even participated in some minor experiments. (Be a conscious guinea-pig, I say!)

My final conclusion about my sister's habits and ideas can be summed up in two words: unbearably boring. She'll take those chemicals and sit in front of the TV all day. You couldn't tell the difference between her high and her sober moments, except that she's much friendlier when she is intoxicated.

In the dreadful flat I shared with my sisters before I fled from Portugal, you could peek into Jo's room and notice the remnants of smoking and snorting sessions she habitually had with her boyfriend or a few pals. Then you'd find Jo sitting with Bea in the living room, watching a quiz show and munching away some cold pizza, followed by cake or ice-cream. It was actually funny to observe how one of my sisters kept getting fatter while the other kept losing weight.

Talk about junk lives.

And their boyfriends. . .! But here I have to interrupt myself with some self-criticism: if there's one thing my sisters and I would agree upon, is that *my* boyfriends have been the greatest idiots of all. I really believe in the power of love, I do—only this explains how I could have wasted so much time and energy with the most pathetic guys I ran into. And the best part is: I repeatedly managed to convince myself that each one of these males was so "exceptional". It's a miracle I'm not a wife and mother yet. I certainly deserve that punishment.

For all it's worth, at least my little sister Jo has one true, constant love: her chemicals. All the mumbo-jumbo about a future career, friends and enemies, jealousy and betrayal, clothes, food, football, pets and children which she manages to churn

out to my absolute befuddlement fades away as soon as she concentrates on getting her next fix. For a short while she has a clear attainable aim—that's more than you can say about most of us.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

Name: Alda D.

Age: 52

Location: G., Portugal

Interests: my family, baking, interior decoration, cats, buying presents for my daughters, crime novels

TO HAVE A DREAM

Posted: 12.01.200... , 17:44

I would like to thank all the blog writers on this *Europeans from Africa* international website for inspiring me to start writing my own story. It has been more than a decade since I've left Angola, my beloved homeland, but for years I couldn't find a way of expressing my grief. This site has helped me more than I can tell.

I want to take this opportunity to share my unique and tragic experiences, having witnessed the transition from colonialist oppression to a brutal civil war in one of the most beautiful countries in Africa. These happenings have shaped my entire life, and have had a profound impact on my family as well.

I was born in Angola in the 1950s, when it was still a Portuguese colony. My parents were part of the colonial regime. They believed that the whites had the right and even the duty to dominate the blacks, because only white settlers had made

the country run efficiently. But I was convinced that my family was lagging behind: there was a great tide of liberation sweeping over the whole African continent, and you could either embrace it or be swallowed up by it. My dreams corresponded to this tide, and soon I met other young white Africans who felt like me and encouraged me to stay true to my ideals—because they were going to prevail. History proved us right: in 1975 Angola became independent.

While most Portuguese fled the country, I settled down in the capital, Luanda, with my husband Martin, himself an Angolan. We wanted to participate in the reconstruction of our homeland and make it the most prosperous nation in Africa. That entailed many hard battles from the beginning, especially against vicious rebel minorities and vested imperialist interests. But we were prepared to go to any lengths for the achievement of our goals.

However, the peace and prosperity I longed for kept being postponed by decades of civil war. Each day living conditions were deteriorating. Even in Luanda everyone feared for their lives (including foreign businesspeople and ambassadors). Which is why we eventually had to turn our backs on our homeland.

We've been here in Portugal since December 1992. And still, no matter how hard I try, I just don't feel at home. There are so many aspects of Portuguese culture that I cannot adapt to and I miss Angola terribly.

Now that my daughters are all grown-up and ready to lead their independent lives, my mind keeps returning to those early days of Angola's recovery from the colonial rule. How challenging and promising everything was. I can't help wondering if I shouldn't return there and pick up the work where I left off.

That was, after all, the only time I felt truly happy, truly justified. For all it's worth, family life has never managed to bring me the same amount of satisfaction.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

BAD KARMA?

Posted: 14.01.200... , 21:09

Today just wasn't my lucky day. I got into arguments with three people who are close to me.

I had a sleepless night, mainly due to the disturbing noises coming from Jo's room until dawn. I don't know for sure what was happening—there were clearly several people, though apart from my sister I could only distinguish male voices. It was difficult to tell because her TV set was so loud. These people kept coming in and out of her room, going to the kitchen or to the bathroom. At a certain point I could swear that I heard someone vomiting. It was excruciating.

When I finally got up around 8 a.m., things had settled down. I tiptoed to the kitchen to prepare my breakfast and noticed a bunch of people sleeping in Lou's bedroom—they hadn't even bothered to close the door. I've told Jo time and again that I don't mind if sometimes one or the other friend stays over, but those guys I heard last night... They disgust me. They aren't university students or anything, they're these immature thirty-somethings who still live with their parents here in the area and meet Jo in the café across the street. They are loud, foulmouthed and aggressive. I don't understand what she sees in them.

But what really got to me was the state of the kitchen, it was full of repulsively dirty dishes. You couldn't even find a single

clean cup. So I decided to get out of the flat and give my sister a chance to clean up during my absence—I didn't want her to snap and yell at me like she has done lately.

As I was about to leave, I met Jo on her way to the bathroom. She immediately asked me to go get some bread and cigarettes, since I was already dressed. That's when I started screaming about being late for university and finding it inappropriate that she lets these strangers sleep in Lou's bed, when she knows that mum and dad are using it on weekends. My tone of voice was really loud, which is unusual for me. Jo was so startled that she started to cry. She begged me not to tell mum anything. They have been on each other's neck lately.

Jo said she's going through a rough period: Tony (that's her boyfriend) has dumped her again and she just wanted to have some fun to take her mind off it. I felt sorry for her, she's so in love with Tony but they continually try to hurt each other. I calmed her down and told her I had to go. We actually hugged—it was nice.

I joined Artur for lunch at a shopping mall close to university. Since there wasn't much work to do in the lab, I had decided to take the afternoon off and go to the museum or to the movies. I wanted to enjoy myself. But Artur didn't feel like going anywhere, he had again been rejected by some company. He said he would rather sit in my living room and snuggle his head onto my lap. I don't know what came over me—I was sickened by the idea, I lost my appetite immediately and just stared at my sandwich. I hoped that Artur would ask me what was wrong and would help me find a way to express myself, yet he simply switched subjects and started telling me about this talk-show he had watched on TV last night.

I'm usually a calm person and try to present logical arguments when I disagree with somebody, but probably because of my sleepless night, I suddenly called Artur an idiot. I had never done this before and must have shocked him so much that tears welled up in his eyes. I immediately regretted and explained that I was stressed because of my work in the lab (which is also true, I suppose) and had wanted so much to go to the museum this week, before the end of the impressionist paintings exhibition. I couldn't believe I had behaved so insensitively.

But I'm lucky to have such a kind boyfriend, he forgave me. After lunch we took the commuter train to my place, where everything was tidy again. Fortunately our charwoman had come this morning. I now see that Artur's idea was much nicer: there was nobody else in the flat, so we could fool around and relax. I'll go to the museum on the weekend. Probably on my own.

About an hour ago, mum called me up. We chat every evening, which is mostly OK. I know how lonely she feels since we kids have moved to Lisbon—she was so used to having us around, cooking for us, helping us with homework... Now she and dad are a bit disoriented. I know for sure that they still love each other a lot, even if they sometimes fight over silly matters. Mum complains that dad is always lending money to his two younger sisters, aunt Nanda and aunt Cecilia, and they never pay back. I don't like it when mum criticizes dad, she should be more understanding towards him. She says he is full of debts but refuses to discuss the matter with her.

Mum is also worried about granny, who has had a hip operation two months ago and can hardly move now. Granny just lies in her bed and claims she's being neglected by aunt Silvia, who only comes by her room three or four times a day to make

sure she hasn't dirtied the sheets. Auntie isn't an unkind person, but I have the impression that she is fed-up with taking care of granny. They've been living together for more than fifteen years now, day in and day out. So mum asked me to go over and chat a bit with grandma, to cheer her up and relieve aunt Silvia.

Then she wanted to talk with Jo, who still wasn't back home. For the past five days or so, my sister has managed to be either asleep or away when mum calls. This puts my mother's nerves on edge, she becomes anxious and complains about Jo's unhealthy relationship with Tony. Mum thinks he is responsible for my sister's failure at university. She asked me if I knew where Jo was, if I had talked to her today, if I had been to the super-market to get her favourite soft drink.

I'm kind of used to these questions, but today they made me furious. I told mum I'm not a babysitter and she should stop treating Jo (who is 23) as if she were totally helpless. Mother took this as an insult. She reminded me of Jo's unstable personality and low self-esteem, which is why my younger sister needs my support. Mum said she can't take care of everything, it's not easy to manage a family. Her voice was shaking.

I felt like hanging up. I think I was mainly angry at myself for having been so tactless. I know that mum only wants what's best for all of us.

I'm so tired, perhaps it's the weather—or my work, which is too demanding. And I wish Artur could sort out his life, it would be great for him to have a job. It might even make him more sociable, instead of always hanging out with me. I'd love to have a wider circle of friends.

Sometimes I miss Lou, we were pretty close. We would talk for hours about everything. Mum thinks I should visit her in England this spring. Maybe she's right.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

EVERYONE IS DOING GREAT!

Posted: 15.01.200... , 12:37

If anybody bothers at all to read these ramblings of mine, they might have the suspicion that I exaggerate my relatives' tendency to cheat each other. I'm not denying my possible paranoia, but this really is beside the point. What I am saying is: I have *evidence* that I'm being lied to continually.

Take the e-mail my older sister Bea sent me yesterday:

Hi, little sis!

How are you? Is it still very cold up there in the North? Have you been reading any interesting books lately? How are your flatmates doing? Are you still having difficulties with your subjects? Mum tells me that you are full of work at the moment—me too!

Anyway, I just wanted to say hello, it's been months since I've heard from you, I had expected to have a little tête-à-tête with you at Christmas but unfortunately you weren't able to come. It was all very nice, even though granny wasn't in her best mood: she didn't get to do her cooking this year because of her hip problems, so of course she had to criticize auntie's sauce and mum's overcooked potatoes and all that. And uncle Mario has still not settled the issue of his unfair dismissal at the court—his lawyer says there are good chances that he will win the case against his old company, though. I sure hope so, otherwise he will go on complaining to everybody about the "rotten system"!

Carlito came over for the holidays, he's improved so much—you hardly notice his speech problems. All the teachers in his new school have praised his efforts and confirmed his talent for music and math. Aunt Silvia wants to buy him a piano, but uncle Mario says they don't have money for such luxuries.

Still, everyone is doing great, you know how we manage!

Mum and dad are fine, they've been fighting less, although every now and then dad gets into financial difficulties because of his sisters. And Jo and Tony have apparently split again—I expect them to reunite by the weekend. Crazy kids! For the rest, I think Jo actually looks better, less skinny that is. At least she goes to university regularly. Sometimes she seems a bit off, I think she drinks a little too much or something. I'll try to chat with her this week, to see what she's been up to.

And me, well, I guess I'm OK too, just slightly stressed because of my research. But I enjoy my work, every day. Artur has been applying for jobs, let's hope he gets hired soon. Have I told you that we are thinking of getting a place of our own? I haven't informed mum yet. This weekend I'm going to the museum to check some impressionist paintings. If you were here, I would invite you to come along!

Anyway, that's all, I think. As you see, nothing has changed. Maybe one day I can let you in on all the details, when you have more time and come see us. I have actually been dreaming of going to London as soon as the weather gets better—that's only a few hours by train from where you are, isn't it, so maybe we could meet?

*Lots of love,
Bea.*

Ignore the appearance of a happy, talkative, united sisterhood. We're far from it. Bea hates my guts as much as I hate hers—we just don't make an issue of it. After all, we're family.

I get e-mails like this every three months or so. I usually reply immediately and enthusiastically, telling Bea about my adventures, the friendly flatmates, the interesting university sub-

jects, the lousy weather. . .all that. Of course, most of it is made up: my life here is utterly boring and depressing, I can't really stand my flatmates (and I'm sure it's a mutual thing), I haven't attended any lecture for a couple of months now, and I actually like just looking at the fog and rain outside while I'm comfortably tucked under my blanket.

Then I turn to my sister's ramblings and start asking for details: are she and her boyfriend Artur having more serious talks these days, is she still nervous about her scholarship, why do mum and dad fight so often, what makes her think that Jo is doing better/worse. . .things like that. I get involved, I show how much I care. At this point, big sis tends to back off. I don't hear a word from her for a long time, and then another one of these e-mails pops up in my mailbox. I again have to read platitudes about my family. As if it weren't enough to talk to mum on the phone every week!

Christmas is probably the ideal occasion to observe my relatives in action, as they all get together in granny's house and drive each other nuts. Granny's place is well within walking distance from the building where my sisters live—you can actually wave to each other from the windows, if that's your idea of fun. We don't even live in the city, but in O., some godforsaken outskirts. When my grandparents and uncle Mario settled there in the 1970s, the area was quite appealing, with neat residential neighbourhoods, trees and gardens, and all the little shops at walking distance. By the 1990s, high-rise buildings (including the one where our parents bought our flat) were sprouting up all around granny's street.

Whoever is in charge of the Christmas cooking, the result is always pretty disgusting: full of fat and tasteless deep-frozen vegetables and cheap wine and all. But that's nothing as compared to

the company. Granny had been getting on people's nerves even before her hip operation, she doesn't hear things properly and tends to interpret every conversation as an insult or a threat to her. I'd say this is pretty accurate: for years now everybody has been waiting for her to drop dead (she's about eighty).

Auntie Silvia just feels frustrated about her spoiled life—from her retarded son to her failed husband and ungrateful mother-in-law. Meanwhile my uncle Mario gets everyone involved in his endless fights against his old company: when he still worked, he continually grumbled about his “tedious job”, the “stupid colleagues” and the “choleric boss”; now he whines because he was chucked. I'm sure he'll go on feeling sorry for himself even if he wins his damned case. He and his wife always have big arguments in front of the whole clan, to the point where she starts crying and he goes off “for a walk”.

No wonder our cousin Carlito came out a bit “defective”. Obviously no special school is going to change this—the only reason he was sent away to Barcelona was that nobody could put up with him any more. His only visible talent is for destroying things. He should probably consider wrestling instead of piano playing.

My favourite bit of information concerns my parents, though. For the past five or six years, mum has been complaining that dad spends so much money “on his sisters”. Dad's family is as dysfunctional as they come, but I have serious doubts that all his supposed debts are due to aunt Nanda's occasional travels to the Spanish coast to look for a new boyfriend, or aunt Cecilia's difficulties raising her four children ever since her husband got imprisoned for embezzlement. Dad might give them one or the other penny, but they're not *that* close, really.

Of course, Bea and mum are speculating about dad's concrete activities, because you can't *ask* the guy what he is actually

doing with his money: he just gets out of his mind and starts screaming until his face turns red and you think he's going to have a stroke. This usually shuts everybody up. Some time ago I asked Bea if it wasn't more likely that dad has some kind of romantic affair(s), where he invests at least part of his earnings. He often has to travel around, doing technical maintenance for different companies. Couldn't it be...? Nope, sister immediately answered, because “mum and dad still love each other a lot”. Right. They can't exchange two decent words, but at least they share *feelings*.

And little sister Jo is doing “better” and has been going to university of all places! Let me assure you that Jo hasn't set foot in university for years. In fact, she mostly just hangs out in the shabby café opposite the depressive block where my sisters live. She drinks a few beers while she's there, I'll grant you that, but this is just the introduction. Most of her drugs consumption is actually done in the comfy privacy of her bedroom, with her junky pals and her boyfriend Tony. Even their weekly fights concern schemes and deals to get more stuff.

This was already Jo's routine while I still lived in that god-damned flat—and yet, my sister Bea doesn't notice anything. She doesn't ask, either, she just sits with Jo in front of the TV and listens to little sister's stories about her difficult Business Administration subjects at university, the arrogant professors, and of course Tony's jealousy fits.

Then there's Bea's private little universe, with her dull boyfriend and the unrewarding work in the lab. She's so bored with Artur, all they do is watching stupid videos, playing childish games and munching sweets. They're both chubby and claim they're try-

ing to lose weight. Every so often, Bea will take up jogging and Artur will start swimming, but the whole thing fades away after a few enthusiastic sessions. Incidentally, Bea has been telling me for six months now that Artur is getting a job. It doesn't occur to her that nobody *needs* Artur's working power, just as no one will properly employ her when she's done with her doctorate.

Plus I don't have much faith in Bea's plan to move out: not only will Artur never be able to afford such an adventure, but the flat I shared with my sisters is registered in Bea's name and financed by my parents—why in the world would anybody forfeit a deal like this? What older sis really desires is to get little sis out of there once and for all. But I don't think Jo is letting go that easily. They sure would have a lot to discuss, if they dared.

To wrap it all up, Bea threatens to come to England and, I suppose, check out what I'm on about. I bet mum is behind this, suggesting that Bea should see London, cause it's such a “cultural” city. Then she can just as well pop by N. to say hello! And report back to base. Mum loves organizing our lives for us.

I do pity Bea, she has always been mum's factotum. Deep in her heart she wishes somebody else would take on this function. Me, for example. That's one of the reasons why I was glad to leave the family circus—I was so tired of fighting with my sisters and making my own existence shitty in the process, just because our parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents don't know how to sort out their boring lives and always need *us* to distract them and make up for their failures.

This time I won't reply to Bea at all.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

BECOMING A FREEDOM FIGHTER

Posted: 16.01.200. . ., 15:23

Looking back on my life, I understand that I was destined to fight for the liberation of Angola. I owed it to my oppressed black brothers and sisters. And it was the most decent thing to do for the sake of future generations.

I grew up in Malange, in the interior north of Angola, an area rich in minerals and specialized in coffee and cotton plantations. My father worked as a district officer for the Portuguese colonial administration—he organized the forced recruitment of black workers, in order to send them off wherever cheap labour was required. We lived well, although we weren't as rich as the farm owners or heads of mining companies who did business with my father.

The fact that my family belonged to the colonial regime soon became a problem for me. It just wasn't right to treat the blacks like inferior beings, mere tools that could be transported away from their home-villages and deployed for many months, even years in a row. I didn't want to live in a country where black and white people were unequal.

When I was fifteen, I was sent to the capital, Luanda, to attend high-school—a privilege reserved almost exclusively to

whites. This was my first chance to live away from my family. I felt very relieved to escape the confines of my home and the limited ideas of my parents, which were making me angry and revolted. I had begun questioning, even criticizing their position towards the blacks. Often enough my father and I had ended up screaming and insulting each other.

In Luanda I was finally rid of that. Living in a boarding house close to the city centre, I was able to explore more liberal attitudes: going out with friends, discussing polemic issues, reading subversive books. Thanks to the contact with other dissenting youngsters in high school, I learned to despise my background and the outdated ideas of the Portuguese colonial system.

This was in the 1960s, when fierce battles for the liberation of Angola were already being fought. Rebel groups of black Angolans wreaked havoc all the way from my birthplace Malange to the capital, hundreds of kilometres away. I had actually entered adolescence surrounded by war: the villages between Luanda and Malange were systematically bombed by the Portuguese Air Force, in an attempt to contain the rebels. And in the capital white mobs made repeated incursions into black slums, lynching hundreds of innocents.

However, there was also increasing excitement among progressive white students, who kept attentive to the movements for independence rapidly spreading all over the African continent, from Egypt to Congo, greatly supported by intellectuals in Europe and America. It was clear to us that a revolution was taking place on a world scale—and the young were being called upon to finally implement the necessary changes.

During this period many whites were brutally murdered, including some cousins of mine who owned a coffee plantation. The horrifying details of their deaths sent a chill down my spine:

although I could not blame the mutinous black farm labourers for their rage after centuries of cruel exploitation, I realized that the life of all Portuguese settlers was in danger—including my own. I had many sleepless nights, especially when I travelled back home to Malange on holidays. Wilderness surrounded the town, the slightest sound outside made me panic. At the same time, my mother became fearful of black servants who had been with my family most of their lives. She imagined that they were conspiring to kill us, even though we had always treated them decently. I had grown up playing with their children. But now the gap between blacks and whites seemed to be widening. Everywhere I looked, there was only hatred and suspicion.

The tension in my family grew more and more: my father insisted that I learn to fire a gun, in order to defend myself against possible black attackers. I tried to argue that we could never conquer the hearts and minds of our black brothers and sisters if we continued using violence against them, but nobody listened to me. The prevailing opinion amongst the whites, especially of the older generation, was that Africans were an inferior, unreasonable race. Like my mother and many other white women, I did eventually become adept at handling weapons. But deep inside I was convinced that they should be used against the oppressive Portuguese regime, not its victims.

In the end, despite the dangers in my home region, my family wasn't attacked. This was a matter of luck—the Portuguese army managed to protect them. Still, in the space of a few years the colonial war in Angola escalated to such an extent that many Portuguese settlers saw no other option but to flee. It was only a question of time until my parents followed suit.

In the beginning of the 1970s I moved to Portugal, to study Law in Lisbon. During that time I had very little contact with

my family, back in Angola. This only reinforced the differences between us.

My brother Mario (five years older than me) was a conscripted soldier with the Portuguese army, fighting the insurgents in the Angolan jungle. I was disgusted by his participation in the war against the black liberation movement, but he and my parents stubbornly claimed that the Portuguese settlers were entitled to defend what they had acquired through their hard work. More than the geographic distance, what separated me from my family were our totally opposed ideals.

This was also the first time I set foot in Portugal—a country which had always been a strange, omnipresent reference in my school textbooks. Young people now can't believe when I tell them how throughout my childhood I was taught that Angola was just another “province of Portugal”, even though it is about 14 times bigger! When we studied history and geography, we were forced to memorize Portuguese names, dates and places. It was as if we lived in a vacuum, we were supposed to have no connection to our real surroundings.

I have said it several times and will say it again: I was born in Angola, I grew up and spent most of my life there. It is my homeland. Portugal is the province, as far as I am concerned.

Anyway, back in the 1970s I lived in a dormitory for female students in Lisbon. The majority of the girls I met there came from tiny places in the Portuguese interior, they had never left the country and could hardly fathom that there was a whole world beyond Lisbon. They were very simple, with absolutely no interest in social and political matters. Most of them wanted to become teachers or nurses, return to their villages, get married and have children. There was nothing in common between us.

I felt more drawn to people from the colonies, mainly whites like myself who came from Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, East Timor. We understood each other much better, we had a common past and similar dreams for the future. But it was upsetting to walk into a lecture room or café or bookshop with my friends and hear other students whisper to each other “here come the colonies”. We were systematically treated like this, especially by students who had grown up in Lisbon and other Portuguese urban areas.

This was a shock to me. When I compared myself to my Portuguese counterparts, I saw no differences. If anything, I seemed to be above many. My skin was as white as theirs, even whiter than most—plus I have auburn hair and blue eyes, not very common in this part of Europe. I spoke very fine Portuguese, was fluent in French and English, wrote beautifully, had no difficulties with my degree, could hold a conversation on just about any topic. And yet, I was often aware that many Portuguese students considered me inferior. I was, after all, just another girl from the provinces!

Still, these were valuable years in my life. My first contact with critical thinking in adolescence had been of a more philosophical nature—only when I went to university in Portugal did I fully grasp how urgent it was to become directly involved in the political struggle.

This turned out to be the most important step in my youth: I got connected with underground movements that helped me make my return to independent Angola a reality. To this day I am happy to have experienced that shift from thought to action.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

BLOODY ORIGINS

Posted: 20.01.200... , 19:12

If you ask me, one of the greatest problems in my parents' life is that they are so bored with themselves and each other. I cannot blame them, though: existence is fundamentally a drag.

Mum has found a series of compulsive activities to cover up her desperation. Adopting cats is one of her favourites. She has about thirty of them by now. Really. If you go to my parents' little semi-detached house in G., the first thing you will notice is the smell of cat pee and cat food all over the place. Twice a year the cats reproduce and mum actually makes an effort to help all these little creatures survive the shock of their first days on this awful planet. She has totally forfeited natural selection and has loaded herself with antibiotics and delicate cat-milk powder and special pâtés that provide essential proteins. Even the limp, blind and deaf ones are given a chance. Although she tries to give away some of the new kittens, she isn't very successful. So they settle down with my parents and spend their days sleeping on the living-room couch, jumping onto the kitchen table to steal leftovers from meals, and sneaking into dad's so-called office (where he keeps all his electronic cables, computer hardware, old monitors, etc) to chew everything they catch.

Dad isn't particularly enthusiastic about the cats, but he's apparently decided to ignore his wife's slight neurosis. Some

years ago, when I was mum's favourite "problem-daughter" and we had daily dramatic fights over petty issues, father became my closest chum for a while. So he confessed to me that also *he* felt like a victim of mother's criticism and was utterly fed-up with her. But he still went on sleeping next to her in one bed, every night—just like they have done for the last thirty years!

I kindly proposed that they consider a divorce. Then we could send mum back to Angola, as she continually claims she would like to return to her homeland, if only she wasn't responsible for her family... (We've been hearing this for years now, but she hasn't even managed to go to bloody Angola for a week or so on a holiday trip—though I'm sure her daughters and husband and even the cats would survive it.) Dad brushed this issue aside with a shrug of his shoulders. He said mum would wither away without us, "she doesn't know what else to do". I think that was the longest dialogue I ever had with my father, and I wasn't very convinced either: it seems they're both hanging on to each other as a matter of routine.

And then there are their three girls.

Mum has always been obsessed about us. When we were kids, in the 1980s, our family lived in rather exotic places like East Germany and Czechoslovakia and Russia and Kazakhstan, where father was sent by the Angolan government to upgrade his expertise in electronic communications systems. My sisters and I had to go to kindergarten and school and face a bunch of kids that spoke funny languages and treated us as if we were a freak show. This was before mass migrations in Europe, dear reader. They still had their pretty little Iron Curtain running across the middle of the continent to avoid such inconveniences.

Mum would cook and clean and wait for us to come home, to supervise us while we did our homework and watched TV. She accompanied our learning process very closely and insisted that we strive to be the best pupils in our class, to "not be embarrassed by our origins". She did tests every weekend. She hardly understood the languages of these countries, always got Bea to accompany her when she had to do the shopping, and mingled only occasionally with other Angolans whom we met through the embassy. She was in her thirties.

When we finally returned to Angola, in 1990, mum became possessed by the idea that her youth values of "justice and equality" would "prevail"—though in reality the whole country was in a shambles. Our "Angolan brothers and sisters" (from the most miserable slum dwellers to government officials) were literally slaughtering each other by the thousands.

Mum expected us to be as enthusiastic about our "homeland", to embrace the whole pioneer-spirit or whatever was supposed to be going on there, sing the national anthem with gusto every morning before entering the classroom, call ourselves "the roses of the African garden", learn by heart all the names of our black national heroes and the most important dates in the "battle for independence". Quite honestly, neither I nor my classmates cared much. We had other priorities—listing the injustices of Portuguese colonialism or imagining the great opportunities in "liberated" Angola (for which our contribution was supposedly vital) were not among them. But mum had absolutely no doubts about these things. Her main concern was that *her girls* should live up to her ideals.

Fortunately, the continual civil war disturbed this process. There's only so much stealing, kidnapping and carnage—combined with permanent shortages of water, electricity and food—

that even a fanatic like my mother could take. And so we left our supposed homeland once again, to Portugal this time, where my family has been stuck ever since—in little town G., a forlorn place with nothing much to do or worry about.

My sisters and I forgot all about our “origins” in a few months and became your typical European teenagers: listening to boys bands, going to the local discotheque on Sunday afternoons, worrying about our hairdos and shoes, making out with guys we barely knew in the schoolyard’s secret corners. Mum had fights over Bea’s low grades at school, my tight t-shirts and mini-skirts, Jo’s secret smoking habits.

If you want to know, I ended up hating G., with all the gossip and slander permanently going on. I was so relieved when I moved to Lisbon for my university degree! But then I just ended up in my granny’s place, where I shared a room with Bea and was forced to interact with granny and aunt Silvia and uncle Mario and cousin Carlito on a daily basis. It was depressing. Plus I still had to talk to mum on the phone every evening, which was sometimes worse than living under her roof—she became much more inquisitive. All the while, poor little Jo was left alone with mum and dad in G., for three whole years. No wonder she resorted to hard drugs. We were an unhappy sisterhood, believe me.

Splitting was the only option. I’ve done it twice already. First I went to Brussels, to participate in some silly academic exchange programme promoting *European Culture, Identity and Integration*. Don’t ask me what it was all about, I never bothered to attend more than a few lectures, during which I either dozed or chatted with other bored foreign students. I was nineteen. Mum called me twice a week, and I mostly lied about my whereabouts and activities—there was no way she could check, was there? For one year I just bummed around old Europe and sent postcards

to my two sisters with funny revolutionary slogans, urging them to break free from mother’s dictatorship. My parents thought I was on drugs. They were right. But the joints I smoked were hardly the cause of my “alienation”, as they called it. Interestingly enough, it never occurred to these people that I was mainly fed-up with *them*.

Still and all, after that year I simply landed back in Lisbon, this time in a flat my parents had graciously bought for my sisters and me. Just next to granny and uncle and auntie, so they could always keep an attentive eye on our movements. Plus we were back at daily phone calls, frequent weekend visits, and mum’s continual criticism of my clothes, eating and sleeping habits, boyfriend. I endured years of fighting—not only with her, but also with Bea and Jo, who did not live up to my ideal of making a hippie commune out of that flat. We just turned it into an uncomfortable pigsty and backstabbed each other on every occasion. I’ve told you, my sisters are too square.

Then I split again, this time to England.

Now I let mum call me only once a week on the telephone here in the campus flat, as I refuse to carry a mobile phone. I don’t want to be connected with anybody anyway. It’s really bad enough to have to overhear other people’s phone chattering whenever I step out into the street.

Talking to my mother every single week is still too much, of course. But I do need the money. I tell her the wildest stories about my life: all the great friends I have, and how much my professors appreciate my work, and the tremendous progress I’m making due to all my library research, and how well things are going now that I’ve got a new boyfriend, Hal. I go through great lengths not to give her any excuses to “worry” about me.

Hal is fictional. I've introduced him just a short while ago, because mum was getting on my nerves, wondering how come I hadn't "met anyone interesting" yet. A future husband, she meant. Why not? I've made him tall and blond, studying architecture of all things, and coming from a well-off London family. He's mad about me. I like him much more than any of my real boyfriends of the past. I foresee a great future for us. Far away from Portugal. I just have to figure out how I can make my family go on paying. It's a tough battle, I reckon, as I seriously suspect that my sisters want exactly the same thing.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

Name: Joana D.

Age: 23

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Interests: adventure, flirting, dancing, forbidden pleasures, football

WHAT I WANT (NOW!)

Posted: 28.01.200... , 22:54

Hi! I'm Jo, from Lisbon. If you want to see pictures of me, click [here](#). I'm not a shy person, but I'm not as naughty as I may look. If I like someone or something, I don't make a secret of it. Life is too short. I try to enjoy it.

The guy you see with me in the pictures is my boyfriend Tony. We party a lot but also have our serious moments. He plays drums in a rock band. One day we will start our own recording label.

Tony and I had a row last night. I actually slapped him, so he left my flat at four a.m. (we're nighthawks). I forgot what we were fighting about, my mind was in a jumble by then. We had done some cocaine, nothing much, and had also prepared ourselves a few cocktails. We were just lying on my bed, listening to some sound and all. I can't even remember who started a conversation.

I suspect it had something to do with Tony's jealousy, though, cause that's what we always fight about. He's just so damned possessive and expects me to behave like a tame kitten! He has actually accused me of having no self-control. I'm a free spirit, that's all.

Around midday I woke up with the impression that something had to change in my life. I'm actually better off on my own, I'm sick of Tony's moods and impositions. I want a new beginning.

I have to leave this place for a while. I live with my older sister Bea, Miss Perfect, who gets out of her mind every time she finds a dust particle out of place. She behaves like a mother, as if it were her business where I go and what I eat and with whom I sleep and things like that. Get a life! She's a prude, she has only had one boyfriend so far, and he's just a fat mummy's boy. Bea is very uptight, you'd think she's fifty or something. I sometimes feel sorry for her. She bores me. But I go out of my way to be nice to her and all.

I still prefer her to my other sister, Lou, who's totally arrogant and self-absorbed. We were having almost daily arguments until she went off to England. I don't miss her much, she basically treated me like shit. I think this is mum's fault, she's always preferred Lou, Miss Pretty. When I was a kid, I got so sick of hearing how talented Lou was, how much her teachers liked her, what nice long hair she had, blah-blah-blah. She actually grew up to be less beautiful than everybody imagined. And she hasn't had any success in her life either—she just goes to university, like all of us. Lou considers herself very smart but she's not. Half the things she knows, she learned from me anyway, back in the days when we still got along.

But that's not the point. I want a whole new life, I need to go out there and start earning my own money, make myself independent, get my own place. I'm tired of being treated like a child by my parents. They think they can always provide us with everything we need but they have no idea about *my* needs. They wouldn't understand me anyway.

Mum and I have had so many disputes over my life choices in the past. Now we get along much better, I know she still doesn't agree with my decisions but she mostly lets me do my thing. If she nags me too much, I simply refuse to talk to her for a while. That usually appeases her. She says she just wants me to finish my studies and live a healthy life. But I don't want to waste time at university, it's useless. And I can take care of my health myself, thank you very much.

I drink a bit, do some drugs now and then, smoke too much. On better days I can get by with no more than fifteen cigarettes or so, but lately I've been stressed. I think my main problem is Tony—and my stupid degree. Now I've decided to drop both of them, for good.

I've got this friend, Gina, she works in a night-club in the Algarve—that's the southern coast of Portugal. We met last summer when I took a part-time job in a discotheque in downtown Lisbon. She was employed there too, we immediately hit it off. She's Brazilian, in her thirties. She says that with my looks I could make a buck in the proper clubs. I love the night. I love being around people. They sure teach me more about life than my calculus professor.

I'm going to call Gina and get ready to split. I need to catch fresh air and enjoy new sights, collect my thoughts, give my body a chance to move a bit. I've always liked the sea. I'm sick of the city. I'm sick of my bedroom. I'm sick of my family and friends. I'm suffocating here.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

OVERLOAD

Posted: 31 .01.200... , 19:11

I haven't been doing so well lately. I don't sleep properly and it's not always Jo's fault—she doesn't even spend much time at home. My mind is to blame. I'm confused.

Artur has just taken up two part-time jobs, he needs the money and the employment interviews weren't leading him anywhere. Now he works at a call centre for cable TV in the mornings and delivers pizza in the afternoons. He only has free time after 9 p.m. and usually heads home, because his mother needs his support. He's the only one who understands her, she says. I've been accompanying him to his parents' place and then I catch a taxi back to my flat around midnight—sometimes Artur comes with me, though not very often.

I don't miss him at all. That's what worries me. I've always loved Artur, these three years together have been wonderful, I've learned to listen and share. But I think I've sacrificed too much for this relationship. I've lost touch with myself. Now when I am alone I feel like a completely different person and have the impression that nobody actually knows the real me.

Jo told me last night that she is leaving soon, she has a job offer in the Algarve or something. She's pretty excited about it.

Some work would do her good, she could get her mind off her turbulent relationship.

She says it's all over with Tony. He still keeps calling, but my sister refuses to speak to him. So he talks to me. I like Tony, he cares a great deal about Jo and sometimes behaves like a father, which she actually needs. He confessed to me that he is very worried about Jo's state of mind, that lately she has been out of control. But Jo has warned me not to believe a single word Tony says, he's just offended because she doesn't want him back. I'm not sure what to think. I know that Jo will do the nuttiest things—she always did, ever since she was a kid. She never listens to orders or advice. But she is still my sister, I have to support her.

Frankly, I don't care much. I'm looking forward to having the whole place for myself, free from Jo and Tony's screams and mutual insults, plus all the people hanging out here with them. It's been nice to share a flat with my sisters, but now I need my own space. We all do, I guess.

Meanwhile, I think my parents are having trouble. This morning mum called me up at about 6 a.m.—her voice was so low, it didn't even sound like her. She and dad had been fighting all night, until he actually drove off. He hadn't returned yet. I'm sure dad just went to a hotel or something to gather his thoughts, but mum immediately jumps to conclusions. She says he's changed so much in the past years, she doesn't recognize him at all.

They quarrelled over money again. Mum had the impression that their expenses were unusually high and wanted to know if my father had bought things without informing her. Dad got very upset and screamed that he didn't know what she was talking about. But this time mum really insisted on discussing the issue. She threatened to divorce him, that's how far it went. She probably wasn't very diplomatic about it, though, she has this

tendency to become hysterical, just like Jo. It can really affect you. Dad still refused to talk, he accused her of being paranoid and threatened to do something even more drastic than divorce if she didn't back off. Then he left.

I've told mum she should let dad do things his way, we've managed so far. The worst you can say about my father is that he is a compulsive consumer, he buys lots of stuff from the internet and pays with credit cards. Maybe he is a bit indebted but I doubt that it's as serious as mum makes it sound. After all, she spends quite some money on her cats and dad never says a word about it.

Mum can be very unfair sometimes. She's disappointed that dad hasn't lived up to her expectations. He was much more involved in politics and such when they met, he despised the superficial values of their parents and siblings. Now he has become more and more similar to them, mum says, he just cares about acquiring his electronic gadgets and DVDs and expensive shoes and ties. I'm sure my mother exaggerates—dad has simply grown out of their youthful illusions. He's still a very caring and loving person. I have absolutely no complaints about him. Mum has changed, too. She's a bit of an uncontrollable shopper herself, she loves buying clothes and furniture and things like that for us. I wish my parents had something else in common besides their kids.

On top of all this, I'm totally stressed about the report I have to prepare in order to apply for another year of financing, so that I can finish my doctorate. My mind has been blocked lately. I stare at those data on the computer and actually forget what they mean. I think my sleeplessness is seriously affecting my work. But I can't tell mum, it would only make her even more anxious. She has enough worries.

I feel so lonely at the moment. I don't think there's anybody I can talk to about my problems. Sometimes I imagine that this

is how dad must feel. He never says much, but I know that deep inside he's very attached to mum and us kids. Even his screaming is just a defence. He could try to open up more, though. It would help us understand him better. Maybe I should go to G. for a few days, see if I can lend some support to my parents. I could use the fresh countryside air, too.

// Comments: 0 //

HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

Name: Martin D.

Age: 53

Location: G., Portugal

Interests: computers, multimedia, cars, carpentry, fishing, hunting, DVDs

LONGEVITY AND SATISFACTION

Posted: 31.01.200... , 23:27

Hello everybody! Today I want to discuss the decarbonization of two-stroke engines, as I have noticed that some people aren't doing it right. The first thing you should pay attention to is that many two-stroke engines require decarbonization already after 4000km—and not 7000km, as proposed by some bloggers. You can see this by the traces of carbon that have accumulated in the exhaust rod. Also, you may feel that the engine's performance is weaker!

To decarbonize the engine you have to carefully remove the cylinder head, maybe even the whole cylinder. If you don't do it properly, you may break the side bolts! To unscrew tightly bound screws, I would advise you to first heat them up gently with a soldering iron and then loosen them. If you can't manage this, it would be best to let professionals do it for you at a car mechanic's, otherwise you risk ruining essential parts!

Finally, to scrape out the carbon in the cylinder, I recom-

mend a simple scraper—only in cases where you find it absolutely necessary should you resort to the back of an old saw blade. For the cylinder head you can use a simple thin copper membrane. For the rest, I found that others have fully explained how to proceed. Check out especially [Mike's](#) and [Howard's](#) blogs! These guys are real experts.

When I was living in Angola, I owned a two-stroke motorbike, a Jawa made in the Czech Socialist Republic. Because of the civil war, you didn't always find the spare parts you needed. The process I've described here certainly made the bike last long and work satisfactorily.

// Comments: 3 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

BOUNDLESS

Posted: 08.02.200... , 18:43

Free at last!

I've been so happy for the past three days. It's sunny down here in the Algarve, the kind of weather that calls for great lonely walks along the beach. I haven't had time to do it yet, but soon I will. I've hardly managed to get some sleep since I've arrived!

Gina says that working six nights a week, I can earn more than enough to support myself, have fun and even save quite a bit of money. She's been introducing me to all her acquaintances, mostly in the tourism business: disco and club owners, barmen, waitresses, dancers, musicians, artists. We drive around in her old Volkswagen beetle, it has some bumps but still runs pretty well, on the hood there are stickers in the shape of broken hearts. Gina's so crazy, she makes me laugh. She wears thick red lipstick and dark outfits, which look superb on her brown skin. Everybody thinks she's really sexy. I'm actually developing a crush on her—she's open-minded enough.

It's a whole new world, I feel at home.

The first night working at Mr. X's club was fun. (His name is Xavier, but he prefers to be called Mr. X—it has more sex-appeal.) I think he likes me, he kept praising my relaxed attitude

towards the clients. He says he appreciates girls who feel comfortable in their skin. We have to wear a tight black miniskirt and black high-heeled shoes.

I've rented a room in a small, cheap hotel not far from the night-club. There are a few other women living here like me, we work at night and sleep during the day. The atmosphere is nice, we share a toilet and shower at the end of the corridor. I've run into a Ukrainian woman today, tall and blond and gorgeous. She says we should get together some time, on our night off or for lunch. She's a table dancer, moves like a ballerina.

It's all I dreamed it would be: exceptional people and cool places, plus the concrete possibility of making my own money here and now, and not in some kind of future, stuck to a boring office job.

This is low season, so things are a bit slow. But there are quite some foreigners, mainly Dutch, German, Danish, French and British. A few attractive men show up at the club. The majority seem to be in their forties and fifties. They like me because I speak English. Yesterday I got a fantastic tip from three guys, Scandinavians or something. After the club closed, I used that money to buy some drinks for Gina and me at another joint that's open till later. I wanted to show her my gratitude. She's been a real friend, it's so nice to hang out with her. She's always ready for the next adventure.

There's live music at the club on Fridays and Saturdays. Now in the winter, a local band comes over to play covers. The musicians are friends of Gina's, she's promised that we'll accompany them to one or the other party. She says you get *everything* at those parties. Plus you meet fantastic guys.

My head is twirling. There are all these places to go to, new

sensations to discover. I don't miss home at all. I haven't thought of Tony again. I hate him. He actually threatened to kill me if I left him! He would never dare such a thing, of course, he was just showing me his love. But I don't care anymore, Tony just couldn't keep up with me. He's such a coward.

I know I've made the right decision, even if nobody believes me. My parents think I'm crazy. Mum wanted me to finish my degree. She has no idea how fed-up I was with the whole thing. I couldn't take another second of it. And dad refused to talk with me on the phone. This hurt a lot, I wish he would have given me a chance to explain myself, show him that I am less naïve than everyone thinks.

I only informed them about my decision half an hour before leaving: I called them from the bus terminal. Mum sounded disappointed, but it didn't affect me. I'm so used to being told that I've let my family down. Whatever I try to do, it never seems right.

So this time I did what *I* wanted, in spite of everybody else. Now I can't wait to get my first pay check and kiss my family goodbye. This is the beginning of a new life.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE-SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

DARK PERIODS

Posted: 12.02.200... , 16:06

Mum and dad were here on the weekend. They're still upset about Jo's sudden departure to the Algarve, but they also think that it's not such a bad idea to let her experience the world of hard work for a while.

Jo is doing fine, she sounds happy and much friendlier. She calls mum every day around dinner time, when she returns from work. She's employed at a family restaurant, serving lunch and afterwards cleaning up. Her boss is very nice, he treats her like a daughter. She is living in a flat with two girls, has a big room overlooking the sea. Mum complains that the rent is a bit high, though. My parents are covering Jo's expenses until she gets her salary at the end of the month. I'm sure she will become much more responsible now that she's going to earn her own money.

Whereas I feel more and more apathetic. I can't even enjoy the things that once brought me so much pleasure, like sitting in cafés, laughing with Artur, jogging in the park or working in the lab. Even when I watch TV, I can hardly concentrate. I just want to sleep—but when I get to bed, I toss and turn and can't find a second of peace.

I keep thinking that I have to do something drastic. But I don't know what. Perhaps I'm just anxious because of the deadline for my scholarship report. Plus my supervisor, professor

Helder, has hinted that he is dissatisfied with the slow progress of our investigation. He expected to have clear results by March, so they could be published in the May-June edition of the university's scientific journal. Now he's not so sure we can make it—and I feel responsible for this failure, although nobody in the group has indicated that.

I look at my life and have the sensation that everything has gone wrong.

This isn't the first time I've had these thoughts. It's happened before, almost eight years ago. I was so afraid of letting everyone down. I hated myself, my weakness. I actually considered suicide.

I think back then I was just dissatisfied with my degree, and couldn't bring myself to admit it. Not that I didn't like Medicine—I had always been interested in science and its application to human well-being. Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to become a doctor and heal people, particularly children. Maybe I was influenced by my early experiences in Angola, where the poor were affected by terrible endemic diseases, and there were lots of cripples because of the millions of landmines. I wanted to participate in the efforts to change this situation, perhaps one day join the International Red Cross and travel around Africa helping the most needy populations. My role model was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, I thought his life story was so honourable, I dreamed of following in his footsteps. I was actually very excited when I first came to Medical School here in Lisbon, and looked forward to meeting people with similar opinions.

But that first year almost killed me. For some strange reason, I became so depressed, I didn't know what to do. My grades were miserable, I didn't make any friends, I wasn't interested in anything.

I studied my anatomy and physiology books like mad until tears were streaming down my cheeks, because I couldn't understand a word of what I was reading. On top of that I became absolutely disgusted with the idea of touching human bodies. I actually developed a kind of phobia against infections, unusual swellings, wounds, the appearance and smell of disease altogether. Just looking at pictures from medicine books made me almost faint.

I kept all this bottled up inside me, not even aunt Silvia and uncle Mario and granny, with whom I lived then, suspected anything. I would leave the house every morning, catch a train downtown and just sit in a park or shopping mall, watching people, not really thinking anything. Only ice-cream made me feel slightly better. I think this went on for months.

Until I wasn't able to get out of bed one morning. I was convinced that I was paralysed and started wailing. Aunt Silvia had to give me a tranquillizer. Then I confessed my troubles to her. She was very kind and understanding—we've always had a close relationship, she's like a second mother. She persuaded me to tell my parents the truth: that I couldn't stand the pressure and had failed all my exams. I didn't reveal to anybody that I had actually not been to university for months. Nor did I talk about my suicidal thoughts.

Mum was very disappointed. She had been so proud of my good high-school graduation grades and my decision to study Medicine. But she still supported me—she let me return home to G. and take some time off to ponder about my alternatives. In the end, my family helped me overcome my difficulties. I should have told them immediately what was wrong.

This time it's different, though, because I'm sure I love my Microbiology degree and want to become a successful bacteriol-

ogist. I am fascinated by harmless microscopic organisms, they are so tiny and distant, I can manipulate them without danger to myself. I was one of the best students in my graduation year and had a wonderful, intellectually challenging rapport with many of my professors. When it came to getting a doctorate, I had offers to join several research teams and had absolutely no difficulty getting funds for my work. These last two years have been exciting. But somehow I never overcame my anxiety, I still fear that I won't manage to do what's expected of me.

The problem isn't my degree at all. I need to look at other aspects of my life more objectively. Maybe I should make a list of all the things I'm actually dissatisfied with.

I have to be more daring, try out new things, move on to new experiences. Otherwise I'll end up suffocating. . .

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HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA FROM UNDERGROUND TO THE BATTLEFIELD

Posted: 14.02.200. . ., 17:56

During my stay in Lisbon in the early 1970s, I got deeply acquainted with progressive anti-colonial thinking, and spent many hours a day studying historical texts, manifestoes and proposals for revolution. These ideas inspired me and many of my fellows to undertake concrete actions in our struggle for liberation.

Ever since the 1930s, the Portuguese dictatorship of Salazar had forced the country and its colonies into a long slumber, promoting ignorance and passivity, piety and a blind respect for the state authorities. This only made me feel more inspired to revolt.

I was convinced of the absurdity of a conformist existence, and felt the urge to break loose from the fetters of a totalitarian regime that expected me to uphold what I couldn't agree with: political and religious intolerance, imperialism, racism. Like many students, I became an enthusiastic sympathiser of the underground Portuguese Communist Party, the only political movement in Portugal that consistently opposed the Salazar dictatorship. Finally I was taking part in an important historical moment.

I joined other young men and women who had spent their entire lives in Africa, but whose white skin did not make them assume that they were special. My later husband Martin was one of them. We first met in 1972 in Lisbon. He was finishing his degree in electronic engineering, and like me he yearned to

return to Angola. We planned to do all that was in our power to help build an independent country, using his technological know-how and my legal expertise in the service of our black brothers and sisters.

For almost two years, Martin and I worked clandestinely with other comrades in Lisbon: writing, printing and distributing illegal pamphlets, calling the Portuguese people to demand an immediate end of the colonial war. These were thrilling but also dangerous activities. We lived in constant fear of PIDE, the secret police, whose members infiltrated student groups with the order to imprison and torture dissidents. Many friends of mine were arrested, some never recovered from the experience. Illegality became our second nature. My family couldn't even dream that I was involved with underground movements, trying to subvert the system that supported their way of living.

For Martin and me these risks were no deterrent. We knew we had to be brave and put our lives on the line for the greater cause of liberation. Our joint efforts and hopes were not in vain. On the 25th of April 1974 the famous Carnation Revolution, led by disaffected members of the Portuguese Armed Forces, toppled a 40-year-old dictatorship. Shortly after that, Martin and I got married.

In the beginning of 1975, when the newly established democratic Portuguese government guaranteed total independence for all African colonies, we packed our things and caught a plane to Luanda. Our dream had come true.

Just as we were arriving in Angola, my parents were about to flee. Their entire lives had been spent in the colony and suddenly they were forced to return to Portugal empty-handed. None of them had any interest in Angola, now that the Portu-

guese rule no longer had a say in it. For them, this great African country should have remained nothing but another "province" of Portugal.

This was also the breaking point in my conflicting relationship with my father. Although I loved him sincerely, I had felt myself drifting away from him ever since my adolescence. He had become the epitome of everything I opposed.

In Luanda in '75, dad and I had a violent confrontation. I remember it as if it had happened yesterday. We were in the house of some relatives. The whole place was a mess, their belongings had been packed into crates they hoped to ship to Portugal, most of the furniture had been given away, the servants had left. Outside there was near anarchy. Food and water were rationed, waste was accumulating in the streets. People didn't know when or if at all they would manage to get a seat on a plane out of the country—Portuguese settlers were streaming to Luanda by the thousands, to be evacuated before the independence day in November. Nobody was going to protect them against possible black violence after that.

I sat with my parents in the living room and tried to explain why I had come to live in independent Angola. My father didn't listen to me at all. His nerves were on edge because of the unbearable heat (electricity shortage made it practically impossible to have the air conditioner or fans running). Worse even, he was filled with a sense of loss. The system he belonged to was collapsing in front of his eyes and he couldn't accept that. He sat in an armchair and clenched his fists. He interrupted me continuously when I described my hopes for the future, and called me a traitor. A madwoman. A hopeless case. He swore he wouldn't even send for my body if I got killed.

I was shattered by his cruel words, and yet I saw the tears in his eyes. Dad seemed paralysed, his wheezing got so loud, my

mother thought he was having one of his asthma attacks. I was ordered to leave and never come back.

But my family's disapproval did not move me to reconsider my choices for a second. If none of them could understand me, so be it! I wasn't willing to turn into a bitter and failed ex-colonialist. Life had much more to offer than their limited ideas, and I was anxious to follow my own will.

Of course, I had Martin and countless other friends who shared my vision. We knew we were facing a great challenge. Already then many people feared that a civil war would break out as soon as the Portuguese army had left. Nevertheless, we were willing to put all our energy and efforts into rebuilding Angola after more than 10 years of colonial war. We were convinced that we were doing the right thing: for our home country, for ourselves, and for future generations. I was in my twenties, as old as my youngest daughter now. I felt more alive than ever before or after.

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PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

GROWING PAINS

Posted: 25.02.200... , 20:03

Before you accuse me of being an inconsiderate daughter, let me assure you that I not only talk to my mother on the phone every week, but also to my father. Even though he couldn't care less about my sisters and me. Apart from the money he provides to secure our survival, there seems to be no other connection between us. He only thinks about his gadgets and the crappy DVDs he's collecting and the fishing club meetings in G.

I usually chat with him for about half a minute, upon mum's insistence—"dad wants to know how you're doing," she tells me—and it's always awkward. He asks me how I'm doing, I say I'm doing fine, I ask him how he's doing, he says he's doing fine, and then he passes the phone back to mum. Each week we have to repeat this ritual. Sometimes, just for a change, I complain of a slight headache, because of the weather or something—he then tells me to take an aspirin.

He enjoyed playing the big daddy when we were small, impressing us with little tricks like building a paper plane or moving his hands in a way that made us think he was tearing out his thumb. And he would explain all kinds of strange things to us, like the star constellations, or the various shapes and sizes of ships, or the differences between the water in a small puddle and the ocean, till we got dizzy and thought we lived in this

tremendously complicated world and would always need him to tell us what was what.

Of course, he didn't provide us with a single *useful* piece of advice. I suppose he has never given much thought to this whole Life-issue, it just happened to him and now he has to put up with it. As we grew older, got pimples on our faces and started shaving our legs, dad became more and more silent. Except when he screams. That's a treat we can count on for the rest of his otherwise unexciting existence.

When I had my abortion at sixteen, dad actually felt too embarrassed to even look at me. That was probably the breaking point in our relationship: he realized I was old enough to sleep around, I realized he was unable to deal with such a banality. In the end, I was relieved that he didn't decide to have a "serious talk" with me, as mum repeatedly asked of him. I thought it was great that at least one of my parents had the decency not to address me with platitudes about "safe sex", as if I hadn't already learned all about conception and contraception from TV.

Mother did all the preaching right after the abortion. I had to put up with it, of course: she paid for the whole thing and ordered dad to drive us to Spain, since abortions were illegal in Portugal and we had to cross the border to get it done lawfully in a neat clinic that received lots of Portuguese teenagers and their mothers.

Mum treated me like an utter idiot, which is a speciality of hers. There I was sitting in the back of dad's jeep, hours after the procedure, still groggy from the anaesthesia, and she blabbered on about how "irresponsible" I had been, and what in the world had made me "decide" to take the risk of producing a child, and why did I expose myself to such "insecure situations", etc etc etc. Whereas dad just steered silently through the curves, as if

he were an anonymous taxi driver. He only intervened when he decided to make a stop at a roadside snack-bar to fetch a sandwich. He asked me if I also wanted to eat something.

I could have bothered explaining myself back then, but I didn't. The truth, dear reader, is that I had bad luck: my bloody ovaries framed me. I had this steady boyfriend, a local boy named Saul. His sperm actually managed to fertilize me the first time I allowed him to penetrate me, which was quick and clumsy and not very memorable. We were obviously a match bound for success.

We did it in the only place where we could be on our own: the underground garage of an apartment block in construction, just next to our high school. We rolled on the dusty concrete floor like several times before, and that was about it. I had hardly noticed the difference. My mind was occupied with the anxious notion that somebody could barge in and catch us red-handed.

Then it turned out that I was pregnant, and my family reacted in the usual manner: mum nagged me, dad screamed at the world, Jo laughed at my humiliation and Bea felt relieved that she was still a virgin.

I think this was the first time it occurred to me how much I hated them all.

Incidentally, my ex-boyfriend Saul, who has a useless degree in archaeology from the university of Lisbon and is "momentarily unemployed" and living at his parents' place in G., still hasn't overcome the pain of our break-up seven years ago. I received an e-mail from him just the other day: he was offended because I hadn't come to Portugal for Christmas. After insulting me for not thinking about him, he finished with this superb

sentence: “My heart still yearns for the happiest days of my life, when I held you in my arms and nothing else mattered”.

Saul and I were a normal, healthy young couple: we were absolutely bored and frustrated with ourselves, and our favourite hobby consisted of verbally abusing each other. I sympathise with his suffering and can only support it—at least he knows that happiness has passed him by already and now there’s only trouble ahead.

I see no reason to be hopeful: if life has been so shitty up to now, there isn’t much to be expected from the future. People who don’t arrive at this basic conclusion by the age of twenty baffle me. Not only that, but they bore me to death with their invariable dreams of better days to come.

But I don’t reveal these thoughts to the outside world, dear reader. In fact, I go out of my way to state the opposite. For example, when mum asked me on the phone how things were going with my new love Hal, I told her everything was fantastic—“I’ve never been so happy in my life,” I said.

Which isn’t all that false, either. Ever since I’ve locked myself up in my room, I’ve come as close to bliss as it gets.

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DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

THE FLAME

Posted: 28.02.200... , 19:21

Life is an adventure. I’m enjoying every second of it. I’ve met the man of my dreams and nothing else matters now. Jean-Luc is a god, he’s a god! Tall, blond, strong and with the most magnetic blue eyes I’ve ever seen. . .I just melt when he looks at me.

It all happened so quickly, he has changed my life in ways I can hardly describe. He has shown me the power I have in me. I will follow him to the end of the world. Jean-Luc, je t’aime!

I don’t care if none of my friends talk to me anymore. That bitch Gina was only interested in helping me while I played her game—as soon as I got into a more favourable position, I was no longer any good. I hate her. She’s just jealous because I’m younger than her, my breasts look nicer, I move more sensually. She can’t stand competition. I’m sure she was the one who made Mr. X chuck me out of his club, there was no reason for him to do it, I kept the clients really entertained.

Screw it. Jean-Luc has found me a better job and I’m earning much more money. I’ve moved to his hotel room, which is a lot bigger and has a private bathroom. Jean-Luc has been so kind, I owe him so much. And he’s fun to be with, he takes me to bars and parties after my shift at the dance club. I feel very safe and relaxed around him, he introduces me to lots of men but always keeps a firm grip around my hips, as if to protect me

from their hungry eyes. He has a very mature character, and I like it. He treats me like a little girl, and I love it. He's already 37, but looks much younger.

We met at Mr. X's club—it was love at first sight. Jean-Luc came over with two guys and a middle-aged woman, they ordered some beers and snacks. He asked me if I spoke French, because his English isn't very good—he gently touched my hand and smiled. He has this incredible smile, like an angel. Fortunately, I managed to produce a few clumsy sentences in French, this seemed to impress him. He gave me a huge tip that night!

The next evening he returned with another guy, and immediately started talking to me in French, asking where I was from, how come a pretty girl like me ends up in such a place, what time I would get off, things like that. I was evasive, to remain mysterious. Plus I had to serve other clients. Jean-Luc actually wanted me to sit at their table for a while, but Mr. X sent Gina instead. This offended Jean-Luc, who paid absolutely no attention to her and kept ordering drinks and food, anything to make me come close to him, walk in front of him, reply to his questions and remarks. We agreed to meet after my shift, but time seemed not to pass at all. He managed to get me into the men's room at the club and we kissed passionately. That's when we got caught by one of the bar-men. Soon Mr. X was on my neck, as if it was a big deal that I had disappeared for a few minutes with a guy—I could just as well have gone to the back yard for a smoke, which is allowed.

That night I walked out of Mr. X's club and into Jean-Luc's arms. We went to a party right by the sea. He brought me drinks, offered me some great cocaine, we danced like mad and ended up on the beach at dawn, high on acid and on pure love. It was an unforgettable experience, I felt reborn. Jean-Luc is so open-minded, so free! I've never met a man like him before.

Then he took me to this dance club and introduced me as the new stripper. Vito, that's the name of the owner, asked me to do a little dance for him, so that he could judge my capacities. There were only about a dozen men at the club, it was still early evening. A fabulous black woman was just finishing her show, the guys were stuffing bills into her white g-string. I felt really nervous, but Jean-Luc said I should close my eyes and imagine I was dancing for him. I drank a shot of plain whisky and got on stage. Vito introduced me as "Vivienne, the Flame", because of my bleached hair, I think.

They played some funky sound, my heart was pounding but I just did what Jean-Luc had told me. The guys started cheering, asking me to take off my tight t-shirt and all that. I danced slowly, removing my clothes bit by bit, until I only had my little red panties on. They actually roared when I unhooked my bra! I felt so powerful, so seductive. I looked over to Jean-Luc and he blew me a kiss. Then I got closer to the audience and let them stuff bills into my panties. And I walked off stage, hearing their applause.

As easy as that!

These guys are really generous with their tips, plus I get my money from Vito every time I perform. Of course he hired me, or Vivienne, immediately. I've been getting up on that stage every night, audiences love me. It's the greatest fun I've had since I've arrived here. Jean-Luc is always sitting at the bar, looking lustfully at me while I dance, and grabbing my hand as soon as I come out of the dressing room. We've been spending most of the money I make rather carelessly, but I don't mind. It's been so exciting. I love being Vivienne. And I love being Jean-Luc's girl.

I've wasted so many nights here in the Algarve, meeting men, sleeping with them, feeling disappointed by them. Now I know that none of them can compare with Jean-Luc.

Soon he will be leaving to France. He says he can't live without me, he's even asked me to become his wife. He already has children from a previous marriage but wants to make a baby with me. I am ready. Now more than ever.

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TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

I NEED A MENTAL VACATION!

Posted: 03.03.200... , 23:48

I sent my scholarship report today and I'm so worried that they won't accept it because of my delay—even though professor Helder assured me it would be no problem, he would explain that I had been ill. There isn't really anything wrong with me physically, but I told professor Helder three days ago that I was in bed with high fever. I feel terrible about lying to him, I've never done this before. I was just under too much pressure, I couldn't have stuck to the deadline.

Things with Artur are a bit shaky. His parents had a huge row, so his mother now insists on moving out. Apparently Artur's dad went too far this time and almost broke his wife's jaw. He's an absolute creep, he also used to beat Artur and his brother when they were kids. He never cared about his family's needs, all his money goes to booze. He's a policeman and likes to boast that he was once responsible for big criminal investigations and arrests—though nowadays he just manages traffic offence reports in some office. I've never liked him.

Artur totally agrees with his mother's decision and wants to rent a small flat for her with his current salaries. He's even considering living with her.

Yesterday he proposed that they move into my place just temporarily, until they find something decent. His mum could be put

up in Jo's bedroom. But I wasn't sure my family would approve, I said I had to consult them first. Artur immediately took this as a rejection, he actually implied that I was coming up with an excuse to avoid helping him and his mother. He also accused me of being selfish. It made me so angry, I began to cry with rage. There was nothing Artur could say or do to mend the situation.

I think this was the first big fight we've had in years—and I'm convinced it was his fault. I wish Artur would have given me a chance to organize things, perhaps even assist him in finding an affordable flat. I just had to get this report done and then I would be there for him again. He doesn't seem to realize that we can't all revolve around his family problems. He says he loves me and doesn't want anything to come between us. Anything but his mother.

This whole mess with Artur is eating me up. He's very sweet and caring, but he only likes to fool around and isn't helpful at all when it comes to my work. Sometimes I have the impression that he totally lacks ambition. He has stopped sending his CV to marketing companies and now dreams of becoming manager at the pizza-joint where he's working. I don't know how he plans to support himself and his mother.

I need some time to collect my thoughts. I've got other responsibilities, too. I must concentrate on my research if I want to be truly successful.

In a fortnight there is a conference on Bacteriology and Industry in A., at the Spanish Mediterranean coast. Professor Helder is participating and would like some of us to accompany him. It lasts five days and will gather scientists from all over the world. I had thought of turning down his invitation, so that I could be around for Artur. Now I realize this is a mistake. I should be open to these experiences, they are important for my career and even for my soul.

I'm actually looking forward to getting out of here. Ultimately this could help me relax and communicate better with Artur.

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HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

VENCEREMOS!

Posted: 09.03.200... , 15:13

More than anything else, what united Martin and me from the beginning was our common dream to live in liberated Angola. We wanted a simple life: a small house, children, meaningful jobs, and—above all—a democratic society, based on the values of justice and equality for all, independent of their skin colour.

When we moved to Luanda in 1975, we joined the MPLA (which stands for Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola), the oldest, most active and internationally acknowledged movement, which formed the new government. Unfortunately, our country was totally devastated: the colonial war had paralysed production, destroyed the infrastructure and weakened the population. Still, there was so much positive energy! I was thrilled to participate in the reconstruction process. It felt like the excitement of the Cuban people, after Castro and Ché's victory over Batista's oppressive regime in 1959. Everybody was confident that Angola would become the new beacon of hope for African ex-colonies.

The first months of independence were very critical. While the MPLA tried hard to unite the Angolan people and proceed to economic reforms that would guarantee a good life for everybody, black rebels and white mercenaries terrorized and pillaged the country. There is no doubt that several foreign powers were

behind these vicious attacks: from Congo and South Africa, to Western Europe and the USA. These imperialist states just wanted to get total control over Angola's plentiful resources—especially the oil, the diamonds and the gold. They armed and trained disaffected black men, to be used as puppets for their own economic interests. Peace, justice and progress meant nothing to them.

At times Luanda was totally surrounded by enemy forces. Fortunately we were defended by the Cuban army, as Fidel Castro personally sent his revolutionary troops to secure Angola's autonomy and freedom. Contrary to what many ill-informed people claim, the socialist countries—particularly Cuba and the Soviet Union—were most helpful at this early stage of independence. Under the terms of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed by our government in 1976, they supported the MPLA's armed forces with material and logistics.

We became close friends with many soldiers and technical experts from the socialist world. Some stayed on in Angola and started a family with African spouses. This gave the country a wonderful cosmopolitan flair, it promoted open-mindedness and respect between races. Angola developed into an international project.

One of the things I appreciated a lot was the truly progressive attitude of women from socialist countries. Most of them were highly qualified specialists in such diverse fields as health, education, administration. They played an important role in the economic and political life of their nation. This was totally opposed to the traditional Portuguese colonialist values that had limited women to home and family. With independence we were inspired to pick up our pens, tools, guns—and make our own destiny. Angolan women could finally perform tasks that had previously been inaccessible.

Martin got employed by the state as a telecommunications engineer, while I joined a government team registering the country's population. We lived in a quiet residential neighbourhood close to the sea. Once it had housed civil servants of the colonial administration and was now inhabited by white, black and mulatto professionals, mainly connected with the MPLA.

The atmosphere was superb—most of us were in our twenties and thirties, full of ambitions and initiative. My husband and I enjoyed hosting dinners with friends or going to private parties, where we would spend hours discussing politics. One of the charms of those early days was that everyone managed in spite of the difficulties. Food, water and electricity were scarce, but nobody complained. The streets were very insecure, so the Angolan army had to impose a curfew from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.—which only meant that parties would last all night long! Our optimism was unshakable.

Not everything was perfect, of course. My job often took me to remote areas far away from Luanda, to issue documents for people who had never possessed an identity card and couldn't even speak Portuguese. Often enough I had to confront the horrifying consequences of war and poverty. I met families who had been robbed of everything. I saw entire regions destroyed.

These were terrible images, but they were a reality I did not want to run away from. I wanted to face it and change it. All the problems and dangers did not make me hesitate about my decision to live in Angola. This was my fate.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU SHOW ME?

Posted: 13.03.200... , 12:05

Yesterday I turned 26. My family found it fit to call me and congratulate me for this great feat. It didn't cross their minds that I might not feel particularly happy with the occasion. It's bad enough that I was born, but having to put up with "best wishes" from people who otherwise have no interest in my petty little pains is really the utmost. Not only that, but instead of receiving some more "financial backing" as a birthday present, I got a cheap lady's watch from my granny (although I already have a less ornate one that works just fine), a book on "Portuguese Desserts" from my aunt Silvia and uncle Mario (who have obviously failed to notice that I hate sweets), and an embarrassing glittery purple evening dress from my parents ("so that you look decent when attending a more formal event," mum explained). All this rubbish was sent via expensive express air-mail.

I left the watch on the bench at the bus stop around the corner and chucked the book into the paper-recycling bin. And charitable as I am, I donated the dress to a Red Cross container in the street, which is supposedly collecting "clothes for the needy in Rwanda". I hope they also have chic evening parties over there.

Interestingly enough, it occurred to me today that my current life bears absolutely no resemblance to my adolescence dreams. I used to imagine that by this age I would have a superb

career as a successful something, own a cool flat overlooking some fashionable city or alternatively a nice little country cottage in some picturesque village, have a bunch of torrid affairs with dashing males and intellectual debates with exciting friends. In short, I honestly believed I would “make it”.

I was obviously a foolish girl. I had no idea how tedious and exhausting real life is, and nobody bothered to explain it to me, either. Now here I am, all grown up and full of disappointments. With no accomplishments and nothing left to look forward to.

All my hopes have reached their expiry date—I am as desperate as ever, with the slight difference that I no longer expect to be rescued out of my misery. Hurray for enlightenment.

A good friend of mine from Lisbon, who turned 26 himself only a few weeks ago, was so touched by “the fact that we are adults now”, as he put it, that he wrote a long e-mail about how much he misses the “good old days” or something.

I’m sure his case justifies this: Alex has been unhappily married for about a year, and his wife is expecting a baby in May. On top of this miserable situation, he just got fired from his job translating instruction manuals for home entertainment gadgets—he managed to work there for a full eleven months on a ludicrous salary. So he has taken up two part-time jobs in order to cover his debts to the bank, after he and his wife purchased a tiny flat in a terrible district on the outskirts of Lisbon. He is now “member of the sales team” at a travel agency, booking vacation-trips via telephone and producing neat letters to send to past and potential customers. Additionally, three times a week you can meet him behind the counter in a photocopy shop. Yes, my friend is obviously a fully-fledged grown-up.

I hadn’t bothered to write to Alex ever since I’d arrived in my English den, as I figured we had told each other enough non-

sense, with the visible disastrous results. When we were turning twenty or so, we actually made a pact to always stay true to our ideals of leading a “different life”, whatever that was supposed to be. I’m still not sure which one of us broke it first.

In any case, this is what Alex had to tell me:

I look back on our youth and wish we had never left it. Everything was so new and thrilling back then, we were full of promises. I remember each detail with great pleasure, how we explored new states of consciousness, the beautiful poetry you wrote, the projects we had for our artistic commune. Sometimes I wonder if we couldn’t have worked harder to make those dreams materialize.

But altogether growing up hasn’t been so bad, has it? I think in many ways we have achieved what we had hoped for, haven’t we? You are out there fighting for your master’s degree, which will definitely help you find a good job in the literary milieu, and I am married to the woman I love. Things haven’t been all that smooth with Gabi, but we have pulled through. She is less depressed since she got pregnant, we hardly ever fight nowadays and are learning to talk more openly. We are both looking forward to welcoming our child into this world.

I wish I had been able to provide my wife with a bigger home, but one day we will afford to move to a nicer area. Gabi wants to start working again as soon as possible, we will have to leave the baby with my parents for a few hours every day. In the meantime, I’m still applying for better positions at schools and bookshops and publishers and magazines. I am sure that soon something will pop up. I’m very optimistic about the future, dear Lou. . .

And so on.

Alex is obviously a bit delusional, something which seems to affect many adults these days. Maybe it goes with marriage and parenthood.

Our youth was a terrifying experience. Alex and I and all our other so-called friends were high on hashish most of the time. I wrote this utterly unoriginal pseudo-apocalyptic poetry none of us could understand. And our “artistic commune” was just this vague project of moving to the countryside, where we’d write and stage plays to entertain the local population—as we had once been told by some other depressed city-dwelling druggie that old houses in small villages were incredibly cheap and the peasants were happy to have some freaks around to liven up their summer evenings. We never actually bothered to check out any villages or anything, we just continually talked about our successful future theatre troupe. We didn’t even know how to act.

Alex was a reliable friend, though. He always had something ridiculously positive to say about life, and I was often desperate enough to believe him. I would complain for hours about my boyfriend Jaime, a penniless psychedelic chap whose greatest ambition was to become a cool DJ at rave parties—and Alex would just hold my hand and nod and eventually say “but you love him, and therefore everything will be OK.”

He was a bit hasty in his judgement, of course: after more than two years of insulting and accusing and threatening each other over petty issues, Jaime and I split with the usual melodramatic speeches about “disillusionment” and “hate”. My dear ex-boyfriend actually wrote me a goodbye letter in which he considered me the “greatest mistake in his life” and wished that I would “be unhappy as hell” for the rest of my existence. I’m sure I’ll manage to live up to those expectations. Which is more than he ever did for me.

But I’ve heard that Jaime has recovered from the painful past. My sister Bea met him in a supermarket some time ago: he is now an aerobics instructor and hopes to soon be able to move

out of his mother’s place. In the end, he told Bea exactly what Alex had predicted: “Everything’s OK”.

Anyway, it’s nice to see that Alex has such fond memories of our youthful innocence, but I just can’t feel any nostalgia when I look back. We were a miserable lot and struggled to keep ourselves relatively sane in the urban chaos and ugliness by continually telling each other fairy-tales about how great everything was going to be once we got our university degrees, became “financially independent” from our parents and started working on our “unique careers”.

Good old Alex, however, seems just as unable nowadays to be realistic about our future. One would imagine that his hopeless employment situation, the tremendously disappointing marriage with the woman of his dreams, plus the terrible hole they were able to purchase on credit would have made my friend realize how dreadful everything is going to be from now on.

I wonder if he actually does. Perhaps he expects *me* to represent some kind of achievement, with my useless master’s degree from an insignificant university in the middle of England. I could be his last bastion of hope.

Of course, Alex didn’t really bother to *ask* how I’m doing—and I’m most grateful. I am in no mood whatsoever to let him in on my gloomy existence out here. On the one hand, he wouldn’t understand a word of what I’d write (now that our drug-enhanced “states of consciousness” are behind us, dear reader, it turns out that reality is just as incomprehensible when one is sober). On the other, he could hardly fathom how relieved I am to have given up on *everything*: our tedious youth memories and silly dreams, my bloody degree and lowly jobs ahead of me, all the dull friends and second-rate lovers and my irritating family.

I just want to sit here in my little room and not be bothered. I've had it with life.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

NEW SHORES, NEW PERSPECTIVES...

Posted: 19.03.200. . ., 01:27

It's been only two days since I have arrived in A., at the beautiful Spanish Mediterranean, and I already feel reborn. I've finally met people like myself, intellectuals with a boundless love for science, open-minded and interested young men and women who are eager to explore the world.

I wish the conference would go on forever, but there are only three days left, so I must make the most of it. I don't even find the time to sleep properly. I'm afraid I will miss out on all this excitement. And it has been especially magical at night, discovering myself...and others. At least the morning lectures are dull enough—so I can always catch a nap, like many conference participants do.

I hardly think about Artur. Things have changed. I will never be the same, whether I like it or not.

My problem is that I might be falling in love. I've met someone who appeals to me in ways I can't even express. He is so kind and thoughtful, but mysterious and almost surreal at the same time. His name is Suresh and he comes from New York. His family is back in India, but his studies have taken him to several universities all over the planet. He loves everything that has to

do with science and technology. And he's very cosmopolitan, just like me. The whole world is his home, he says.

At first we just chatted a bit, but I immediately noticed a very strong force impelling me towards him. He says he was drawn by my aura—he could feel it the moment he looked into my eyes. I had been crying all morning before we met, I felt tired and displaced.

I don't know how to explain what made me fall into Suresh's arms so quickly, when we took a walk along the beach, on our first evening here. Maybe it's because we are so similar. Like soul mates...

Or I could be simply confused. What if this *is* only a dream and Suresh doesn't care about me at all, he just wants to sleep with me, return to New York and forget all about our encounter?

He doesn't talk much, but he's very attentive and seems to agree with many of my views. Every now and then he recites short poems by Indian sages. I wish I knew something equivalent from Angola or Portugal, or wherever, but I don't, so I just listen and admire him.

He hasn't made any pass at me. We just kissed on the beach that first night. And today he went to bed right after dinner, because he's still jet-lagged from his flight over the Atlantic. He wants to go jogging with me early in the morning. But he fears he won't be able to keep pace with me. I'm not sure we will be doing any running at all...It's going to be a sunny day, we could skip all the lectures, enjoy each other's company. That's what I would like.

Unless I decide to spend the day with Dirk, though. He has invited me to go on a short tour with him along the Spanish coast in a rented car, to check out some of the neighbouring towns and villages. It's a tempting proposal.

I met him tonight in the hotel bar, he was with a big group of conference participants. He comes from Denmark, is tall,

blond and sexy, very talkative and with a great sense of humour. He bought me a fruit juice and we immediately hit it off. We like the same authors and music. And we are both confused about our lives. Dirk lives with his girlfriend in Copenhagen, but there is no more passion between them. They are very good friends and he loves her more than anyone else in the world, but he just doesn't feel attracted to her anymore. I told him I was going through a similar phase with Artur.

We left the bar and sat for a while on the beach. That's when Dirk actually confessed that he sometimes just wants to leave his whole life behind and start anew. We held hands, but that was all. Still, I wanted him to kiss me, I know it. He's quite irresistible.

Dirk is travelling to Italy and maybe Morocco, once the conference is over. He asked if I would be interested in accompanying him. He might even cross the Sahara. That sounds very adventurous.

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. Neither tomorrow nor in three days. Dirk is undeniably attractive and interesting, but there's something about Suresh that touches my soul very deeply. In any case, I'm behaving in a way that disgusts me: I am betraying Artur, who has been a loving and loyal companion for so long.

I'm not sure if that matters at all anymore. Whatever kept me bound to Artur is fading away very quickly. It is time to end our relationship and move on. I know it will hurt him, but I cannot continue deceiving myself.

I am still young and the world is opening up before me. I have to grab this opportunity. My whole future depends on the decisions I make for myself now. I choose freedom.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

Name: Joana D.

Age: 23

Location: T., France

Interests: sports cars, all-night parties, true romance, astrology, babies

QUEEN OF THE NIGHT

Posted: 21.03.200. . . , 15:38

These two weeks in T. have been a non-stop adventure. Jean-Luc is simply the most amazing man I have ever met. I will never forget the pleasure and excitement, the opportunities he has given me to develop my true talents.

We are living in the flat he used to share with his wife and kids. It's small and dark and a bit run-down, but I try to keep it decent. I secretly envy Jean-Luc's ex-wife, just because she lived here with him for seven years, day in and day out. He says that it's much nicer to have *me* around. We sleep through the mornings, eat out all the time, get high on tequilas and some great cocaine. After dinner I go to work—I turn into Vivienne, the queen of the night. That's what he calls me.

Jean-Luc has this friend in the escort business, Ahmed. He's a trustworthy, serious professional. He has put me on a "shift" with Jasmin, a gorgeous woman from Guatemala. It's easy-going, we just sit in a car, smoke and drink and snort as we please, while we're taken to some flat or hotel room or club, wherever

there is a client. Our chauffeur gets a call on his mobile phone, and off we go. If the clients want a brunette, they get Jasmin; if they want a blonde, they get me—they don't mind that my hair is bleached. Sometimes they ask for both of us, simultaneously.

It's a great job, I am there on top of the world and all these men are paying good money. Some don't even touch me, I'm just supposed to undress and sit around, have a glass of champagne, do some drugs, talk, laugh, dance for them or whatever. Other guys are total perverts, but I don't mind. I can give them something they want and I do it gracefully.

Going to clients with Jasmin is lots of fun, she takes everything as a joke. We're so high half the time, we don't care what they think about us—most of them are pretty relaxed chaps, anyway. Yesterday I spilled my drink over a guy and didn't even manage to apologize because I was laughing so much. He told me I was cute. He wanted me to talk dirty to him, but sometimes my French comes out all jumbled, even though Jean-Luc has been teaching me everything I need to know. This guy didn't mind that I stuttered all the time, it just aroused him even more!

Jasmin looks as young as me, though she's already in her thirties and has three kids back in Guatemala—they are living with their grandparents. She has had a tremendously adventurous life, she tells me lots of stories while we are sitting in the car, cruising the town for clients. Sometimes she starts weeping, which gets our chauffeur out of his mind, because she ruins her make-up and her eyes get all swollen. I try to console her, tell her that things are OK here, that we will take care of her and all. She can be very insecure.

She says she misses her family, they haven't been together for almost ten years now: her two older brothers are living in

Los Angeles (one of them in jail), her sister is somewhere in Germany or Austria, and her younger brother was killed in a gang fight in Guatemala City just recently. Jasmin's first husband was also killed, during some drugs transaction that went wrong somewhere in Mexico, I think. She actually came to France with her second husband, they were working as couriers. They got into trouble, and she met a guy in Paris who had connections with Ahmed. Then she lost track of her husband. That was three years ago. She says she's very happy here in T.

Sometimes her stories don't make sense, she contradicts herself and keeps changing details, so I don't know what's true and what's not. But I don't really care, I listen just the same.

Now I understand what it means to live life on the edge. I love the secretive side, the way you have to hide your true identity...but still give something of yourself to these guys. I love being Vivienne during the night, and turning into Jean-Luc's little Jo when I arrive home.

Jean-Luc and I will marry as soon as we save enough to move to a bigger place. He's had some financial difficulties because of bad investments, but I know he will recover. For the moment we want to celebrate our love without any restrictions. We go to parties whenever I'm not working, frequent good restaurants, buy nice clothes, get the best coke in town.

I often have the impression that Jean-Luc doesn't like the way Ahmed looks at me. But I can't help it if men desire me. I think Jean-Luc understands that, he is much more open-minded than Tony, who would freak out if I would flirt a bit with a guy just for fun.

Though the other night Jean-Luc lost control for a moment. We had drunk too much at a club and this guy put his hands around my waist while I was dancing—Jean-Luc got so

furious that he started a fight right there on the dance floor. He threatened to hit me too, but he was just showing off. By the time we arrived home, he had calmed down and apologized. I wasn't offended at all, I know he had a hard time when his wife ran off with another man. Maybe he fears that I will do the same. He doesn't understand how madly in love I am. Nobody can replace him.

This new world might seem harsh, but I like the challenges. I am a fighter, I always have been. Even my family was amazed at my determination to do things my way. This is what I'm destined to be.

Underneath the make-up and the cool gaze, I am still human, I have real feelings. Yesterday I was with this client, he made me cry. It wasn't his fault or anything, he just looked like my father. And he was very kind, too. He paid well and only wanted to touch me a bit. Looking at him reminded me of all the pain I've left behind. All the things my family never wanted to accept.

I miss my dad. He was so sweet to me when I was small, I always wanted to please him. I think he started distancing himself when we moved from Angola to Portugal. I remember him arriving home and just sitting in front of the TV. He had no more time to play or talk with me, he was either tired or busy.

And he got so disappointed when I started smoking, or when I almost failed a year at school, or that afternoon he caught me in bed with a boy when everybody was supposed to be away...As if he didn't want to believe that his little Jo was growing up, developing her own interests and needs.

I really tried to explain to mum and dad why I had to go with Jean-Luc. We fought for hours on the phone. They thought

I was being hasty, but they have no idea how much I yearned for a new beginning. My life in Lisbon had totally stagnated.

Mum got offended because I was determined to drop my degree, but dad expressed more than that: he seemed jealous that another man was going to take care of me from now on. That I was no longer daddy's little girl.

I just had to split from my family. They never even tried to understand me, I was treated like a freak, a nutcase. Whatever I did, I was never considered as diligent as Bea or as creative as Lou. There was always something wrong with me. Now I am surrounded by people who appreciate my eccentricities—and are willing to pay for them.

// Comments: 0 //

HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON
EVERYTHING

PAYING ATTENTION TO DETAILS

Posted: 24.03.200... , 21:43

Hello, everyone. Today I would like to share a few thoughts about toy electric railways which function as double-conductor systems on direct current. The principle is rather simple: the current is sent to the right rail, and a sliding contact in the toy locomotive receives it from the right wheels, directing it to the engine. From here, the current travels through the axle, the chassis, and the non-insulated left wheels into the left rail. The right rail is thus the positive pole, and the left rail the negative pole. This type of transference makes it necessary to insulate the rails, axles and wheels from one another, otherwise there's the danger of short-circuits.

The moving direction of a toy locomotive is changed by switching the polarities of both rails, that is, turning the positive rail into negative, and vice-versa. This is done via the so-called "toggle switches" built into the transformers and locomotives. On the chief circuit mechanism, the conductor cable constitutes the positive pole, which means that the direct current flows from it to the locomotive engine and *then* to the axles, the left wheels and the rail.

Now, if any complications arise on the level of the engine or wheels, *you should let a professional fix it*—because if you don't really know how to handle such delicate pieces, you might just aggra-

vate the problem! I find it irresponsible that some people have been trying to give advice on repairing these things by yourself.

There are little maintenance jobs, though, which you can safely and easily do at home. In order to keep the current distribution stable, I advise you to clean the rails and wheels with a bit of rubbing alcohol every now and then. As for the bearings on all moving pieces in the locomotive, one should add a drop of oil to them—not forgetting also the rotor bearings in the engine!

I have been collecting electric toy locomotives and railways for more than twenty years—many of the original pieces are still functioning. When they were smaller, my three daughters experienced great joy in watching the locomotive move, and adding rail tracks to the whole system. Unfortunately, with time they lost almost all interest in such things. They are adults now, and have other priorities. But for me it remains a most rewarding hobby.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

UNFORGETTABLE DREAM

Posted: 25.03.200... , 17:19

It's so nice and quiet here in my flat. I've put on some relaxing music and have been looking out of the window, thinking about my life. Or maybe just dreaming, I don't know.

Artur is coming over for dinner, he's bringing some pizza from the shop where he works. That way I don't have to bother with the washing up. I hope it will be a pleasant evening. I haven't told him about Suresh and Dirk, yet—I don't think he could deal with it at the moment. In any case, I feel much more peaceful since I'm back in Lisbon, as if those few days at the Mediterranean had cleansed my soul. Now I am happy to return to my cosy home and my dear loving companion.

Being with Suresh was nice, and sex with Dirk was just fantastic. But they are back to their own lives. Actually, Suresh has already written from New York, inviting me to visit him—he says he would love to show me around the city...

At the end of the conference in Spain, Suresh confessed that he had a fiancé, but was now sure that marrying her would be a mistake, because he didn't love her. I was really offended that he had kept this secret and led me on for days. I didn't even say goodbye to him. Of course, I later regretted it, so I sent him an e-mail, apologizing for my bad mood. I realized it would be hypocritical of me to hold anything against Suresh—after all,

I have my problems with Artur. But I told Suresh all about my relationship, from the beginning. He should learn to be more open about his private matters. Maybe he is already: he's written that he is officially single again, and feels great about it.

Anyway, I don't really want to lie to Artur about my experiences in Spain, so I've decided to leave it up to him: if he asks me what actually happened during those five days, I will tell him the whole truth. But Artur has been so absorbed in his own issues. He only remarked that I'm a bit tanned.

I'm partially relieved, though also somewhat sad. I would like him to care more about us and not just take things for granted. I must teach him to be more attentive, sometimes he's totally aloof.

Spain is becoming a distant, sweet dream. Only every now and then I am overwhelmed by images of Dirk's beautiful body in the sun, and Suresh's comforting kisses...I'm sure they will fade away with time. I have to concentrate on my work again, professor Helder would like me to write a report on the conference, to present to my lab colleagues next week. I took some notes on one or the other lecture, the rest I will have to base on vague recollection.

Now that Jo has moved to France, our flat sometimes seems too empty. This is the first time I'm actually living on my own—it's pretty exciting! Knowing that granny and auntie and uncle are just around the corner is reassuring, I can always drop by if I feel lonely. Artur also spends more nights here, now that his mum and dad are reunited. I think this has relieved him, he has even started applying again for jobs with marketing companies. I have convinced him to look into the internet for opportunities all over Europe, instead of limiting himself to Portugal: he speaks good English, plus Spanish and even some French—there is no reason why he shouldn't work abroad.

My relationship with Artur is an issue I can deal with more coolly now. I'm certainly not going to marry him soon, I've learned to value my freedom. For that I will be eternally grateful to Dirk and Suresh.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

HUMAN CONTACT

Posted: 28.03.200... , 22:57

I'm not totally alone here, dear reader. I've got Pauline to keep me company—that's the spider hanging above my bookshelf. It's nice to have somebody around. She's certainly more pleasant than Michelle, Kathy and Aissa, my other three flatmates, whom I have to deal with whenever I drag myself out of the room to get something to eat or go to the bathroom.

Today, for example, I actually sat down at the kitchen table and had a cup of tea with Michelle. We needed to discuss some bills and all, so I thought I might as well make myself comfortable and chat a bit about life with a fellow human being.

Michelle tells me she's worried about my "state of health", because I "haven't gone anywhere for months". This isn't entirely true. I do go to the supermarket when necessary—but I don't buy that much anyway. I get so disgusted by all the things on display, with their artificial ultra-fresh appearance and aroma additives, and the packages with pictures of happy people and fluffy animals and bright and breezy plants, and the loudspeakers blaring love-songs into your ears while you try to make your way through the labyrinth of shelves and bump into overweight shoppers. This sure kills my appetite. I'm basically down to carrots, oranges, crackers and bottled water at the moment.

I also do some exercise: every now and then I step outside when it's already dark and just pace around the block. After a

while, the incessant traffic and annoying advertising all over the place get totally on my nerves, so I'm convinced that being in bed is the only decent thing I can do for myself, and I rush back to my room.

But I didn't need to explain any of this to Michelle. Her great worry about little old me, it turned out, was solely an excuse to talk about the big party she wants to throw *right here* in our flat next weekend, because our flatmate Aissa is returning to Lithuania in April. Michelle and Kathy have already invited a bunch of people. Now they are getting money together to buy some plastic food and drinks—as well as “a cute sweater” for our departing friend. So if nothing else, they could use my financial contribution.

Aissa is finishing her teaching degree and has been happily hopping around ever since she arrived here, six months ago, to participate in one of those “study abroad” schemes promoted by the European Union. She didn't do much studying, of course, being too busy enjoying herself with her female friends from Estonia and Moldavia and Byelorussia: they spent their afternoons strolling around shops or hanging out in cafés, and “went clubbing” in the evenings.

Michelle and Kathy are also very fond of the night life. I always encourage them to “go out and enjoy themselves”, in the hope that they won't just end up sitting in the living-room watching some pathetic TV show, as all the sound goes through the thin walls into my bedroom, disturbing my frail peace of mind. They think I'm profoundly dysfunctional because I don't have any friends, don't watch TV, and don't sit around with them at mealtimes to chit-chat about my day. As far as I can tell, they are absolutely right: clearly something's wrong with me. I would be the last person to deny it.

Now, if I really had nothing better to do with myself, I could

explain to Michelle that also *I* was once a fun-loving person, full of great expectations and promises, always eager to hang out and meet people, hoping for some excitement. It wouldn't even be a lie. Most of my so-called youth was spent in the pursuit of adventure and romance. How original. When I look back, only one thought comes to my mind: what a waste of time. I just ended up all entangled in continual conflicts and disappointments.

I'm so much happier, now that nothing happens.

But why bother my flatmates with my useless memories? Instead, I told Michelle the reason I'm so reserved and secluded is that I'm pining for my love, who is far away and can only communicate with me via internet. I named him Charlie and made him American. I said he's a soldier on a mission somewhere in the Middle East, and it's all very hush-hush for security reasons, so not even *I* know where exactly he is and what he is doing, but I fear for his life and all that nonsense. Anyway, I'm so mad about Charlie, I confessed, that I am just patiently and faithfully (and above all: chastely) waiting for him. In the summer he'll come visit me, I added, and then I will gladly introduce him to my flatmates and we can all have a big “Welcome Home, Charlie”-party.

Now everyone's sighing away about my sweet and sad love story, while I'm left alone with Pauline and my cranky thoughts. As for the unavoidable party next weekend, I've decided to go for a longer walk—and afterwards I'll pop some sleeping pills and switch off from all the happiness pounding at my bedroom door. So long, Aissa.

Fortunately, my flatmates aren't the only ones complaining about my habits—so I'm getting fairly used to criticism. Mum is now dissatisfied because I talk with her only once a week, as

compared to Jo, who is also living abroad but still manages to call my parents every day. Sometimes they even chat up to three times a day. Whatever they have to discuss there. Then again, they've always enjoyed telling each other nonsense.

Little sister is, of course, doing "very well" in France with her middle-aged boyfriend, who allegedly works in the "food and beverages" business. Right. And Jo, believe it or not, has found this superb job as a hotel receptionist (because she speaks a couple of foreign languages, just like me, mum reminded me) and will soon be earning heaps of money. They must have fabulously exceptional working conditions over there in France.

For the moment, though, mum and dad are still financing Jo's adventures, as she first has to "get integrated in her new environment" and needs all kinds of stuff, such as cutlery, a washing machine, a TV set, a new laptop, carpets and flower pots. How nice to hear that my sister is getting so homey.

Obviously, mum implied, I should strive to be just as industrious as little Jo, who is trying hard to gain a foothold in the promising world of tourism. Sure. If things continue like this, in a few weeks' time her stay in T. will have become even rosier—and way more expensive. I wonder if Jo's lifestyle might actually endanger my own survival here. You never know how much money she'll manage to suck out of my apparently aloof parents under one or the other absurd pretext.

Sometimes I have the impression that I go through too much bother to make my stories believable. As it seems, mum and dad buy into just about anything my sisters and I tell them. So long as we keep the appearance of success.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

BETRAYED

Posted: 03.04.200... , 08:23

I hate Jean-Luc like I've never hated anyone in my life, I'm so sick of that bastard, he's trying to destroy me but I'm damned if I'll let him, he thinks I'm like his stupid ex-wife but he's fucking wrong, I'm not taking any of his abuse, I'm splitting, I've had enough. I've taken so much shit from him and now he threatens to kick me out! He pretends that he can live without me but he doesn't even have the money to feed himself, I've been providing him with everything for the past month and I'm not up to it anymore. Fuck him and his moods. He's totally paranoid and childish. He thinks he can intimidate me with his strength, but I'm not afraid of him!

I'm tired of living in this slum, waiting for him to make his great business deals, cash in some real money and marry me, like he promised. How stupid I've been, I let him lead me on. Jean-Luc doesn't care about me, he just wants somebody to fuck and pay his bills and drinks and cocaine. Well, he chose the wrong woman.

Ahmed warned me early enough, but I didn't want to believe it. I thought he was just trying to snatch me from Jean-Luc. Now I see what he meant. I was being used like a little doll, a slave. Ahmed only tried to open my eyes because he took a genuine liking to me. He's seen Jean-Luc do this to other women before. Several women, not just his ex-wife.

I feel so angry, I could kill Jean-Luc. For days now, he has done nothing but criticizing, insulting and threatening me. He claims that only thanks to him I managed to get away from that terrible club in the Algarve and leave Tony and my family. He says I owe him everything I've achieved here: my job, my connections, the money and the coke. Pah! He sees everything upside down, *he* is the one who should be eternally grateful!

What really hurts is that I believed him. I worshiped Jean-Luc, and now I feel as if I were waking up from a long terrible dream. I'm so furious with myself, I feel like dying. All my life I've been betrayed. The more I give, the more I lose. Everyone I've ever met has let me down.

My family never offered any real support. Mum and dad keep sending me money, that's for sure, but they don't pay attention to me. I bet they don't even miss me, they're glad I've split and are anxious to have me out of the way forever.

Ever since I was a kid, everything revolved around pretty little Lou's artistic talents and creativity, or Bea's good grades and obedience. Only *I* was never praised, mum and dad seemed to dislike everything about me: I was too fat, too clumsy, too slow at school, too irresponsible, too interested in boys. I just wanted them to love me as I am. Lou and Bea have faked everything all their lives, they're not half as perfect as mum and dad think—they are lazy and selfish. And hypocrites. They've teased me all my life, particularly Lou, who thinks she's so funny, she just puts everyone down, as if *she* were any role model! And Bea's even worse—she's always so polite and all smiles, but underneath she's a snake. I know she always rejoiced in my failures. Whenever mum and dad showed their disappointment in me or punished me for some stupid thing I had done, Bea just stood beside them and grinned.

I hate my family. Whatever happens to me, I never want to return to them. I'd rather fight for myself than be put down by them again. In my childhood I learned all about being lonely and misunderstood. I knew I would have to go out into the world, looking for someone who would truly love me.

It hasn't been easy. I yearn so much to be accepted, I'm willing to open up totally and share the good and the bad, but I just end up being backstabbed. I've had it with traitors. Either I find true love in this world, or life isn't worth living.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

THE DIALECTICS OF REVOLUTION

Posted: 03.04.200... , 14:37

What are the limits of revolution? This question has been on my mind lately. It was triggered by an article I read in a renowned British magazine, concerning Angola's transition from colonialism to independence. The writer, a Portuguese historian living and teaching in the UK, claimed that the liberation of Angola had failed. That it had all been one great illusion, a huge mistake. How preposterous! Even if there were some problems and drawbacks, we cannot ignore the great transformations which came with freedom.

Of course, one has to consider my country's fragile situation at the time. The departure of Portugal's army, police, civil servants and most professionals had left hardly any functioning institutions. We had to start from scratch. The creation of a new society was part of the challenge as well as incentive.

Regrettably, there were also lots of disputes inside the MPLA—between those who had directly fought the Portuguese army in the Angolan jungle, and those who had been exiled during the colonial war. The first group felt entitled to a greater share of the fruits of liberation, from the property left behind by the Portuguese, to the increasing revenues of Angola's offshore oil wells (operated by American companies). Besides, they expected top positions in the government, even though many of them didn't have any kind of qualifications. This revealed an enormous immaturity and would soon have dire consequences.

The Portuguese historian's article focused particularly on the political unrest in Luanda, on the 27th of May 1977—indeed a dark episode in the history of independent Angola. To this day it is difficult to tell what actually happened. I can relate only what I experienced.

The drama was set off by an attempted coup inside the MPLA itself, led by some of the embittered jungle fighters who wanted to take over the government. This represented a great risk: a collapse of the state authority would undoubtedly have given the opponents of the MPLA a chance to tear up the country into pieces and hand all the riches to Western imperialism again. In the face of this danger, the government and the armed forces had no alternative but to crush the opposing faction, with the support of Cuban troops stationed in and around Luanda.

What followed was violent, bloody, irrational. The article in the British magazine describes it quite accurately: thousands of people were dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night, beaten up in front of their families, taken away to prison, tortured, killed. Neighbours accused each other of treason, angry mobs took revenge on strangers, and the Cuban tanks raided Luanda's poorest neighbourhoods, where purported opponents of the government were hiding. There was a widespread feeling of suspicion—everyone feared to be caught on the wrong side. Definitely some temporary hysteria prevailed. It reminded me of mediaeval witch hunts.

Although some insurgents might have been genuine idealists hoping for better opportunities, others were just jealous black racists who threatened to expel or kill off all white and Creole Angolans. They totally disrespected our country's multi-ethnic stance, something we had so dearly fought for.

In spite of this, the Portuguese historian actually accuses the whites of having cooperated with the government to suppress a legitimate dissatisfaction with Luanda's administrative body. To me this sounds totally far-fetched. Many people were just motivated by greed. It was very difficult to tell who believed in what.

At the time I worked for the government in Luanda, mainly managing MPLA reports. But I never laid eyes on a single document stating in any way a command to imprison, torture or execute the opposition. So I was absolutely shaken when I saw all the violence around me. It seemed that we had gone from independence to total anarchy overnight.

Worse even, I was all alone. Martin was fully engaged as a trainee with a Soviet technical team working for the armed forces somewhere outside Luanda. It was unclear whether the fight would spread beyond the limits of the city. Because the telephone lines were interrupted, I couldn't reach Martin for more than 48 hours. I feared the worst.

I also felt that my own life was in great danger, I didn't dare step outside our house. Some black people had been totally misinformed and were convinced that a new war between "pure Africans" and "European intruders" had begun. It seemed as if the racial hatred of the 1960s, the most traumatic experience in my life, was returning in full force. For a moment I thought all my plans would be crushed forever.

After a few days of total mayhem, the situation gradually calmed down again. The coup had been a disastrous failure, which had only inflamed people's moods for a while. Then the government resumed its activity and we could carry on with our

everyday lives. The conflict left quite some scars, but everyone was relieved that it had ended quickly.

Martin returned briefly to Luanda and we had a long discussion about our future options. Some of our friends had been so appalled by all the atrocities, they felt they couldn't go on living in Angola. Whereas I was even more convinced of the value of our endeavours: we still had a lot of work ahead, in order to make Angola a peaceful and just society. My ideals had been reinforced. There was only one way of overcoming the shocking events: forgive and forget. We had to avoid petty rivalries and move on with the reconstruction process, to provide a better life for everyone.

The Portuguese historian, however, chooses to ignore these facts: by blowing the 1977 events out of proportion and denying Angola's achievements, he treats my country in the typical paternalistic way I knew from colonial times.

All those who believed in the Angolan dream did everything in their power to secure liberty and peace, at any cost. This in itself assures me that the Angolan revolution was not in vain.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

TANGLED FEELINGS

Posted: 05.04.200... , 22:46

Today I received a letter from the foundation confirming the extension of my scholarship. This has really boosted my good mood. I was so afraid that they would turn down my application, but as usual I had been too pessimistic.

My near future certainly looks more promising: I can relieve my parents by at least not adding any pressure on their finances (mum has been complaining that both Lou's and Jo's stay abroad is much more expensive than anybody had expected). And since I only use about half the scholarship every month on daily expenses, I can even save money to do some travelling this year. I feel a great sense of power and security.

I also realize now that my fear of failing at my research was a mere phantom—just as Suresh has been trying to convince me. He has shown so much trust in my capacities. We've been chatting on the internet almost every day, for hours. I feel ever more drawn to him, anxious to pack my things and fly over to New York. But I prefer to take things slowly.

Still, not everything has been easy lately. I've actually had lots of trouble with Artur. He got completely out of his mind when he discovered a postcard from Dirk, which I had incidentally left on the kitchen table. Artur just picked it up and read it without my permission—I found this rather uncivilized. But

it's Dirk's fault, too: he wrote me a naughty message about how much he missed my voluptuous body.

Artur barged out of my flat without saying a word. I had to run after him, all the way to the bus stop around the corner. I begged him to come back, so we could talk things over. I explained that Dirk had only been a one-night stand, I didn't really plan to see him again and had even disliked the postcard (although also I have recurrent fantasies about sex with him). That's when Artur lost it, right there in the middle of the street, surrounded by a bunch of people waiting for the bus: he started insulting me, calling me nasty names and everything! I had never seen him that furious before.

Finally I convinced him to have a glass of warm milk, to recover from the shock. As soon as we were back in the kitchen, though, he just started wailing. I didn't know how to comfort him, I felt pretty guilty. At the same time I was annoyed by his inability to control himself. I know that Artur is under stress, but quite honestly I'm tired of his worries.

He sat at the table, sobbing and shaking his head—until I told him to go home, have a rest, and call me when he felt ready to talk. As I accompanied him to the elevator, I actually felt relieved. Artur has been staying over almost every night now, and I'm starting to get very bored with him. He doesn't share any of my real interests in literature, scientific matters and deep philosophical conversations. We often don't even know what to talk about at all.

I think I don't love Artur anymore. I wish we could always remain close and support each other, but I feel no passion. And ever since my experience with Dirk, I know there's much more I can give when I'm really drawn to somebody.

Artur could use some change, anyway. He has just got a proposal to work in the north, for the sales department of a

sausage factory exporting to several foreign countries. They've invited him for a personal interview this week, which means they'll almost certainly hire him. Most other companies never even bothered to answer his application letters. It's a wonderful opportunity for him, yet he seems to be hesitating—as if he were afraid of making a real adult decision.

Of course, accepting that job would imply that he moves away from his mother and me, but at least he would be working in his field and could concentrate on a proper career, instead of delivering pizzas for the rest of his life. And Portugal is such a tiny country, he could even come to Lisbon every second week-end or so. I've been trying very hard to encourage him to take this step, I've even agreed to accompany him to the interview. I'm his friend, I want him to do something decent with himself.

Travelling would only do him good, Artur has spent his entire life in this city. I am now sure that this makes you more narrow-minded. People like my sisters and me, Suresh and Dirk have profited much from cosmopolitan experiences—you can see that we are eager to move around.

I've been remembering my childhood lately. My family has lived in so many countries, and I only regret that I was too small to really understand the interesting things happening around me. I have fond memories of all the different schools we attended, the playgrounds in East Berlin, the dancing bears in Smolensk, the cold winters with the snow and the frozen lakes where we learned ice-skating. . . everything was so new and exceptional, like being on permanent vacation.

But the country where I was born—Angola—is still my favourite. I loved the white beaches, the fresh shellfish from the sea, all the children my sisters and I played with in our quiet residential neighbourhood. Life was very pleasant in Angola—

we were satisfied with the little we got. My parents also looked happier in those days.

I felt so cosy and safe, even though the country was poor and ravaged by continuous warfare. It seems that people from warmer zones have a more natural joy in them, and also a kinder soul. Maybe that's what I find so appealing in Suresh.

Artur was never interested in my past. When we first met and I told him I was actually Angolan and had only moved to Portugal in 1992, he was just surprised that I was white.

He isn't keen on going somewhere for a holiday, either. I have been proposing that we do some travelling together in the summer, maybe an inter-rail across Europe, or visit a more exotic country, like Egypt or Thailand. Artur gets nervous with the idea of leaving his family and being exposed to different climates and germs. He suffers from a series of allergies, but I think he exaggerates—I'm sure you can get high quality medical treatment wherever you go these days. And breathing another air might even be beneficial to his health.

I would love to go places, I'm so tired of simply alternating between Lisbon and G. to see my parents—I'm sick of the Portuguese culture and mentality altogether. If it weren't for my research, I would get out of here and find a job or continue my studies somewhere else. My sisters are lucky that they get to see the world, now from a grown-up perspective. I should find ways of doing the same, before it's too late.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

ARITHMETIC CONSOLATIONS

Posted: 08.04.200... , 15:29

Ah, the eluding happiness!

Poor Aissa's goodbye party was a tremendous flop, to everyone's amazement. Only seven people showed up: four of them were these funny female friends with whom Aissa hung out every day anyway, two guys from one of Michelle's law courses popped by hoping to get some free beer, and another chap was an absolute stranger to everyone. Go figure. Yes, and they all tried to hide their disappointment by getting drunk and laughing hysterically at the jokes one guy kept telling, until some of them started vomiting in the bathroom. Around midnight the whole lot left the place in order to find some greater excitement.

I occupied myself with a series of meditative walks around the block under incessant drizzle and caught myself a little cold. I told mum on the phone that I got all wet the other evening returning from the library, where I had been working hard on a difficult paper for my course on *Radical Post-Heideggerian Feminist Themes in Transsexual Science-Fiction Literature* (I wouldn't be surprised that there actually is such a subject at university), so I lost track of time and didn't even notice it was raining. I hope the image of a hard-working, albeit somewhat aloof, academic sticks to her mind. In any case, she strongly recommended that I "take a couple of days off" to cure myself.

In the meantime, Aissa's room has promptly been occupied by Lara, who came all the way from Florence to participate in a sociological research project entitled *Overcoming Youth Crisis Through Active Participation in Spectator Sports*, sponsored by some big sportswear company. I was all alone when she arrived and had the honour of welcoming her in our flat with a friendly chat concerning all her unrealistic ideas about life.

Lara is the leftist progressive do-gooder type, a real jewel. She gave me this beautiful long speech about the "real aim of sociology"—which, according to her, is supposed to "make people aware of injustices" and "come up with viable solutions" for the great future of the human species. And of course, she believes that with a bit of effort and mutual understanding, "our generation" will be able to push for "vital changes in the system". In short, Lara dreams of what she calls a "global revolution". She is happy to be working towards this end by "acquiring basic knowledge about the functioning of societies". She wasn't really able to explain how societies function. But I wasn't very disappointed: it seems to be an issue that baffles many of us, academics or not.

We moved away from that embarrassing topic and concentrated on the great new research project about the redemptive power of spectator sports, which Lara is about to join here in N., together with a few dozen other sociologists. Although financed by "capitalist pigs", it is of great relevance, she told me, as it shows the "cooperative potential of young people, in order to attain a common goal". So at bottom there seems to be no difference between toppling an unjust regime or winning the gold medal—both should provide good entertainment for the masses, I suppose.

I then asked Lara what her role in the project would be. It turns out that she will gather and process statistical data. This

sure sounds revolutionary. She's totally enthusiastic about it—because "numbers tell us a lot about people's real experiences" on this planet.

Lovely Lara provided me with a rare epiphany there: she made me realize that, whether I like it or not, I actually *count* in this world. Literally. My name will most likely not go down in history—but I will be registered for all eternity as a number. Several of them, in fact.

And since I have so much time on my hands, I've spent the last couple of days surfing the web, looking at some neat statistics collected by countless sociologists and demographers and economists and political scientists and similar geeks. I've found my valuable contribution to quite some of them. All was not in vain, after all.

I can proudly consider myself included in such exciting categories as: the 14 percent teenage girls in Western Europe who had legal or illegal abortions in the 1990s; or the 15 percent aged twelve and over who have tried illicit drugs; or the 30 percent who express feelings of alienation and a sense of powerlessness as to their ability to influence either local leaders or the government in order to bring about change; or the whopping estimated 60 percent who will only find low-pay temporary jobs in the next two decades; or—finally—the 40 percent (and rising) pseudo-adults over the age of 25 still living with their parents and/or receiving financial support from them.

There we are: Lara was right. A few numbers can paint a nice picture of one's life—focusing on the essentials and leaving aside all the redundancies (the painful everyday struggles, the countless discomforts, the broken promises, the frustrated hopes). I actually doubt the absolute accuracy of these calculations (they're all underestimations, if you ask me), but that

hardly matters for the vital papers and files and historical documents being produced as we speak. In the end, I can only agree that we're all nothing but an average, an approximation, a big give-or-take-a-few hotchpotch. Nobody's interested in the details anyway.

I'm glad that the social sciences have confirmed what is pretty obvious already: anyone who can is somehow surviving at his or her parents' expenses. This clearly is the case with my two sisters and me. Even if Bea and Jo prefer to pretend they're independent or about to become so, which is all very noble and understandable—but pretty far from the truth.

My big and diligent sister might receive her little research grant (because there are all these industries interested in the use of bacteria to make dead animals more appetizing), but she's still not paying any rent. As for Jo, no amount of "support" from my parents is ever going to be enough. If there's anyone *dependent* on their generous funds, it's my poor little sister. Fortunately for her, nobody in my family seems to mind that her repeated promises to "start earning her own money" never materialize. We sure are a lucky bunch of daughters, with such providing parents.

Also Lara admitted that the main part of her current "income" stems from her divorced mother, as the research scholarship only covered the university fees and plane ticket to England—so somebody had to chip in for the room and food. She's hoping to get a nice job here in N., though, "perhaps taking care of children or helping the elderly". She thinks "it's important to do something useful for our fellow beings and not just worry about money". So far, Lara has had two jobs: as a kind of secretary at an uncle's real estate agency, and behind a check-in desk at the Florence airport (during her last Summer vacation). Ad-

ditionally, she has done "lots of voluntary work", such as serving soups to the poor at Christmas or participating in archaeological excavations in Greece for a couple of weeks.

It's nice to meet someone with such unshakable optimism. I asked Lara if her promised revolution would also be solving the nagging problems of our general obsolescence and our inability to even pay rent for a miserable room in a depressing block. She says "it is our responsibility to demand more decent jobs for everyone and nicer homes to live in." That's reassuring.

Lara certainly has a challenge ahead of her. I can't help wondering if she won't just end up throwing the battle and sticking to the safe universe of football cheering, like so many supposed idealists do. But I didn't try to convince her of the lunacy of her expectations in such a wretched world. I wouldn't want to spoil her efforts to find some consolation for all the miseries she's experienced.

I'm no different—and neither are my parents and sisters, or even Michelle, Kathy and Aissa and that anonymous guy who showed up at the party. We're obviously all stuck on this planet, all 100 percent of us, without knowing what to do about that misfortune.

I don't see a way out of this mess. *Sauve qui peut.*

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

IMPASSE

Posted: 10.04.200... , 17:19

My life is in a turmoil. Artur and I have been having daily fights, not just over Dirk but also our future. Fortunately he left for his job interview up north today, so I'll have some time on my own to think things over. I was supposed to accompany him, but last night I had a change of heart. I just didn't feel like spending hours on a train with him and then hanging out all day in a café or whatever while he got interviewed.

I feel terribly annoyed when Artur is around. I know it's not his fault, he is the same sweet guy I once liked so much. But lately he has acquired this sad puppy look, it really drives me mad. He keeps complaining that he doesn't understand why I want a more open relationship. He was actually going to propose marriage if he got hired by the sausage factory. According to Artur, I should have no problems moving up north with him and doing most of my work via internet. He figured this out on his own, without consulting me. And now he is disappointed that I don't agree with his plans.

I have realized that Artur is at bottom a totally self-centred person, he doesn't take my needs into consideration at all. I kept ignoring this because I genuinely cared and was happy with him...for a while.

Last night he stayed over at my flat, but we didn't sleep a wink. He just cried and accused me of having led him on. If

anything, I lied to myself for too long. I'm very sorry for that, I wish I could have been more honest. Artur didn't make it any easier, either—whenever I wanted to discuss something serious, he was too tired or too worried about his mother, or simply not interested in the issue. Things were fine so long as we fooled around. But I'm no child anymore. I want a more serious, intellectual relationship.

That's why I had to let Artur go on his own to this interview—he needs to become independent, even if it hurts. We've paralysed each other for too long. In a way, I am doing him a greater favour than he realizes.

Artur has no idea how consuming our relationship has been, I often even put his family before my own! I don't think that's fair.

My parents aren't doing very well, they've got so many worries now that my sisters are abroad. Particularly Jo has been getting on mum and dad's nerves: calling them in the middle of the night, when they're already fast asleep, and complaining that she hates being out there in France. Just the other day she suddenly wanted to come home and needed a plane ticket. She's short of money because she got chucked out of her hotel job after slapping her boss, who made a pass at her. I think her reaction was justified, but she could have tried to talk with the guy instead of immediately resorting to violence. Sometimes I think it's a miracle that Jo doesn't get into greater trouble.

My sister is so unstable, you never know what she wants. As soon as my parents had sent her money for the plane to Lisbon, Jo changed her mind and told them everything was fine again, she had found another job and would be staying on. This really affects mum and dad. I'm sure they would be happier if they didn't pay so much attention to my sister's uncertainties. We're all grown-ups, we should take responsibility for our actions.

I'm fed-up with my life, I want to reorganize it completely. For years now I have been behaving like a little ant, dutifully performing my tasks, sacrificing my time and leisure for my family and my boyfriend. I'm sick of dreaming away about better days to come. I want to achieve happiness here and now.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Posted: 11.04.200. . . , 21:27

Mother seems interested in discussing only two issues lately: my relationship with Hal and my little sister Jo's exciting activities in France. I have to answer a lot of silly questions about my new boyfriend, such as the name of his parents' two big dogs or what kind of cars Hal and his father drive. I then go through the trouble of writing all these things down, so as to not contradict myself too easily. I obviously put real effort into creating an ideal life for myself here.

Which is much more than Jo is doing—her stories just get wilder by the hour. This of course keeps the family tremendously absorbed. Therefore, as soon as mum gets tired of hearing me talk about Hal's artistic talent or the neat flowerpots on his mother's terrace in London, she switches back to Jo's trials and tribulations.

You wouldn't believe the amount of nonsense mum is able to tell me in about ten minutes: how tremendously well my kid sister is doing, despite having just been chucked because her boss wanted a bit of hanky-panky (as if that didn't come with any decent job these days); how relieved she is now that she's walked out on Jean-Luc, who was actually a jerk and even more jealous than Tony (although only a few weeks ago mum had been praising this Jean-Luc for his reliability); how stupid Jo's landlord is because he evicted her after she got herself a nice little Rottweiler to keep her

company; how great her new friend Kiro from Sudan is because he immediately invited her to move into this empty room in the big flat he shares with his sister, though the rent my mother had to pay in the end has more than doubled. . . And so on. I don't even find it funny anymore: it's the same old story with endless bullshit details to cover up what everyone knows anyway.

But that doesn't mean we should *talk* about it, does it?

In a way, my family is simply behaving as usual: so long as Jo does her thing away from everyone's sight, she is basically supported. Even her suicide attempt when she was thirteen didn't really inspire my parents to consider that at least one of us might be unbearably unhappy. They were affected by the whole episode, of course—particularly since granny (mum's mother) was staying in G. for a few days, and had the honour of finding Jo lying on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night, screaming about big spiders climbing up her pyjamas. Supposedly my little sister had "accidentally" taken a tad too many pills to kill a throbbing headache. Right.

In the end, mum and dad took this as a sign of typical teenage angst. So they bought Jo some nice clothes and had her room refurnished. That's what I call a new beginning.

Little unhappy Jo. How I loved to see her cry, when we were kids. I fought her like hell. She always seemed like an obstacle in my way. Of course, she hated me just as passionately.

But for a while, way after her failed suicide and my memorable abortion (that pretty much sums up our adolescence), I actually admired Jo and had my go with the old "sisterly love" myth. I had just returned to Portugal after my adventurous year in faraway Belgium, when Jo was moving from G. to Lisbon, to

start her Business Administration degree. In the meantime mum and dad had bought the flat for the three of us, and we imagined that this would bring some great change to our lives.

Jo seemed like a real misfit, as compared to me. All of a sudden I considered her so cool. She knew all the "bad guys" in G., the kids from the poorest part of town, who sold all kinds of illegal chemicals and got into continual trouble with teachers and parents and the police. In big and chaotic Lisbon Jo was just as fearless. So I became her closest buddy, supporting her supposed sexual adventures and drug addiction—simply by participating in these exciting youthful activities.

The good old days of the kids' liberation movement!

During the first couple of months of our communal life in Lisbon, Jo and I used to go out every night: dressed up in our best hippie rags, high on hashish, anxious to meet all the other supposed freaks in the downtown bars. We bumped into all sorts of people, but I'm damned if I remember any conversation worth the bother.

The only excitement I experienced was getting the hash from a petty dealer in a dark corner, rolling joints in some crummy bar's toilet with my sister, and then smoking them with one or the other stranger who looked confused like ourselves. After that, everything would get just about as boring as usual.

Still, I felt so proud to be living on the other side of the law. Actually, I mainly accompanied Jo, who bought and consumed and sometimes even sold an admirable variety of drugs—claiming to get some kind of kick out of these thrilling activities that for some reason kept eluding me. I thought this would be great material for my future poems and all. I considered myself the intellectual in the drugs underworld—and hoped for deep

metaphysical conversations about the cathartic potentials of all the substances being traded around me. But then many of those adventures simply ended with people vomiting up their supper, or passing out in the middle of the street, or blowing a fuse over the most foolish matters—such as the previous weekend’s football scores or somebody’s lame remarks about the big arse of somebody else’s girlfriend.

Even the supposed criminals we got our drugs from were absolutely tedious characters, not at all cool and philosophically detached from society, like the Beats or something, as I had expected. Most of them watched TV all day, listened to preposterous pop songs about love and fun, dreamed of owning big cars, and in the evening had dinner with their mums. Just like everybody else.

Pretty soon I got fed-up with the whole scene and settled for more domestic habits. My sisters and I got ourselves some unfortunate new boyfriends and spent our days in that flat on the outskirts of Lisbon, sitting in front of the TV, eating pizza, and getting on each others’ nerves. There was nothing else to do, after all.

So much for liberation.

In the end, apart from a slight increase in the frequency of headaches and sleepless nights, none of those chemicals actually provided me with much relief. Little sister, on the other hand, faithfully continued her junkie habits. Though I don’t believe anymore that she gets much out of these hobbies. Why? Because there’s nothing really exciting about life. It’s just a painful drag, day after day.

But it did take me a while to arrive at such wisdom, dear reader.

Be that as it may, I have no objection to my little sister’s efforts to get her daily fix out there in the wild world. What I cannot endure is my mother’s neurotic chattering. Having to listen to her innocent accounts of all these apparently puzzling situations Jo gets herself into is just too much.

So I have begun my own private mutiny: after our last phone conversation, I sent mum a kitschy little postcard of a white kitten in the middle of a field of roses, announcing that from now on I didn’t want to talk on the phone more than once a month, because “we never have much to tell each other anyway, as all the family stories keep repeating themselves.”

This has caused quite a turmoil in the family—at least according to Bea’s account. My older and always reliable sister sent me this e-mail today:

What’s wrong with you? Do you have any idea how much you’ve hurt mum and dad with your stupid postcard? The last thing they need is another practical joke from you!

Of course, you’re not around to see how their health has been deteriorating. Mum’s low blood pressure gives her dizzy spells, the other day she almost fainted while cleaning up one of the cats’ litter trays, she was all alone at home and had a cake in the oven, the whole place could have caught fire while she lay there unconscious—can you imagine what risks she takes? And dad has been complaining of chest pain, mum worries that it might be his heart, he’s gained a lot of weight lately.

They’re getting old and tired, they’ve spent their lives working to provide us with all the comforts, and instead of being grateful, you scorn them.

Have you got no feelings at all?

I sincerely hope you will call mum immediately and apologize. We've had enough of your sarcasm. One would think your experience abroad would have made you more responsible, but you're just the same insensitive cynic. . . Mum worries so much about your well-being, all she asks for is a short talk once a week—is this such a great bother? Are your other activities so important that you can't care about the family, anymore?

We love you, dear Lou, but sometimes you can be a real bitch.

Good old Bea! Mum did a terrific job there to appeal to my bad conscience. Unfortunately, it won't do: my family simply wants to suck me into its endless dramas and unsolvable problems. I'm having enough difficulties dealing with my own existence.

Big sister may find it useful to treat my parents as if they didn't know what they're doing with themselves and their daughters. But I for once refuse to continue acting as if everything was fine and our family would manage. It won't—and honestly, I don't feel that sorry for us. We're all just terribly unhappy. Big deal.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

THICK SKIN

Posted: 12.04.200... , 13:58

I've posted some recent photos of myself, click [here](#) to check them out. Of course, they were taken before I got all covered with bruises. That bastard Jean-Luc almost killed me. I'm sure he believed I was dead after he beat me senseless. When I regained consciousness, he had already left the flat, so I managed to drag myself to the telephone and call Ahmed. He was a real friend, he picked me up immediately and drove me to an acquaintance of his who's a nurse. She checked me out, cleaned the cuts on my lips and around my swollen eyes, rubbed some soothing balm on my sore belly and back, and told me I was very lucky to not have any broken ribs or anything. But even now, one week after the incident, I still feel pain all over my body. Plus I'm limping a bit. Only a good shot of heroin can calm me down for a few hours.

Ahmed then dropped me off at Jasmin's, she put me up in her tiny apartment for a couple of days. They both made me promise that I wouldn't return to Jean-Luc. . . As if I was stupid! I never want to see that beast again. I'd press charges against him, if he didn't have enough evidence to frame me. Ahmed says I've got to keep it low for a while, let the thing cool down, forgive and forget. I'll never do that. For Ahmed's sake, I will simply ignore Jean-Luc. He actually tried to call me several times after the beating, but I didn't answer. Now he doesn't do it any-

more—Ahmed had a little talk with him. He made it clear to Jean-Luc that I'm no longer his property.

Ahmed swore he will protect me. I like him a lot, but I'm not sure I can trust anybody again. I can only rely on myself.

And perhaps Jasmin's kindness. We've actually kissed a bit—it was nice and gentle. I love sleeping with strong and confident guys, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate something lighter.

I've always liked women a lot, especially since my experience with Tania—a neighbour kid from my hometown G., with whom I slept when I was about fourteen. Tania was a year older, she was a wild thing, absolutely fearless and a real junkie. She couldn't get through the day without her fix. She called herself my "god-mother", because she was the one who first gave me a taste of the harder stuff, like heroin and cocaine. Before meeting her, I used to get high on a mixture of tranquillizers and alcohol, but they were fucking up my brains, I was developing all sorts of anxieties and paranoia. Tania showed me that the purer highs are much more fun. She also introduced me to the whole drug scene in G., everyone had great respect for her and all, she could stick up for herself and didn't let guys get close to her. She was only into women. I think I was genuinely in love with her for a while.

I was completely desolate when she died in a stupid car crash one night—she was only sixteen. Everybody claimed that it had been suicide: Tania drove straight into the opposite lane on the motorway not very far from G., smashing against a speeding truck. The guy accompanying her didn't survive either, and it was his car. But I don't believe Tania wanted to kill herself, she loved life, she would have gone on until old age. Her only problem was that she would nod out all the time when she was

on heroin, no matter where she was. She just had bad luck. I miss her like hell. She was a friend, a sister, a mother. In many ways, I'm reminded of her when I'm with Jasmin.

Now I'm out of Jasmin's place. This guy from Sudan called Kiro and his French wife Charlotte run a small, cheap hotel next to the harbour. They're letting me have a room for half the price, because they owe a lot to Ahmed. I've insisted on moving in with MadMax, my Rottweiler. He behaves like the sweetest little puppy around me, but groans and barks like a real killer when a stranger approaches. MadMax has been trained by a cousin of Ahmed's who breeds dogs for illegal fights. But I don't want him to participate in those things, they're violent and dangerous. I have grown very fond of my dog.

I'm slowly beginning to feel safe. Jean-Luc may have bruised my body, but my soul has remained untainted. In a couple of days I start working again, although my face is still not completely recovered. Ahmed assured me that some clients find this sexy, so I shouldn't worry much. He says I can't let men intimidate me just because Jean-Luc behaved so violently. Not everyone is such a monster.

Ahmed has actually invited me to accompany him to Holland, where he's got some business connections. If I like the whole scene, I can even hang out there for a while, see how I fit in. I think he wants me to get into dealing. If you behave properly and keep yourself under control, you can make a lot of money. A nice-looking, well-dressed young woman has more chances of passing the police unnoticed, he says.

He has told me lots of stories about all the trouble he got into with cops. Sometimes he was absolutely innocent, they just picked on him because of his race. I guess I'm lucky that my skin is white. In fact, I could pass for a typical French or even Ger-

man woman. I've got nice features and a decent posture. I can make these traits work in my favour.

The main rule is to not get hooked on the stuff—I can manage that. I've always been able to reduce my doses, I'm not the type to get out of my mind if I don't have a fix. When nothing else was available, I just took my old mixture of pills and vodka or whisky, plus some good hashish. Perhaps every now and then some ecstasy to cheer me up. But that shit gave me headaches after a few hours, probably because I involuntarily kept grinding my teeth in excitement. I nearly broke a tooth that way. I didn't even realize how much I had hurt my jaw until the next day. And my ex-boyfriend Tony almost had a stroke or something on an acid tab once, so after that we were reluctant to take them, you never know what kinds of chemicals they put into those things.

I have been consuming on a daily basis for some months now, but I'm sure I could stop if necessary. Particularly the cocaine has been very useful, it keeps my spirits up and allows me to deal with the clients in a much more relaxed way. Still, I can kick off that habit any time, I just need the right motivation.

I've always had a strong will. No drug has ever changed that. And no person, either. I can pull through, I have the strength to defend myself and my dignity. I'm a fighter, I fear nothing.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

MISSION ABROAD

Posted: 16.04.200... , 17:39

As an activist for freedom and equality, I knew that the Angolan struggle would not be over with the achievement of independence—this was just the first step in the right direction. We still had to defend our country from exploitative interests.

At the end of the 1970s a brutal civil war was instigated by UNITA, a radical movement whose leader wanted to form a separate Angolan republic around the diamond and gold mines. His only goal was fame and money, without the slightest concern for the people. Heavily supported by the South African army and even the American secret services, UNITA repeatedly invaded and ransacked villages and towns, destroyed crops, blew up bridges, storage dams and power stations.

The survivors of these bloody incursions left their homes by the thousands and sought refuge at the coast. Only the capital remained relatively safe. All over the country the production of basic necessities came to a standstill, diseases like malaria and cholera spread unhampered.

In order to end this conflict and secure Angola's prosperity, the MPLA had to remain militarily superior to UNITA. With the help of the Socialist Countries, our government strived to build up a qualified body of administrative and technical experts. As part of this project, my husband was eventually del-

egated to go to Europe, to further specialize in telecommunications: first in the German Democratic Republic, then the Czech Socialist Republic and finally the Soviet Union.

Martin was advised to take his family along—by now we had three children, the first generation of independent Angolans, our pride and hope for the future. I considered it my revolutionary duty to support my husband's efforts to get the best instruction in the world.

We arrived in East Berlin in 1986, with one mission: to gain as much knowledge as possible, to help our homeland flourish.

This included the education of our daughters, which had been neglected due to the civil war. Schools in Angola were totally unequipped (pupils often just sat on the floor or on empty milk powder cans, with no roof over their heads) and most public services were completely unreliable. Now in Europe my children could enjoy for the first time all the amenities of a developed and peaceful society, such as permanent running water and electricity, kindergartens and playgrounds, sports centres and public entertainments.

I encouraged my girls to study very hard, so they always managed to come top of the class—in spite of the language barriers and demanding curriculum. They easily adapted to any environment. It was such a joy to watch them unfold their talents: participating in athletic contests and school plays, receiving commendations for their good grades and prize-winning compositions. Many teachers were amazed that children coming from a war-torn country in Africa could achieve such high accomplishments! To this day all my daughters are very self-confident and diligent, which they certainly owe to their years of socialist education.

For Martin the experience in Europe was a dream come true. He could finally improve his skills by working with some of the best instructors in his field. We saw ourselves as representatives of the Anti-Colonial Revolution, promoting our country's possibilities in the international arena, but also acquiring lots of stimulation to improve it. I had visions of a future Angola where children could play in parks, the streets would be safe, public transports would function, medical treatment would be free for all, schools and universities open to everyone, poverty and vagrancy inexistent. I wanted my homeland to truly live up to its reputation as a model country of socialist orientation in Africa.

At the same time I missed Angola terribly. Fortunately, the Angolan embassies in Europe organized frequent gatherings, especially around important historical dates commemorating the struggle against colonialism. It was a wonderful occasion to meet our compatriots and exchange ideas.

These social events were also essential for all the Angolan children growing up in the socialist countries—they were reconnected with their origins and true African identity. Everyone would dress their kids in the Angolan Pioneers uniform, teach them traditional games and songs about liberation. This always reminded me of the early days of independence in Luanda, when people used every opportunity to celebrate and reaffirm their faith in the fight for a better world. As an Angolan lieutenant and petrochemical engineer told me in Moscow, “each one of us is a permanent freedom soldier”.

My husband's training was suddenly interrupted by the collapse of socialism in 1989—which made the Soviet Union cancel all support to the developing world. Hundreds of trainees, including ourselves, had to go back to Africa. We were totally surprised by this turn of events.

After years abroad, we would finally join our brothers and sisters again. But our mission was far from over: the historic transformations set off by the end of the Cold War represented a new beginning also for Africa. I felt eager to participate in the next great wave of reforms.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

COURAGE TO CHANGE

Posted: 19.04.200... , 15:54

I've finally broken up with Artur. He feels pretty bad, but I'm sure he will recover. He's convinced I dumped him because he got rejected by the sausage factory. It goes to show how little he actually knows me, even after all these years we've spent together.

In the meantime, Dirk has called me from Copenhagen. He's back in his girlfriend's flat and cannot bring himself to split from her. He wants to visit me in about two months, he's never been to Portugal and would love to be shown around Lisbon. I like the idea a lot. I hope by then he has sorted out his life.

I also had a long conversation with my mother on the phone yesterday. I finally told her about my problems with Artur. She was pretty supportive of my decision to finish my relationship. She had the impression that I was far too dependent on Artur, relying solely on his company and disregarding other people—even my lab colleagues. She's right, I had indeed limited myself to my boyfriend. But that hardly means I cannot live without him. On the contrary, it's as if only *now* I could start enjoying life.

This was the first honest talk I've had with mum in a long time. It was so nice to open up, I felt very close to her. I even confessed my desire to marry and have children—but at the same time I'm so afraid of committing myself to someone, only to regret it later. Mum confirmed that marriage isn't easy. In

fact, she has often thought of divorcing dad. I'm sure she doesn't really mean it. She'd be lost without him.

My parents were very much in love with each other in their youth, before my sisters and I were born. Mum admired dad's courage and determination. Of course, he felt exactly the same about her. Mum was so bright and beautiful, she could have made a successful career as a lawyer or even a politician, but unfortunately she had to drop these plans to accompany dad to Eastern Europe and concentrate on us kids. Now she's beginning to wonder if she has missed out on something. She often has the impression that we aren't grateful at all for the sacrifices she and dad have made for us.

I guess mum was particularly referring to Lou. My sister now refuses to talk to any of us on the phone. She has come up with some ludicrous story about needing time for herself and her work—and she wants us all to just leave her alone! This is so typical of Lou, she suffers from the illusion that she is the centre of the universe and everybody is just dying for her valuable contributions. Lou's problem is that everyone always pays so much attention to her.

Maybe she's been having trouble with her boyfriend or something. She's so difficult to put up with. As soon as something doesn't fit in her little scheme of things, she becomes aggressive. She doesn't scream and kick like Jo—she simply gets sarcastic. Sometimes I think this hurts even more. It certainly is devastating to mum.

At least Jo appears to have cheered up again. She has a new boyfriend—some Arab, I think—and seems to be pretty happy with him. Jo needs lots of variation. If you try to make her settle down and stick to a routine, she gets very unhappy. She has difficulties remaining attached only to one lover.

I used to consider this wrong, even immoral. But I'm not so sure anymore. I was totally devoted to Artur for years and in a way I regret it. During this time I met several men I liked, but I kept my distance because of my relationship. I was never the type to go out and betray my boyfriend. The thing with Suresh and Dirk in Spain was different. It wasn't physical, I genuinely felt drawn to them as persons. Plus I was already so fed up with Artur.

Now I just want to have some fun and not get so seriously involved with anyone. I feel like looking around, meeting new people, expanding my horizon a bit. That's why I've booked a flight to New York for my birthday in May—to meet Suresh, but also to see America. I'm very anxious, it will be my first big trip in years. I'm totally eager for adventure.

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PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

Posted: 23.04.200... , 12:05

Bad, bad Lou. I have been a most undutiful daughter. After the whole postcard scandal and the ridiculous offended e-mail by Bea (to which I didn't bother to reply), I actually *refused* to talk to mum on the phone *at all*...until further notice. I didn't even refer anymore to the whole "your-sister-Jo-is-doing-wonderfully-abroad" story, which seriously annoys me. I simply informed my mother via e-mail that I was far too concentrated on my work at the moment and couldn't waste even a minute on the phone...because it "disturbs my creative process".

This, in turn, inspired my entire family to write, urging me to stop behaving like a spoiled brat and do what mum wants without further complications. Actually, everyone *except* mum had to share their opinion with me—whereas she just sits back and pines to hear my voice. How touching. One would think that Jo's continual whining day and night would be enough, but no—mum wants all her daughters to behave that way. To show how much she loves us.

I honestly don't see what the problem is. I just want to be left alone for a while. Maybe in a few months or so I will actually be dying to hear from them again. At the moment I'm too busy doing nothing. Which requires lots of time and expertise. But go explain that to these event-oriented people. They seem

to thrive on being surrounded by trouble and nonsense. Real junk-addicts, in short.

In any case, it's been a great honour to find so much family-spam in my e-mail box. They've neatly distributed among themselves the task of appealing to me from several emotional angles. I wonder if there was an actual strategic meeting to discuss this brilliant attack, or if it all just happened to them, as usual.

Bea, for example, has taken up the scolding-role, which I must say fits her like a glove. She has accused me of insensitivity, self-importance, spitefulness, etc—obviously imagining that I have nothing better to do than “torturing poor mum”. And of course, she reminded me of the “sacrifices” my family is making to support my studies here in England. Interestingly enough, Bea never mentions all the money my parents are sending almost daily for my little sister's expensive chemicals, under the guise of one or the other “emergency”. But that is for a good cause, we will all agree. It's so much nicer to deal with an anaesthetized Jo.

Aunt Silvia, on the other hand, has assumed the defence-role. In her beautiful e-mail she explained just *why* my mother needs to hear from me every week: it helps her “sleep peacefully at night”, knowing I'm safe. The fact that mum gets continually startled out of her sweet dreams by Jo's phone calls is apparently less problematic.

Then there's uncle Mario, who's been assigned the worried-role. He tells me that “it isn't normal” to behave like this towards one's parents, and everyone is so surprised, since I've always been “such a good girl”. Therefore, he concludes, I must be “suffering from stress”—so he urges me to “seek some professional help”. Which is really interesting, as my family has always been against letting any outsider influence our neat dynamics: when my sister Jo had her little suicide attempt or Bea got utterly depressed about her miserable life, it was uncle Mario who most

vehemently claimed that “no professional can help, they're all charlatans”. How nice to see such progress in his opinions.

And finally, my dear dad—who usually has difficulties just uttering a clumsy “hello” on the phone—brilliantly performed the disappointed-role in a dramatic e-mail about how much it hurts to be treated with such contempt by his “favourite daughter”. That certainly is new. For years he has shown absolutely no appreciation for any of his children, nor the slightest concern about what we do, think, want... All of a sudden, he tells me he is “under shock” because I have “changed so much in the past few month”—to the point that he doesn't recognize the Lou he loves anymore. Now if this doesn't break your heart!

In the end, none of them actually bothered to ask *me* why I'm behaving this way. They seem to be content with this possibility of getting all tensed up over my moods and fits. Which is absolutely not in my interest.

In order to calm these people down, I've quickly sent a new e-mail to mum, apologizing for the “obvious misunderstanding” set off by my postcard and request for some peace of mind. I just needed to finish an urgent paper, I explained. But now “everything is great” again and I look forward to having our usual talk on the phone...but unfortunately only in about two weeks' time, since I'm off with Hal to a “Buddhist retreat” in Wales—where phone calls are excluded, “because of the meditation”.

Still, I promised to write as soon as I get there. And I will come back more relaxed and eager to indulge in our chats about all the wonderful achievements of all my family members. Never mind the repetitions.

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HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON
EVERYTHING

LIGHT UP THE SKY

Posted: 27.04.200... , 20:17

Hello, everyone. Today I'd like to share some tips on home-made fireworks I particularly enjoy. I'm only a moderate practitioner of pyrotechnics, but I keep an eye on new developments and the prettiest explosions.

I don't know how many of you have heard of the Flying Fish Fuse. It is a Chinese product that I'm sure will catch on very quickly in the West. In the sky it looks like little wobbly spheres that spread around in an irregular circle, resembling swimming fish. It has only recently appeared on the market, but many of the major pyrotechnics suppliers are selling it.

The fuse itself is made in the usual manner, though the powder composition is slightly different. The Chinese produce it in several colours: gold, silver, red and green. They're all very powerful and impressive. I imagine that an experienced pyrotechnics operator will easily manage to create variations of the original image—it all depends on your skill and interest! This is definitely a great toy and a wonderful show. I can only recommend it.

The second thing I would like to mention is the Firefly Star, which is my very favourite firework. In the sky it looks like a shooting star, with a silvery shimmering effect that flashes

on and off. It's very nice because the flashes are subtle and last relatively longer than many glitter-producing fireworks, which I don't consider as pretty.

To achieve the firefly effect you have to mix large flake aluminum in a charcoal star composition. The charcoal will cause golden sparks accompanying the silver flashes. For different firefly colours, you have to vary with the large particle aluminums and charcoals.

Here's the composition I normally use for my home-made firefly (in ounces):

Potassium Nitrate—49
 Air Float Charcoal—29
 Sulfur—9
 Dextrin—10
 36 Mesh Charcoal—11
 Firefly Aluminum—5

I've seen other people applying different amounts. For example, the professional display operators in charge of the New Year's fireworks here in my town added less dextrin. But for me, the above combination has always worked. Friends of mine have exhibited it at an Amateur Pyrotechnic Fair and received much praise.

I've been a great lover of firecrackers and fireworks ever since I was a little kid in Angola. I was very lucky to come into contact with a variety of techniques and tips by professionals from all over the world. The most valuable experiences I had were with the Red Army, during my stay in Smolensk, in the northwest of Russia—where I received training in the field of electronics. Particularly the guys in the Soviet Air Force, many of them engi-

neers just like me, were very innovative when it came to producing blasts. I experienced some of the most beautiful recreational explosions back then.

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TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

TEMPEST

Posted: 03.05.200... , 19:57

Jo was in Lisbon for a few days. She just got on everyone's nerves, screamed and accused us of all sorts of things—inclusively that we all wish she were dead or something. Then she returned to France. I'm still very confused about everything that's happened. It has affected all of us.

My sister arrived unannounced, she still has the keys to our flat and just barged in with her new boyfriend and dog while I was watching TV in the living-room. It was well past dinnertime. I immediately welcomed them and tried to be sociable, even though I was so startled and already in my pyjamas. They hardly paid any attention to me and locked themselves up in Jo's room. This kind of behaviour persisted throughout their stay.

That boyfriend of hers is absolutely despicable. I've never met anyone I disliked so much. Ahmed is a rude, sullen guy who only speaks a strange kind of French that nobody but Jo seems to understand. He didn't even try to establish any bonds with my parents and me, he simply stood around or sat next to Jo and watched everything intensely. It was really scary.

Also the Rottweiler, appropriately called MadMax, was awful. I'm usually very fond of dogs, but this one was so big and aggressive, he almost bit me on several occasions. Jo actually wanted to let MadMax sleep on the living-room couch, but I vehemently

opposed that. He would have ruined it completely—at least judging by the slippers, the TV remote control and some books in Lou’s room, which he managed to get hold of and chew up.

My parents came to Lisbon the day after Jo’s arrival and spent the weekend with us in the flat, trying to talk to my sister. It was all very uptight, nobody felt comfortable uttering anything with that boyfriend of hers staring at us in a menacing way. And Jo just blabbered away. She would switch from being hysterically enthusiastic about the “ideal life” she supposedly leads in France now, to getting aggressive towards my parents because they “never offer her any support”. She accused mum of always having preferred Lou and me, of having neglected her when she was a kid, of never having shown any appreciation for all her “efforts”. Which is totally untrue. Jo always did what she wanted, she knew no restrictions, and my mother worried sick about her when she was younger.

I don’t really understand why Jo went through the trouble of flying over, just to insult and abuse everyone. For a moment I wondered if she expected mum and dad to rescue her from Ahmed, maybe she was forced into a relationship with him, one hears about these things. Then again, she appears to like him a lot, she kept calling him “mon amour” and laughing at whatever he said.

Mum even organized a big Sunday lunch in our place and invited granny, uncle Mario and aunt Silvia. Fortunately, Ahmed behaved rather politely on that occasion. The dog was locked up in Jo’s room—and kept barking. This was the only time that Jo actually smiled. She seemed particularly happy to see granny. Maybe she misses home and just can’t admit it.

Everyone remarked that Jo’s dressing up very nicely, almost lady-like, with skirts and high heels and lipstick and designer handbag and all. I wouldn’t have recognized her if she passed

me in the street. I suppose she wants to appear more mature. Although I think she looked much nicer when she wasn’t so skinny.

I’m not sure my sister leads a very healthy life, she’s pale underneath the make-up. Maybe that’s how Ahmed likes his women—at least Jo appeared to continually ask for his approval. Her relationship with Tony was crazy enough, but this is really the utmost.

As soon as my parents drove back to G., my sister invited all her old friends over, the low-life guys from our neighbourhood here in Lisbon with whom she used to hang out. There was a continual coming and going of these people, plus lots of noise. When I tried to talk to Jo about this, she just yelled that I should mind my own business.

I actually feared that Jo and Ahmed were planning to stay for a longer period. My sister didn’t tell any of us when she was returning to France. But she probably took only a week off from work—six days after her arrival she called mum and dad to ask for money for her plane ticket. I think everyone was very relieved that she went off again.

This experience has affected me so deeply, I don’t know why. I wish my sister would have given me a chance to get closer to her. We had chatted on the phone a few times in the past month, she was always so nice and enthusiastic, I can’t understand what has changed. It’s as if she had a split personality.

Now I have to return to my work routine. I must finish my latest report and prove my dedication to professor Helder’s project. My problem is that I really don’t have much time left—in

less than a fortnight I'm flying to New York. That's actually my main priority at the moment. I'm anxious to get out of here, into a new world. I really need it.

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PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

PUTTING LITERATURE TO GOOD USE

Posted: 05.05.200. . . , 20:48

After around half a year of absence, I finally went to university today to attend a lecture on *Dream and Desire in Gothic Fiction*—because the professor bothered to write me an e-mail. She wondered if I had “dropped out” of her course, as I had failed to hand in an essay two months ago and had not shown up for so long. Honestly, I hadn't wasted another thought on this issue since I'd walked out of one of her extremely dull lectures some time in November. But there, just for the heck of it, I decided to pop by her office and have a little chit-chat.

Marianne (that's the professor's name) is head of the literature department. Advanced students who dream of “making it in academia” are eternally raving about her “intellectual accomplishments” and the “honour” of taking one of her courses. So far both aspects have eluded me. However, I convinced myself it was too early to just get chucked out of university. I still need this degree-story as an alibi for my escape from the real world.

Entering Marianne's office, I put on a most serious facial expression and sincerely apologized for my absence—but, I sighed, I was having “family difficulties”. I explained that my mother is “seriously ill” and I've been compelled to fly to Portugal four times in the past half year to be with her, which has “really messed up my work routine”. Therefore, I solemnly con-

cluded, I couldn't keep up with Marianne's course and would like to announce my withdrawal.

My professor is also a mother, she has a grown-up son in the Royal Air Force and a younger daughter who wants to become a model, even though she isn't all that pretty. I know this because Marianne indulges in telling us stories about her private life during her lectures. This seems to interest her more than gothic fiction. So my little family drama probably touched a nerve there: she immediately encouraged me to continue her course, even if it means skipping some lectures and delivering papers way past the deadline. This, she said, could actually relieve me of my private worries once in a while—and still allow me to invest in my degree without too much stress. I accepted her proposal.

However, I doubt I can stick to this nice arrangement. As soon as I sat down with her and a bunch of other students to discuss the “supernatural motifs” in some novel (which I haven't read), I realized why I had fled university in the first place: I simply can't stand these people.

On Marianne's command, the students pretended to discuss some character's “intense and hypnotic eyes” and the “interplay of light and shadow” and the “effect of short sentences on the plot structure” with extreme seriousness, as if anybody *cared* about an obscure novel's “binary tensions” and “aesthetic impact”. This enthusiasm didn't last long, though. Within fifteen minutes the whole room fell into an embarrassingly deep silence, during which a couple of students looked through their notes to find another brilliant remark to share with the rest of mankind, the others stared into space in a thoughtful way, and Marianne just sat there smiling at everyone and twisting and twirling her fake pearl necklace. Until she broke the silence by switching subjects. A real professional.

All of a sudden everybody was excitedly chattering about whether or not they were “afraid of ghosts”. Really. One girl told a fantastic story about her neighbour's alleged ability to perceive “dead souls” around her, and another girl swore that she had once talked to a “strange old man” as a kid, although nobody else in her family had seen him. How fascinating. Even good old Marianne happily chipped in with a comment about a TV show she watched the other day, in which “experts confirmed the possibility of an afterlife”. That's academia these days. I felt like I was back in granny's living-room.

After almost an hour of yapping about who sleeps with the bedside lamp on and who can tell scary stories, Marianne decided to finish the session, to everyone's relief. I rushed out of the room, anxious to return to my bed and remain there for at least another year, when I was intercepted by Stephen, who is also taking Marianne's course. In fact, he was the only male attending the lecture. I think I chatted once with him in October. The conversation must have been so dull that I immediately erased him from my mind.

In any case, Stephen seems to have a different opinion, at least judging by the enthusiasm with which he greeted me and even apologized for “not having remained in touch”. Whatever. He has actually been away—in Ghana—for the past six months, to gather material for his master's thesis on “trauma in postcolonial literature”. According to Stephen, the “personal contact” with the environment that produced many of the “marginal authors” his thesis is dealing with was “extremely moving” and taught him a great deal about “coming to terms with suffering”.

Now *there's* something we'd all like to learn, postcolonial or not! I asked him what the so-called marginal authors' trick actually was. It turns out that they “construct a magical uni-

verse full of opportunities to break free from reality's chains". It's amazing that Stephen had to travel all the way to Ghana to arrive at such a basic conclusion—when just reading a glossy magazine or switching on the TV here in the “civilized” world offers exactly that. His marginal authors are obviously going for the great mainstream.

Stephen then insisted on accompanying me a few steps, elbowing our way through the crowd of students heading for the cafeteria. We had to practically scream into each other's ear because of all the surrounding screeching voices, laughter and shouting. The poor chap must be really desperate to go through such an ordeal only to exchange a few words with me. And I didn't even reward him with a single smile.

Anyway, my unrequited friend proceeded to ask me what my master's thesis was all about. I told him I was planning to approach universal literary works from an ecological point of view. This really got his attention—“how interesting”, he said.

Yes, I said, because I am so concerned about our planet's future, I keep wondering what the literary establishment could do to help humankind deal with the depletion of basic fuel resources. So I've concluded that we should start collecting all the billions of books and printed matter which nobody but a few tedious scholars look at, in order to use them as burning material. Why wait until the next world war to blow up all the nonsense we've accumulated over the centuries? With a bit of luck and ingenuity, we could save some of the feeble trees still left standing and create free space in all the thousands of library buildings hardly used by anyone, while there are people freezing their arses off in the streets.

I assured Stephen that I didn't want to eliminate literature or anything. Since the whole thing can be saved into computer

chips for posterity, we wouldn't really be destroying any information. We'd merely give way to good old progress. I also told him I was planning to get some funding from one or the other company specialized in alternative fuels. They should develop techniques to extract valuable energy from the burning paper, while I would investigate which literary works should get incinerated—and why—from an aesthetic and functional point of view. *Theoria cum praxis*, I said.

Of course, I had no idea what I was talking about, dear reader. But it sure sounded silly. It wasn't even an original theory of mine (so much for creativity), I actually stole it from Nietzsche. Honestly. Though he might have meant it slightly more figuratively—but I wasn't in the mood to explain all this to my attentive listener.

Stephen started growing somewhat uncomfortable—still, he managed to mutter that it was “a very ambitious project” I had there. In other words, he got an inkling of how nutty I am. His mum would never approve of me. But instead of calling it a day, he invited me to “have a cup of coffee and discuss our projects further”. As if I had nothing better to do with my time. I told him I had to rush home to feed my pet spider.

Today I also had the pleasure of chatting with my mother again. She was most diplomatic and avoided discussing our recent strife. Instead, she was a bit “worried” about my flirtations with Buddhism, because “these people tend to gather in strange and dangerous sects”. Mum sure is well-informed. This gave me the chance to talk uninterruptedly for a few minutes, explaining to her what meditation's all about (though I've never really done it); and how tasty the veggie food was at the retreat; and how supportive Hal's parents are of his “metaphysical quests”,

because they understand the importance of “appeasing mind and body” to keep a “healthy balance” in life (his father being a doctor and all). And so on. Mum ended up concluding that “this kind of experience wouldn’t be bad for Bea”, who could also use some change to compensate for her break-up with Artur. So next time I go to a retreat, I could just as well drag my big sister along.

Jo didn’t pop up in the conversation at all. I suspect that mum was just waiting for me to show the slightest interest in my little sister’s fantastic adventures. But then she had to hang up—her mobile phone was ringing and she thought “it might be something important”. I wholeheartedly agreed and bid her farewell.

What a day! I’ve had more excitements than I can bear. I wonder how other people manage to continually get involved in all kinds of happenings, from their jobs to their connections with other boring bipeds around them. Buddha at least just sat in his lotus position and stared at nothingness. But even that appears to demand too big an effort.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

NIGHT VISITOR

Posted: 08.05.200... , 22:07

Just one more week and I’ll be off to America, into Suresh’s arms and to a vibrating, mysterious city. Suresh has already planned all kinds of activities for my stay in New York—he tells me every day how anxious he is to see me.

Meanwhile, I’m enjoying my newly acquired freedom: I go jogging every evening (when the sun is setting and it’s nice and cool), I go to museums and galleries if I feel like it, I’ve even been to a classical music concert—which I hadn’t done for ages, because Artur only liked mainstream pop music. Plus I’m much more sociable. The other day I went out for dinner and a movie with my lab colleagues, afterwards we ended up in a karaoke bar. I hadn’t been on a night out ever since I had met Artur.

Living alone is quite a pleasure, even though I feel unsafe now and then. Maybe I wouldn’t mind sharing the flat with a close friend. Yesterday I woke up in the middle of the night, as I heard noises coming from Jo’s room. This really scared me. I hid under my bed and was about to call the police from my mobile phone, when I clearly recognized Tony’s voice. He was yelling at someone. I barged out of my room, half relieved to confront a familiar face, and half angry that he had dared to invade my privacy.

Tony apologized for waking me up and reminded me that he still has the keys to the flat. He had just slipped in to pick

up some of his stuff left lying around in Jo's room. I also know the guy who was with him, it's his best friend Ziggy. I have no idea what they were looking for, but they had turned Jo's room upside down—which is a shame, because just two days earlier our charwoman had cleaned and ordered everything neatly. My sister had left the place in a mess. And her dog had peed on the door-frame several times. I asked Tony what he was missing, maybe I knew where it's been stored, but he totally evaded my question and said he had to go. They appeared to be in a rush.

Anyway, Tony returned this morning while I was having breakfast—it was already past ten (I'd overslept and decided to skip my morning session in the lab). He was much calmer and more polite. He explained that he had been looking for something very personal last night, something from his past.

We ended up having a long chat. I think he was happy to talk about Jo with someone he can trust. He recalled the times he took my sister to rock concerts and open-air festivals, and described how Jo got so drunk sometimes, he had to drag her unconscious to bed.

Tony is still very much in love with Jo. He even hopes she will eventually return to him. I didn't tell him that my sister had been here just a week ago—it would have caused a real chaos if Tony had met Ahmed.

I've seen Tony getting into fights before. One of them took place right here in our sitting room a couple of years ago: he and Jaime (that was Lou's boyfriend) had a big row over money or something, and before we knew it, they were rolling on the floor. They almost knocked down the TV set. Jo even helped Tony, trying to kick Jaime once or twice, but the whole thing was over when Lou emptied a bucket of water over them and threatened to call the police. That was shortly before she left to England.

I'm sure Tony would be pretty astonished if he saw how Ahmed treats my sister, he has her in the palm of his hand. It's actually embarrassing to even think about it. In terms of relationships, Jo's much worse off now. But she's still raving about her great life and her love for Ahmed! I don't know how anybody can put up with such a monster.

At least Tony is a decent person. I've always been very fond of him. I'm glad he dropped by. I even wanted to have lunch with him, but then I got a call from granny and aunt Silvia, inviting me to eat at their place (I don't know how they figured out that I hadn't left for university). I thought I should keep them company. Tony still went over to Jo's room to look for his personal something—by the time I was back from lunch, he had left.

I've realized recently that I always envied my sisters: Jo for her fearlessness and pragmatism, and Lou for the attention she got from everyone as a kid. Now both of them seem to grow sillier by the hour. Whatever Jo is doing in France, Lou can take her on any time.

According to mum, Lou has become a fanatic defender of meditation, vegetarianism and a monastic existence, after visiting a Buddhist community. All she wants now is to “turn her back on this world of dust” or something crazy like that. Of course, Lou has to exaggerate her anti-everything stance. So long as she can complain, she's happy. No wonder that an isolationist and self-absorbed sect appealed to her.

I also like Buddhism a lot, it can help you relax. When I went through my mild identity crisis at the age of nineteen (after dropping out of Medical school), I read a few books about using the teachings of Buddha and his followers to find motivation and good will in myself. I think these books eased my suffering, they showed me that everything was basically fine. The world

can be a beautiful place, if you look at it the right way. Nowhere did I find any reference or advice to lock yourself up in a monastery—quite the opposite, I was encouraged to enjoy life and the people around me.

What counts is inner peace, inner beauty. That's what Suresh keeps repeating in our chats. He has a wonderful stance towards life—spiritual and yet convivial. I look forward to learning more from him.

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DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

SERIOUS GAMES

Posted: 11.05.200... , 11:27

There are big things coming my way. Any minute now I'm leaving, probably for good. Ahmed says I have great chances of making it in Holland.

Jasmin got busted the other day, she was caught with loads of cocaine in her purse, the police claim she was dealing but I know she was just carrying it for someone else. Her business is sex, not drugs. Now she has to keep her mouth shut and Ahmed is seriously worried that she will start naming names. He doesn't trust her. Women, he says, always give in under pressure. He wants me out of the scene before things get heavy.

He's also pissed because a deal we had going in Portugal didn't really come through. He thinks I framed him—but that's not my style. I keep to my man, so long as he rewards me properly. If there's anyone to blame, it's Tony. I told Ahmed we shouldn't get my ex-boyfriend involved in the deal, but he just wouldn't listen.

The whole thing was perfectly planned: fly to Lisbon, collect the money my family had in a savings account for me, hide the acid tabs we brought along in my room, find somebody trustworthy to sell them for us in Portugal, make all the business arrangements with him—and split again. Ahmed had been

tricked into buying those tabs from a Vietnamese a few months ago, they're a real cheat, you just end up with a stomach ache and no trip. He wanted to get rid of them safely, from a distance. It's peanuts, anyway.

The main point was to get my money. It's all in Ahmed's hands now, my investment in our mutual projects. Ahmed has promised to make that money grow—if I stick to my part of the arrangement. Be a good girl, do what he says, never question his decisions, get my rewards. He gives me the best cocaine in the world, as much as I wish. He lets me take time off whenever I don't feel like meeting clients and going to parties. He buys me the nicest clothes.

That doesn't mean I don't have an opinion. I wanted to hire two of my neighbours in Lisbon to sell those tabs, they are decent guys who have stood by me on many occasions. Whereas Ahmed insisted on contacting Tony. He was convinced that my ex-boyfriend would be more manageable because of his hang-up with me.

But Tony didn't even manage to pick up the acid. First it took him ages to drop by my flat, and when he finally got there, he didn't find anything in my room. I keep having these paranoid thoughts, that my sister has discovered the tabs or something. On the other hand, Bea is so stupid, she wouldn't know what to make of them. She probably can't even tell the difference between coke and baking flour. I bet Tony decided to pocket all the money he makes selling the stuff to dim-witted kids at one or the other party, and screw Jo and Ahmed.

Now Ahmed keeps questioning *me* about my involvement in Tony's little scheme. I have the impression that this whole tabs-story was just a trap to see if I trick him. But I'm not that worried. I keep cool, I know I'm right. We've got the major trans-

actions still ahead of us, then I will prove to Ahmed how absolutely dependable I am. Little Jo doesn't backstab her friends.

I'm dead serious about becoming a pro. I'm sick of all the little con men, the squalor and the violence. I want the big money, the influential people and important places. I'm not going to crawl for a few grams of cocaine anymore. I'm not in the mood to fuck any slimy chap for a handful of euros. I was born for greater things. I've got the looks, the wits and the willingness. Soon Ahmed will be convinced of my abilities. Then I will become his number one—his woman for all important occasions.

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HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

LONG NIGHTMARE

Posted: 13.05.200... , 11:01

By the time we returned from Eastern Europe to Angola, in 1990, many things had changed drastically. Some people celebrated this as a “new independence”.

The Cubans had called off their decade-long cooperation with the MPLA and left the country along with the Russians and other experts. Simultaneously, the South African army and the US government withdrew their support of UNITA. We truly believed that without foreign intervention, our homeland might finally have a chance to opt for peace, after 30 years of war.

But instead, things just got worse day by day.

With the demise of socialism, Angola almost immediately turned to a kind of untamed market economy where only the most privileged government supporters and corrupt businessmen actually lived in affluence. For everyone employed in the public sector—including teachers, civil servants, doctors, engineers, technicians—the rampant inflation (sometimes going up to 1000 percent!) brought terrifying insecurity.

Because the Kwanza, the national currency, was hardly worth anything, the only way to acquire necessary foodstuffs, medicine and even official documents was to pay with American dollars—which most people simply had no access to. So

a booming black market developed, based solely on barter—where particularly six-packs of beer and soft drinks could be exchanged for just about anything. Those who were really desperate would steal and kill to get access to these goods. There were no limits.

Some friends of mine, who had for years fought for justice and equality, changed radically during this period. They became totally corrupt, backstabbing everybody, from the government down to the poor starving people. Their commitment to help the Angolan nation was forfeited for the sake of money. This was perhaps one of the greatest shocks I experienced. It marked the end of many long friendships.

Moral integrity and professional skills no longer counted. In spite of his high qualifications, my husband found it hard to earn a decent salary. The lack of money forced us to resort to quasi-criminal activities for survival. This was too degrading. I did not want my daughters to think that cheating was the only way to get by in this world.

Just as bad was the continual lack of water and electricity. Basic activities such as cooking and cleaning became a real toil. And especially at night, when it was important to keep the windows closed because of the malaria-infested mosquitoes, one really needed fans and air-conditioners. But the use of generators increased the risk of being attacked by bands of thieves. So we had to rely on soldiers to protect our home.

Another grave problem was the accumulated waste in the streets of Luanda. With the exception of a few areas that managed to remain relatively decent (including, fortunately, where we lived), the city was totally disintegrating. Apart from our neighbourhood and the guarded beaches next to big international hotels, there was really no place for our girls to play and

enjoy themselves. Even sending them to school was a dilemma, as hygienic conditions were appalling and other children carried all sorts of illnesses.

What worried me most, however, was the rising insecurity in Luanda—not only due to robberies and gang activities, but also based on political rivalries. Everyone felt constantly under siege. Thirty years of war had permeated the Angolan society so deeply that people had become accustomed to routine violence and murder. This was no environment to raise children.

Never before had I felt so apprehensive. We desperately needed to get our country's situation under control. Many of us felt that deep democratic reforms were the only chance for Angola to recover. When the MPLA and UNITA finally agreed upon a ceasefire in 1991, it gave everyone hope. For the first time since independence, our country could hold free elections.

The following year was full of optimism! People danced in the streets and vowed that the war should never return. The refugees began moving back inland to find surviving relatives and rebuild their villages and towns. International observers visited our country, marvelling at the peace process and all the new economic opportunities. Angola was hailed as a model for other African nations to adopt democratic means to settle differences.

However, this peaceful interlude ended only days after the elections in September 1992. Although the United Nations had closely monitored the process and ensured its fairness, UNITA simply refused to accept its overwhelming defeat! A new vicious conflict erupted with the announcement of the results.

This time even Luanda wasn't spared. Particularly in the poorer quarters, people were persecuted and brutally murdered because of their political affiliations. Again, just like in May

1977, loyalties were questioned and everybody feared to be considered a dissident. Those who talk about a bloodbath in the autumn of 1992 are not exaggerating.

One didn't dare to drive anywhere, because there were urban militias stopping cars at intersections, shooting down the passengers or burning them alive in the vehicles. Even Miramar, the best area by the sea with all the expensive hotels and embassies and politicians' mansions, was plagued by hostilities and assassinations. Some nights I had to lock myself up in a windowless cellar room with my daughters, while outside there was screaming and gunfire.

All my hopes to make this country a perfect home for future generations of Africans remained unfulfilled. I felt stuck in a horrible nightmare.

I didn't want to give up the fight. I was prepared to go on defending my homeland, in spite of all the risks. But I couldn't expose my daughters to such conditions anymore. For their sake, Martin and I were forced to drop our Angolan project. In December 1992, we fled to Portugal.

Leaving our dream behind was extremely difficult and traumatizing. I don't think I ever recovered from this loss. And yet, I'm convinced it was the right decision. I'm proud that my children are so safe and healthy now. What matters most is that they follow their own ideals with as much conviction as Martin and I defended ours.

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TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

SHOCK AND RAGE

Posted: 18.05.200. . . , 23:58

I just want to crawl up inside a hole and not be bothered. I'm tired of always caring about others, of never having a moment for myself. I feel more frustrated than I can express in words. Fortunately, Suresh isn't angry at all that I didn't manage to come to New York. He knows how much I'm suffering from this turn of events.

I was supposed to take off two days ago, on the sixteenth. But then mum called me up only hours before my flight, she was totally shattered because of my sister Jo. I instantly felt that something was about to ruin my plans.

The details were unclear: Jo was in jail in Amsterdam. According to her, it was all one huge misunderstanding and she just wanted to return home to the family. The Dutch police was willing to let her go on bail.

At first my mother thought of sending Lou over to Amsterdam, to get Jo out of prison and take her to the airport, perhaps even fly with her to Lisbon. But my sister simply *refused* to help! She had the audacity to blame my parents for Jo's imprisonment—therefore it would be their responsibility to pick up our kid sister! Lou accused our whole family of covering up Jo's drug addiction for nearly ten years. So maybe "it's time to change tactics", she said. Whatever that is supposed to mean.

In the end, I had to accompany mum to Amsterdam. I had no choice, I couldn't just abandon her at such a difficult moment. She was crying on the phone!

During our flight mum kept repeating that this was all Ahmed's fault and Jo should have never left Jean-Luc. However, none of us could really figure out how my sister got into such trouble. I was tremendously nervous about facing the Dutch police officers, but in the end everything went much smoother than we had imagined. We were even assured that Jo was simply "involved with the wrong people". Just as mum had suspected.

When Jo showed up, I could hardly recognize her, she was in such a miserable state. She was wearing some kind of tight and extremely short dress that didn't suit her at all, and high-heeled black boots. The left side of her face was covered with Band-Aid, there were bruises and scratches all over her arms. My mother became instantly pale, I thought she was about to have one of her dizzy spells. But she has a strong character—she soon recovered from the shock and we got into the taxi that had kindly been sent for by the police. For a few minutes nobody said a word, then Jo started talking uninterruptedly.

She seemed almost delirious, insulting Ahmed and "his pals", whom she blamed for her imprisonment. She told us in great detail something about a car crash that had caused her injuries, but it was totally confusing. I only understood that she had split from Ahmed—and all the money my parents had given her in Lisbon had disappeared. I felt completely shocked. But mum just sat there, holding Jo's hand and nodding, as if she were in a trance. I remained as quiet as a mouse. I just kept wishing I had booked my New York trip a few days earlier and could now be in the arms of Suresh. And I was totally disgusted by my sister's self-righteousness. She didn't even apologize for this

whole mess or thank mum and me for immediately coming to her rescue.

When we arrived in the hotel room, mum finally confronted Jo with what she had heard from Lou that morning. Jo absolutely denied that she was addicted to drugs. She was really offended! She's done a bit of cocaine now and then, but never got hooked. That's all behind her, she said. All she wanted was to return home, continue her degree and get a decent job.

Mum took Jo into her arms, they both cried. I actually admire my mother for her ability to forgive and forget. Jo doesn't even realize how lucky she is to have such a loving and supporting family.

The next day we flew back to Lisbon, late in the evening. We could have caught an earlier flight, but Jo needed her beloved MadMax. He had been left in Ricco's flat just before the accident. Ricco is an Italian friend of Ahmed's, living in a tenement at the northern edge of Amsterdam. It would have been easy to just take a taxi there on our way to the airport, but Jo was afraid to even get close to the area, because she might run into Ahmed. So she stayed behind in the hotel, while mum and I went to Ricco's place.

I was surprised that my mother had given in so easily to Jo's demands. Just before landing in Amsterdam, mum had said she never wanted to see that dog again. But I guess she felt sorry for MadMax. God knows what Ahmed would have done to him.

Ricco wasn't home, but his girlfriend (some Indonesian, I think) was very friendly and immediately agreed to let us take the dog. Fortunately, he was muzzled, so I was able to lead him by the leash and sit next to him in the taxi.

Here in Portugal things have settled down again. Jo is back in the flat with me and immediately got reunited with Tony. Her wounds are healing nicely, but she will probably have to live with a scar on her left cheek for the rest of her life. It actually looks like a knife or razor cut. But I didn't ask. Altogether, we have been fairly friendly towards each other. Jo certainly smiles more and screams less.

So everything's turned out fine. And yet, I feel an enormous rage. As usual, nobody bothered to ask me about *my* needs. Mum didn't even refer to my New York trip, again. I wonder if she has forgotten about it.

We're family, we're supposed to stick together. But right now I resent them all, which is a terrible thing. At least Suresh has been very supportive. We are already arranging a new meeting. This time I won't let anybody interfere. I'm not sure I will even inform them about my plans.

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PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

(ANTI)CLIMAX

Posted: 21.05.200. . . , 17:20

Just the other day my mother called me very early in the morning, to communicate in awe that Jo was in Amsterdam. . . in jail. Why my kid sister had ended up behind bars was a mystery to everyone. As far as mum knew, Jo was supposed to be in France, selling internet services from door to door. One has to admire Jo's ability to beautify her actual activities. I sure have a lot to learn from her.

In any case, lo and behold, suddenly Jo was stuck in a cage and needed someone to bail her out. Mum had decided to grant *me* the honour of playing the great rescuer, because "England is just around the corner from Amsterdam." Right.

I was caught totally off guard. I had imagined that Jo would come up with one or the other urgent little drama now and then, but somehow I also expected to remain as non-involved as possible.

So I was forced to abandon my defensive position and try out some frontal honesty, for a change. Some years ago it might have been useful to pretend we didn't know why Jo always needed so much extra cash, hung out with the most unappealing chaps, looked like an anaemic concentration camp inmate most of the time, had mood swings that made your typical manic-depressive seem like an amateur, and found everything apart from locking herself up in her room with aluminium foil an utter bore. In

short, we could all ignore the classic signs of an advanced addiction to hard drugs. It's been known to happen to some of the best families.

But now that Jo is in pretty serious trouble, maybe we could *for once* talk openly about her addictions, I proposed. What would we have to lose at this stage, anyway?

My concerned "revelation" of Jo's junkie habits didn't really shock anyone—but it didn't move them to reconsider their behaviour, either. You can't beat these people.

"Of course we know that Jo takes the occasional drug, who doesn't?"—mum immediately told me on the phone. In spite of this, they "need more proof before jumping to conclusions". After all, mum insisted, Jo had a "perfectly good job" in France, and was "trying very hard to become financially independent". Little sister's only problem were the "nasty people" she got involved with. They had "manipulated her because of her weak self-esteem". I sure love mum's profound psychological insights.

I advised her to contact an "expert" on junkie matters immediately. Perhaps an outsider's opinion would convince my family that the issue really was as grave as I was making it sound. Not that I'm mad about forcing my poor kid sister to go through detoxification in order to become a worthy citizen again. But I was sick of my mother's pressure to continue playing this silly little we-know-nothing-about-what-Jo-is-consuming game.

However, mum promptly rejected my idea with the all-knowing remark that "experts don't know anything about anything". I had never heard such nihilistic opinions out of my dear mother's mouth before—she sounded like me! It goes to show how versatile humans can be.

Be that as it may, mum and I kind of reached an agreement: she refused to go on discussing Jo's "alleged addictions" and I refused to fly over to Amsterdam. A fair deal. She hasn't called me again.

But these last few days have hardly been family-free, dear reader. Instead, I have been blessed with a nice e-mail from dad and a surprising phone call from good old Bea. As it turns out, things are "fine" again in the family. The only problem they have now is with *me*.

Dad is becoming a real pro in writing heart-rending e-mails, reminding me of my cruelty—especially towards my loving mother. According to him, my last conversation with mum had reduced her to tears. How moving. The fact that *she* has made me cry on countless occasions did not occur to him. I've actually lost track of all her unjust actions and offending words—one expects this from the subordinate child position. But as soon as the tables turn, these people get all upright.

I immediately wrote a most diplomatic reply to dad, apologizing for my "insensitivity". Then I proposed that we all consult a family therapist "to help us deal with our conflicts in a more civilized manner"—since we seem unable to communicate without "professional guidance". This is bound to shut him up for a while.

And Bea just phoned "to chat a bit about nothing in particular", as it had been ages since we'd had a "sisterly talk". What an appropriate timing. In the end, she was the one who blabbered for almost an hour about all the things that have been happening back in Lisbon for the past month or so. My big sister's life has lacked no excitements lately. She has hardly had time to catch her breath, being so overwhelmed by her new love (some Indian chap stuck in New York), plus the return of Jo and her entourage of junkies.

Big sister did try to swiftly draw me into a trap by asking if “it was really true” that Jo had consumed as many drugs as I had implied. You’d think they live on different planets. I repeated my idea to let an expert judge the situation. To this Bea replied that “an expert can’t help our family at all”. I suspect this is becoming their mantra.

What I most appreciated about Bea’s call was to learn that my parents had generously handed thousands of euros to Jo from some savings account, in order to “help her become independent”. And to everybody’s bafflement, the whole thing disappeared in a fortnight. Jo’s Arab ex-boyfriend is apparently being hunted down by the police—though not because of the money he has “stolen” from my family. What actually makes him such an attractive target for law enforcement, Bea didn’t know. Anyway, “it’s none of our business”, now that Jo is safely back at home.

Well, well. I don’t want to appear like an utterly material girl or anything, but I’m glad my parents can afford to throw away all that money on Jo’s drugs. There seems to be a fountain of wealth somewhere in the background. So even I may count on some of it trickling down on me. Though I will have to fight tooth and nail for it.

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HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN’S VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

UNDERWATER RULES

Posted: 24.05.200... , 19:01

Hello everyone! Today I’d like to talk about another great passion of mine: aquariums. I’ve been keeping all kinds of fish tanks at home for twenty years now and can really give some advice, particularly to beginners. Here are some of the most common mistakes I’ve seen people making:

New aquarium owners are usually very eager to add fish immediately after they’ve set up the tank. This is natural and understandable, but totally wrong. When you buy an aquarium, the water should stand for several days, to allow dissolved gases to escape and the pH to stabilize. Only then is it safe to introduce fish.

There’s also the problem of adding too many fish before the bacterial colonies are totally established in your tank! You should start with a couple of small fish. After that, you have to be observant and wait until the ammonia and nitrite levels have risen, then fallen to zero, before adding more fish. If you fail to do this, you will have dozens of dead fish in your tank after a very short time!

Now, even after you’ve gone through this initial stage successfully, it’s very common for new owners to overstock the aquarium. Fish are delicate creatures, they need space and the right amount of oxygen and nutrients, which only with time you

will learn to judge. Don't put the lives of entire schools of fish at risk by keeping more than you can manage—it's your own money that's going down the drain!

Additionally, new aquarium owners tend to choose fish that look attractive, without considering their environmental needs. Some fish may fight one another, or require very different water conditions. Either way, they should not be kept together. Ask professionals for advice before purchasing any fish, and always try to select peaceful types that thrive in similar water conditions!

But in case you do make the mistake of acquiring a highly aggressive individual specimen, I would recommend that you create a separate, smaller tank for it. I have observed that sometimes keeping the fish "in isolation" has made them milder after only a few weeks. This is my personal opinion, though, so you should still check what the experts have to say!

Finally, the most common mistake made by all fish owners is overfeeding. Fish are opportunistic and will seek food at all times. Just because they appear hungry, don't assume you must feed them. Give them no more than is completely consumed in five minutes.

Initially you should feed the fish only once a day. Also, during critical times when ammonia or nitrite levels are high, I would advise you to withhold feeding completely for a day or two. This will reduce the waste being produced. Even if it makes you apprehensive as a caring owner, I assure you that fish can easily manage up to several days without food, and not suffer ill effects.

These are my honest views about fish. They have helped me care for countless schools that were a pleasure to watch. I hope they can be helpful for other fish lovers, too.

// Comments: 8 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

Name: Joana D.

Age: 23

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Interests: house music, formula one, snooker, aphrodisiacs, daring fashion, Rottweilers

DUSTING MYSELF OFF

Posted: 27.05.200. . . , 22:26

I'm back home in Lisbon. But not for long. The last thing I need is to put up with Bea's finicky regime again, explain my decisions and actions to my parents, be friendly to bloody grandma and all. I just had to get away from Ahmed and the Dutch police. The whole transaction in Amsterdam was framed from the beginning, there was no way to avoid the cops. They were pretty nice, though. They gave me the option of staying on in jail and facing conviction for drugs trafficking, or testifying against Ahmed and returning to Portugal. I chose the latter—even if it meant asking my parents for help. I can handle my family, they're all suckers anyway.

Tony and I are together again, he told me no other woman can compare to me, he doesn't even mind the scar on my face. Well, I do.

I was lucky to get out of the whole mess with Ahmed with so little injuries. We were both drunk and high on speed, but that doesn't excuse his behaviour. Ahmed would have disfigured

me completely if I hadn't fought back. Fortunately MadMax was around, he really got agitated by my screams and turned against Ahmed. Mum is considering some plastic surgery to fix my left cheek, she says it's such a shame that my beautiful symmetric face is ruined. For the first time in my life she actually implied that she considers me prettier than Lou.

I'm not put down by all that's happened. I've learned a lot, I can establish an even better and truly independent business over here, with Tony's help. He has to leave all his prejudices behind if he really wants to make the big money. Then I can prove to my family that I don't need them anymore, I'll move into my own place and do what I want.

Tony and I are going to promote our services on the internet. Plus I still have valuable phone numbers from my time in the Algarve, I know enough sick bastards who pay good money for some kinky sexual performances. I'm an artist, I have no boundaries to my self-expression.

My sister Bea was so shocked when she saw me in my black leather outfit in Amsterdam, it made me laugh. Now she seems afraid of me, as if I had nothing better to do than threaten her pathetic existence. She also claims she can't move freely around the flat because of MadMax. But I keep it cool, I don't even raise my voice anymore, I just smile and explain that my dog is a bit insecure: as soon as he gets more familiarized with her he will quit snarling. I'm trying to convince Bea to take MadMax jogging with her in the park—that would get me rid of both for a while. I haven't managed to teach the dog to be quiet, sometimes even I get headaches.

Bea doesn't leave the flat at all these days. That's a real drag. She just sits in front of her laptop in the living room, chatting

on the internet. You can hear her fingers typing madly and her excited giggles. I suspect it's some guy. Nobody else could make her smile and blush so frequently. Sometimes she pretends to do important work for her research, but she doesn't fool me.

I don't give a damn, anyway. So long as I can do my thing, I'll let Bea do hers. She hasn't even complained about my friends coming over, although she always made a fuss about it before. Now she keeps her mouth shut, probably because she's afraid that I'll reveal her little sins. I've overheard Bea's evening phone calls with mum: she always brags that she has spent the day at university, when in fact she's been home all the time, staring at the TV or her computer screen. We've all got our secret pleasures.

Mum wants me to take up my stupid degree again, which I've promised to do in order to be left alone. Besides, there are lots of prospective clients in the field of Business Administration, so I could even take advantage of my diploma. I'm pretty intelligent, I can manage anything.

But if I ever get my hands on my sister Lou, I'll kill her, I swear. The little backstabbing bitch had the nerve to accuse me of being a junkie! As if taking some drugs for recreation were such a big deal. All the hotshots in the world are doing it—why shouldn't I? What's so special about moderation anyway, I don't want to live till I'm eighty to end up paralysed and senile like my granny.

What I do with my body is my business. But of course, Lou had to try to ruin my life—she's always looking for a chance to humiliate me. She even dared to play innocent, as if *she* had never touched drugs. She tries to convince everyone that she's all busy investing in her "academic career" in England, but I know my dear sister too well. She isn't doing anything. She never did. I'm sure she's an even bigger liar than I am.

Now I have to invest in the relationship with my parents, make them trust me again. If only they could see my potential, they would be much less judgemental. I'm just ahead of my time, that's all. They were once great revolutionaries—what I'm doing isn't all that different. Also I am fighting for freedom and independence. But I'm not doing it for any stinking nation. I'm doing it for myself.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

HOMELESS

Posted: 03.06.200... , 18:14

We arrived in Lisbon in 1992 with no more than a few suitcases. We felt like true refugees. At the customs we declared we had come to visit our relatives, even though Martin and I knew we would have to stay for an indefinitely long period—at least until the end of the war in Angola.

My mother took us into her house—which she shares with my brother, his wife and child. The atmosphere was as tense as usual. Although my father had been dead for years, his disappointment lingered on in the way my mother and brother treated me. I found myself unable to talk about my experiences and opinions.

Martin and I were already in our forties and were suddenly forced to start from scratch. We couldn't really count on any support, all our connections had been based in Angola. Although some of our friends and acquaintances from Luanda had also fled to Portugal, we were actually drifting apart—as our communal dream of liberation became more and more unattainable, we were left with nothing but frustration.

In spite of all this, I knew we were not alone. Thousands of Africans were living in Lisbon by the 1990s—there were whole neighbourhoods in and around the city with African music coming out of the open windows, the smell of traditional dishes fill-

ing the streets, the typical accents from Angola or Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Sao Tome. It would have been a small consolation for my husband and me to settle down close to our uprooted brothers and sisters. Plus it would have allowed our daughters to remain closely connected to their origins.

However, Martin was soon offered a good job in the east of Portugal. We moved to a small town and suddenly felt like strangers in a strange land! Even in the early 1990s, the interior of Portugal was pretty backward, it lacked cultural variety and open-mindedness. We had absolutely nothing in common with the inhabitants of G., but we did our best to get integrated in the community.

I learned a hard lesson during those first months in Portugal: not to speak about my past at all. Most people weren't interested in what had happened in Africa after 1975. They were basically of the opinion that decolonization had been a mistake! It was impossible to explain what my husband and I had fought for—everybody simply assumed we had gone to Angola to make money. Some people even seemed surprised that we didn't return loaded with gold and diamonds!

Although it took me quite some time to get used to the idea, I came to terms with living in the province. With the help of my mother, we were able to buy a small house. I started a catering activity at home, mainly baking cakes and pastry for local family parties or social gatherings. In this stable environment I could support my daughters as they went through the difficulties of adolescence.

I made as cosy a nest as possible for my family. Even my relationship with my mother and brother improved considerably over the years. Eventually I accepted that my deep connection to

Angola had to be put on hold. But I hope that some day I will be able to recover it. There is nothing I desire more than returning to my origins.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

HEROIC ATROCITIES

Posted: 06.06.200... , 21:35

Today I had another enlightening conversation with my dear flatmate Lara, whom I chanced upon as I sneaked into the kitchen to get myself a carrot and some olives. She had been watching TV all afternoon, in order to “divert her mind from the heavy work” at university. So she ended up catching some kind of documentary about the historical achievements of the Portuguese nation on this planet.

Lara was shocked that such a tiny country had been the so-called leader of the transatlantic slave trade in the 16th and 17th centuries, snatching black people by the millions out of Africa and transferring them under the most terrible conditions to the American continent—without even bothering to brainwash them with “liberty and opportunity”-myths. Incidentally, dear reader, my family’s supposed homeland Angola was the biggest provider of slaves in the whole world. So there’s a long tradition of commercial relations between Portugal and Angola.

Lara vaguely remembered having learned all this at school. But it was much more impressive to see it re-enacted on screen, with black actors faking the suffering of the slaves, and white actors putting their best effort to portray pure evil. Real Hollywood. Now my flatmate feels totally aware of “what really happened back then”.

She wanted to know if the Portuguese government had ever “officially apologized for all the atrocities” the nation had committed, as well as the “enduring trauma” it had inflicted on other human beings. I tried to explain to her that governments seem to have other priorities, and don’t even manage to apologize for the trouble they cause their own population.

In any case, I thought, those were the *heroic* times of the European race. No wonder there’s widespread focus on the accomplishments and a disregard for gory details. Or would Lara be willing to publicize the fact that she and I and all other cultured Europeans are descendants of the greatest killers that ever walked on Earth? You can’t build a civilization without sacrificing a few millions.

But I kept this pearl of wisdom to myself. Maybe one day she’ll catch a “documentary” on TV, explaining this trivial point with cute little coloured pictures and soft background music.

I’ve also been giving quite some thought to recent history—particularly concerning all the goodies my dear clan “imported” from Angola. Of course, what I’m most curious about is exactly how much of that initial looting might still be in my family’s hands. My future (if there’s any) is at stake here.

Whenever I bothered to listen to any of my relatives’ reminiscences, I got nothing but soppy fairy tales. Like most ex-colonialists, my family really rejoices in whining about all the wealth left behind when my grandparents (from mum’s as well as dad’s side) beat a hasty retreat from Angola in 1975—as if none of them had had the foresight and ample time to transfer back to Europe large parts of whatever they had accumulated in Africa. These people weren’t the lowest of the low: mum’s father was some high-ranking official in the colonial administration, and dad’s father coordinated transportations all over the country.

They must have been surrounded by briberies and learned to turn a blind eye to inconsistencies or “injustices”. How else can one keep such positions?

And then there’s my mother, continually bragging about all the “self-sacrifice” and “altruism” behind her decision to live in independent Angola—so one is forced to imagine that she and dad did *nothing but* charity work out there. Which is rather puzzling, considering that everybody who somehow managed in post-colonial Angola used any means to help nobody but *themselves* in getting their hands on the country’s riches. Even if they all claimed to be doing “everything for the Angolan people”. As usual.

So there are a few dissonances in my own flesh and blood’s commendable past. All the endeavours of my predecessors to first colonize and then “liberate and reconstruct” Angola must have paid off. Never mind who got traumatized in the process.

Incidentally, you’ll be happy to hear that now everything has returned to normal in my family, dear reader. At least if we trust mum’s account. Jo, who’s back home and has picked up her exciting Business Administration degree again, is doing “so much better”: she is calmer, friendlier, goes to university every day. She’s also reunited with her loving boyfriend Tony (who’s such a nice chap, after all), visits grandma every day, and of course talks to mum on the phone every evening. In short, little sister is clearly not consuming anything illegal, mum implied, so there are no longer “problems” to be discussed. Let bygones be bygones.

And since things have fundamentally settled, mum can concern herself with me again. She wanted to know when I would finally show up with my glorious master’s degree—as the term is drawing to an end and all. Well. . . I had to admit I wasn’t quite that far yet, and would need some more time to finish my thesis. In spite of all my hard work.

Mother didn't sound exceedingly shocked or anything. She obviously doesn't have that much faith in my academic brilliance. But she sternly complained about the "effort" my family has made to support my studies in England, without any "visible results".

Now my case has to be "carefully considered", mum said. Particularly since I've been "so uncooperative lately". Which means that my chances of getting further financial support aren't very high. My future prospects are beginning to look really cheery now.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

STEADY RECOVERY

Posted: 17.06.200. . . , 23:01

Re-evaluate, reform, recover. Dr. Valerie has taught me the three pillars of a balanced existence. It was wonderful to finally have a chance to practice these ideas. I feel reborn.

I joined one of Dr. Valerie's meditation groups last week in "Villa Esperança", a beautiful little holiday cottage up in the hilly north of Portugal. It was a nice, cosy environment, in spite of the heat. I felt very close to everyone. I didn't even mind sleeping on mattresses in one big room and sharing the bathroom with six women and two men—although I'm usually so fussy about having my private space. One of the aims of the retreat was precisely to learn to find peace in myself, not in the outside world.

All our days were carefully planned in order to make the best of our time—trying out different self-healing techniques, as well as achieving pure intimacy with others. We did yoga, massage therapy, group dances, water and fire rituals, role playing, hiking and lots of meditation. Twice a day we retired to a quiet place of our choice on the private grounds around "Villa Esperança", some acres of land with lots of rocks, a few olive trees, and a little artificial pond. We went deep into ourselves, eyes closed, for at least half an hour. It was extraordinary to feel the positive energies that came out of such a simple activity.

The most difficult aspect of the retreat were the long fasting periods. We were only allowed to have a bowl of cereals in the morning, a piece of fruit around lunchtime, a small snack in the evenings (some yoghurt or carrots or nuts and raisins). And we drank lots of herbal tea and lemonade. The first couple of days I felt really weak and about to faint. Still, I totally trusted Dr. Valerie, who's not only a highly qualified group therapist and yoga expert, but also a macrobiotic nutritionist. She explained that our bodies were full of nasty toxins, accumulated over years of bad eating habits and stress—now they were finally released through our fasting diet. So we should look at this pain we felt as something positive, a sign that we were slowly being healed. And indeed, after the initial impact, I felt absolutely great.

What I most appreciated was the meditation, plus the morning lectures on recovering our balance in life. Dr. Valerie is a true specialist and has written several books on the topic. I really liked her “triad approach” or “the three Rs”: *Re-evaluate* your life situation, your choices, responsibilities, desires and possibilities; *Reform* yourself by tossing aside all defeatist thoughts, pressures, guilt, and concentrating on the neglected positive aspects of your true self; finally, *Recover* your self-respect and self-confidence by listening to your inner voice and giving your best every day to establish real empathy with others. Once you start applying this formula to your life, you can tremendously improve both your love and family relationships, as well as your career.

First of all we were taught to free ourselves from unnecessary insecurities and inhibitions. I think this was a true challenge to most of us. In daily group activities, such as massage and dance projects, we were encouraged to appreciate physical contact, instead of hiding within ourselves—plus we shared our deepest desires and apprehensions in intensive encounter sessions. There was lots of crying, which was actually very nice.

I myself couldn't contain my tears when I told the group about my anxiety over my research, my obsessive terror of death ever since I experienced the war in Angola, or my difficulties in giving myself totally to a man—most likely because I fear being betrayed or abandoned. I felt uneasy and relieved at the same time, making these confessions publicly. I knew I had to be absolutely honest towards myself as well as the group.

Dr. Valerie confirmed that I have excessive qualms. She urged me to step out of my protective but stifling cocoon and face the outside world with more confidence. My fate is in my hands. I must learn to weave it wisely. She says that life is a delicate and valuable work of art. Therefore I should cherish the artist, the creator in me. I have great potential to become anything I wish, if only I let my primal energies run free.

After such revealing talks, we usually went hiking on the hills around the area—there was hardly any shade, only shrubbery and stones. Here we had the chance to get rid of all our negative energies through physical effort and sweating. In fact, Dr. Valerie strongly advised us to continue this kind of practice at home: first liberate your mind by facing your inner ghosts, then free your body by keeping it in motion almost to exhaustion. It was pretty hard to move at all, as we were so hungry most of the time. But we certainly got exhausted!

I also enjoyed meeting new people and becoming friends in only a few days. This had never happened to me in Lisbon, where I just feel lonely all the time. Most group members were in their thirties and forties. There was only one woman of my age, she came from the north, where she worked as a dentist's assistant. I was amazed that she has a ten-year-old son. She said this was sometimes a real inconvenience, since the child's father isn't around anymore to help her. But she totally agreed with Dr.

Valerie that motherhood is a true blessing and joy—it's just so difficult to meet a man who shares these notions. She found a lot of support and consolation in our group, though. Most of them were parents, either single or divorced.

My favourite acquaintance was actually Paulo, one of Dr. Valerie's assistants, who taught us ancient love and magic rituals. Although he's only about thirty, he has spent years traveling around Asia and South America. He picked up a lot of ideas from different cultures, which he considers more honest and pure. I will never forget the private talk we had one evening, when I told him about my relationship with Artur and cried a bit, and he stroked my hand to console me.

I would have liked to get closer to him but it didn't seem like the appropriate place to do it, plus it would have probably created a conflict between me and another woman who was also very keen on Paulo. She always tried to monopolize his attention, which was really nerveing. Still, I gave him my e-mail address and told him I would be very happy to meet again. I hope he picks up the cue. Normally I wouldn't have been so open about my desire, but after Dr. Valerie's lectures I realized that it is up to me to make my life more pleasant by pursuing my dreams.

Now I'm back in my flat in Lisbon. It was a bit strange to return to this world. In a way I think I would have gladly stayed on in "Villa Esperança", although I know that's not a practical solution for my life: I've got a lot of work to do at university, and I should take up the chances which are at hand. Plus it's nice to have privacy again, particularly my cosy bedroom. It's a great place to meditate, too.

The only thing I haven't kept faithful to are the eating habits. I actually stuffed myself with chocolate ice cream as soon as I arrived home, and now my stomach feels all queasy. That should

teach me a lesson: I must stay away from these toxic substances, even if my body is addicted to them. And from tomorrow on I'll be jogging again, every day, until exhaustion. I don't want to keep any negative energies in me any more. I want to enjoy life.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

CARPE DIEM!

Posted: 18.06.200... , 20:38

Tony and I had a fantastic time during the past week. We had the whole flat for ourselves and could receive our friends whenever we felt like it, make home videos, do some heroin and cocaine, get stupidly drunk, sleep all day long. I let MadMax stay in Lou's bedroom most of the time, it has this nice fluffy carpet which he really enjoys, and he only tore a few cushions to pieces.

I took the opportunity of going through Lou's stuff, to see if there was anything valuable—I only found a golden bracelet, a pair of pearl earrings my grandmother had given her as a birthday present when she turned fourteen, plus a couple of pretty jackets and skirts and shoes that mother had bought for her but she never wore. We'll hopefully manage to sell some of it. And Tony's even trying to get rid of her crappy books (the hardcovers) in one or the other second-hand bookstore, though we won't get much for them anyway.

I've also been keeping granny company and putting up with my cousin Carlito, who has school vacation. I can only endure them after I've smoked a few joints or taken some heroin—otherwise I have no patience for my grandma's continual complaints (she barely hears anything, so you can't even interrupt her), or my cousin's dirty jokes and attempts to squeeze my thighs. I use

every chance to sneak into uncle Mario's office when he's not around, to check out his valuable old watches collection and various African masques and statuettes, made of ivory or beautiful dark wood. Ever since I was a child I loved looking at these things, I know them all by heart. Now I have to find a way of snatching one or the other discreetly. Nobody notices them anymore, my uncle hardly ever uses his office—he prefers the bedroom, where he has his big flat-screen TV set.

Aunt Silvia is always inviting me for lunch and dinner, but I have absolutely no appetite. She complains that I'm so skinny and my hair looks dry and unhealthy. She's just jealous, she's getting fatter every day. I never liked aunt Silvia, she clearly prefers Bea and even Lou. And she always complains behind my back about Tony's shaved head and piercings. Sometimes, just to irritate her, I accept her invitations on condition that I can bring Tony along, because I know how much the sight of him bothers her. She thinks he's a neo-nazi.

Tony is the greatest. Sexy, tough, smart. And he's totally mad about me. My true twin soul. He really improved a lot while I was away—he's so mature now, so self-confident. He trusts me much more and never complains when he sees me flirting with other men.

He's a bit pissed off at the moment because his stupid mother found some cocaine in his room and flushed it down the toilet. Tony should have made her pay for it but he was afraid of getting into a conflict. So he just tried to convince her that he was keeping the stuff for a friend. I don't think his mum believed him, but it doesn't matter. She would never dare to do anything against Tony, he's her only child.

Now the party's over. Bea returned from her silly meditation retreat yesterday afternoon, even before I had time to clean up the mess all over the place. But she just locked herself up in her room and put on her "relaxation music".

I can't stand having my sister around, but I can't prevent her from being here, either. It would be so much nicer if I had the place for myself. I just hope Bea will really spend more time at university, as she claimed this morning. We had a friendly chat over breakfast, she didn't complain about the still unwashed dishes. She only mentioned how "light" she feels, or something, and described in detail some rituals that this guy Paulo had taught her. I almost started nodding out there over the kitchen table, as the heroin I'd taken was making me a bit too relaxed and I was so bored by Bea's stories. But I tried to maintain my composure—and my sister was completely absorbed in her idiotic stories, so she probably didn't notice anything unusual. She never does.

Tony and I have to concentrate on our next deal, we need to get money together to buy some coke, the prices have gone up this week because of some big police crackdown on a major transaction just outside Lisbon. This means we either get a bad product or nothing at all. In any case, I'm much more into heroin now. I do cocaine only to please Tony.

It's not that I have to consume every day, but I feel better if I do. It makes me enjoy life to the fullest. I'm just trying to be happy, like everybody else.

// Comments: 1 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

ULTIMATUM

Posted: 22.06.200... , 22:35

Mum and dad have finally reached a decision concerning my “complicated case”: they want me to come home as soon as the term is over, in order to “have a serious talk” about my “future options”.

What's there to talk about?

Well, mum is basically “fed-up” with my “nasty behaviour towards the family”. She won't tolerate this any longer. “Some things will have to change”, she announced. Mainly me, I guess. Only then can my parents determine whether to grant me another year in England or not.

Talk about a cul-de-sac.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

TOP PRIORITIES

Posted: 28.06.200... , 22:18

Following Dr. Valerie's advice, I have begun composing daily "duty lists"—so that I can always re-evaluate, reform and recover. On top of my list is the promise to be nice to people around me, have an open mind to their opinions, learn to love them for what they are (and not what I would like them to be), but at the same time remain faithful to my true self and my necessities.

Particularly my relationship with my mother needs a lot of work. As soon as I arrived from the retreat I called her up to confirm that everything was fine and I hadn't starved to death, as she feared. She hadn't been supportive at all of my idea to take off for a while, but she can't imagine how badly I needed it!

Mum was actually beginning to get on my nerves with all her expectations and complaints. I couldn't stand talking to her any more. I have to control these negative thoughts, I don't want to fight with anybody. I'm actually tired of all the confrontations permanently going on in my family. We should be helpful to each other.

That's why I'm also trying to get closer to my sister Jo. We have to make the best of sharing a flat. I think she's making tremendous efforts to keep a nice atmosphere at home. In fact, she's doing so much better ever since we picked her up from

Amsterdam. Jo has developed a healthier routine, she spends many afternoons and sometimes even whole evenings at university. Unfortunately she still invites her wasted neighbourhood friends, they're noisy and verbally aggressive. But at least they don't come over every single night. Maybe Jo is getting sick of them, she just doesn't have any other friends.

Altogether I can't complain about my sister—we've always had our differences, but I respect her personality. She can be so sweet when she's in a good mood. And Tony helps her lead a more balanced and productive life.

Mum would like me to keep an eye on every single movement of Jo's, whereas I think it's much better to let her do her thing, even if she sometimes has to fall and hurt herself. I cannot prevent that. I have enough difficulties just looking after myself. Jo is grown-up, she is free and quite able to create her very own work of art, as Dr. Valerie would put it.

Then there's my work, which I have neglected for so long. This was actually another of my mother's fears, that I would endanger my career by adopting Lou's fanatic notions of Buddhist seclusion or something. But my experience at the retreat has not been damaging to my professional life at all. Even though I took a short vacation without professor Helder's total approval, I've returned to the laboratory full of positive energies and constructive ideas for the team. Being a bacteriologist is certainly not the most exciting of activities, but it is useful and in many ways creative. I feel absolutely fulfilled in my function.

Finally, and probably most importantly, I want to find true love. I have to stop worrying about my looks. I've got intrinsic qualities, there are enough people who will appreciate me as I am. My profound spiritual connection with Suresh is a proof of

that. I sent him a long e-mail as soon as I arrived from "Villa Esperança", telling him how well I feel. In a way, it was thanks to him that I began exploring my true self.

Unfortunately, we are both too busy with our research at the moment and can't afford flying over the ocean either way, so we had to postpone our meeting. We can always chat on the internet, our connection is growing stronger every day. No distance can break that.

What's more, this morning I received a little surprise from fate: after a prolonged silence, Dirk wrote again announcing that he's coming to Portugal, if I'm still interested in seeing him. Of course I am! Whenever I think of the passion I experienced with him during the conference in Spain, I quiver with excitement.

Now I want to explore this primal energy in me. I want to give myself totally, without fears or hesitations. This is my absolute priority.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

HIGH POINT/LOW POINT

Posted: 03.07.200. . . , 20:38

We've finally started working independently, just posting ads on the internet. We've typed down a few words and pasted a couple of photos, using a specialized server. So we're already in the business. We get all kinds of freaks.

Tony's in charge of the negotiations. I usually talk to the client a bit on the mobile phone, check him out—if I think we can make a deal, I pass it to Tony and he can set the price. Some guys get intimidated as soon as they hear my boyfriend's voice, others are actually excited that I work with a male. We've already been invited to perform together—one client even wanted MadMax to be around. Now we're thinking of getting another woman to work with us, to have more variety. We'll probably invite our friend Ziggy's sister, she's cool and we can give her a bit of heroin for her services.

Now and then things become shaky and we get under real pressure: we receive no phone calls, which means we earn no money. That's a real drag, because we have to start thinking of what we can snatch and sell, without running unnecessary risks. We have no other options, I need at least one good shot of heroin per day just to keep me going. And I want more than that, I want to be high for a few hours.

I always wake up feeling sick as hell and need a fix, to get back to normal. This has been going on every day for almost a month. I don't even dare to imagine what it would mean to be without stuff when I feel shitty. So I make sure I save a bag or two for the next day. I only got into trouble once, a couple of days ago: Tony was too greedy and consumed our whole stock of drugs in the evening. The next morning there was nothing left for me, which made me furious. He knows I can't function properly without my first shot. I made him go out and get some heroin for me at once, it took him almost two hours to return, I thought I would die. I just lay in bed, sweating and heaving, my limbs ached so much I wanted to cry, but I didn't have the energy.

Tony claims he's not addicted but he's lying. So far he has never refused to accompany my smoking sessions. I still prefer smoking to injecting—I only use a syringe in the morning, to achieve a greater effect. The needle marks are beginning to show on my left arm, though. I've decided to cover them with a tattoo, I'll use dark colours, like purple and red and blue. I'd like to have a butterfly—or maybe a snake.

We also have our good days. I normally meet a client or two in the afternoon, in hotel rooms or at their place. After that Tony and I catch a taxi to our favourite dealer, buy a few bags of heroin, some hashish, maybe a bit of cocaine. If we're lucky, we can make all this last for a couple of days.

The only problem is working at night, when I prefer to be high at home. I try to select guys who are likely to be married and have to be with their wives by dinnertime or something. Altogether it's a great profession, it gives me freedom to do what I please, without any boss or taxes. Plus the pay is good—and I don't even have to wait until the end of the month. I can reap my rewards immediately. I think I could go on doing this for years to come, without ever getting bored. I like being naughty.

By the way, thanks for your sexy comment to my previous entry, Spike. I'm glad you appreciate my blog, and I'm grateful for your tips on where to get some good cocaine. But I've already got my dealers. And as I said before, I prefer heroin.

I can't complain, everything is working out great. Only the mornings are a real drag—but so long as I have enough heroin to keep me going, I'll be fine. In fact, I hadn't felt this good in a long long time.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

PURE PASSION

Posted: 05.07.200. . . , 01:08

Dirk is arriving soon, I can't wait to be with him. He's staying in Lisbon for about a week and then he wants to travel around a bit. He said it would be so nice if I could accompany him, but I've really got a lot of work to do in the lab, I'm not sure I can afford to take yet another vacation. I'll try to persuade him to stay longer.

I feel an unusual anxiety. I have absolutely no appetite, can hardly concentrate on my research, only dream about Dirk. Even my meditation efforts are continually interrupted by images of his beautiful face and body. It's silly, I know.

I thought I would never experience this sensation again. I've had it only once in my life, when I fell in love for the very first time. I was just fifteen years old.

There was this boy in my school in G., he was so gorgeous, every girl was mad about him. His name was Bernardo, he was already 18 and drove to school on a really cool motorbike that looked like a Harley Davidson but was something else. I wasn't even into motorbikes or anything, but Bernardo was really sexy, I thought whatever he did was amazing. He was in my class and I used to help him with homework or even whisper the answers during tests, so we kind of became close. That's when I started feeling funny every time he showed up. I'm sure I blushed when

he looked at me—it was quite embarrassing! I couldn't help it. I thought of nothing but his eyes and hands and voice for months.

Bernardo never paid much attention to me, at least not on the physical level. Back then my hips were already a bit large and I wore glasses. I wasn't ugly or anything. There were certainly many girls in my class who looked much less attractive than me. But of course Bernardo was the star of the school, all the perfect beauties were after him. To be honest, he treated them like meaningless sex objects, he had no respect for women. So I was glad that he considered me a friend and behaved very decently.

If he didn't turn up at school, which happened frequently, I felt unhappy. And when he failed the year again and I realized we weren't going to be in the same class anymore, I cried as if something terrible had happened to me. I didn't even care that I had been the best student in my year and all the teachers were so proud. I was miserable.

Mum was very critical of my feelings back then, she kept telling me that Bernardo was a loser, he would never love me, guys like him only wanted to use and hurt me. I was really shocked by mum's words—I had tried to keep my passion for Bernardo secret. I hadn't even told my girlfriends or sisters about my feelings: I knew everyone would laugh at me. But I had this diary under my mattress and every night I confessed my deepest feelings and desires. It was my most reliable friend.

Anyway, there was this one time the following year when Bernardo offered me a ride home on his motorbike. Although I was terrified of those things, I accepted, just to hold on tight to him. It was wonderful, I didn't even mind that we were rushing through our town at high speed (it seemed), I couldn't see or feel anything but him. When he dropped me off in front of our

house, Bernardo gave me a gentle peck on the cheek and said he really liked me. About a month later we kissed at a school party, outside in some dark corner—I let him run his hands all over my body and felt great. After that we didn't talk much.

Now Bernardo is married and has two children, I think. I haven't seen him for years but I know he still lives in G., with his wife's parents. Frankly, I don't find him all that attractive any more.

With Artur things were never like that. I respected him and enjoyed his company, but I wasn't overwhelmed by any physical sensation when we slept with each other. Not even in the beginning. It was okay, but not exceptional. My short experience with Dirk was completely different, it was pure energy. Maybe there can be no true love without that absolute, yet inexplicable connection between two people.

Finding your other half is a complicated process—sometimes it's so unrewarding that one might even settle for a less appealing companion. That's very frustrating. I made all the efforts to keep my relationship with Artur interesting: I tried to teach him to appreciate art and literature and even science, but in the end I failed. You can't transform people.

Dirk and I have many common ideas and interests, we are able to communicate on several levels. I'm very intrigued by his desire to travel, meet people and experience new sensations all the time, as he wrote to me in an e-mail. I think I also have a passion for discovery, maybe together we can develop it even further. Along with other passions that will surely arise again.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Posted: 12.07.200... , 18:19

I'm meeting a successful businessman tonight, he's taking me to a high society party in a famous posh club. I'm very excited. This client, he isn't like the others. He's invited me to accompany him as a friend. This is my night off, he said.

We first met some time ago in a hotel room. He wasn't able to perform sexually, he said he was under too much stress because of his work. He's a bit old, fiftyish or so. I think I would have been able to stimulate him, but he wasn't really interested. So we ended up just talking the whole afternoon. It was very nice, we drank some champagne, he made me laugh, recited verses by my favourite Brazilian poet, and told me stories about his kids and his ex-wife. He said I'm a bright girl, that's what he likes. Plus he thinks I'm beautiful.

Tony had a real fit when I told him I'm going out on my own and I'm not bringing back any money or drugs. I've been pretty tame lately but I've had enough, I need to meet new people, enjoy myself. I'm so sick of Tony, he's been nothing but an obstacle in my life, he backstabs me at every opportunity.

He's consistently trying to steal my heroin, going through my drawers and all, while I'm away working. But he refuses to admit it, he even accuses me of hallucinating when I insist that

one or the other heroin bag has disappeared! My dear boyfriend thinks I don't know him.

All I ask of Tony is that he learns to control his urges. I like to see my love happy and high, but he becomes my worst enemy when he takes away from me what *I* need to be happy. I have to do the work, expose myself to all the risks, whereas Tony can just collect the rewards. He claims he's entitled to consume his "fair share", since he's the one who has to sell the things we've been snatching from our families. Pah! We didn't even get much for the shit we stole. We always have to sell far below the real value because we get under so much pressure to make money.

I'm not fooled by Tony's fake morals. He's been injecting far more often than me. Honestly, he's beginning to disgust me. He's slackened so much in the last couple of weeks, I basically have to force him to take a shower and brush his teeth once in a while. If I weren't around, kicking his arse to get some money and restock our little medicine box, as I like to call it, Tony would spend his days in my bedroom, nodding out in front of the TV. Get a life!

This morning we ended up having a huge fight over my desire to get intimately connected with other men. All of a sudden Tony pretended that he cared about my sex life. We don't even sleep together anymore! It is my good right to get involved with a guy if I like him, without having to charge for it every time.

I don't make a secret of these things, I'm beyond that. Maybe if Tony could still make love to me, keep my mind entertained and cater to some of my basic emotional needs, I wouldn't have to go looking for someone else. I've got better things to do in life than settling for a second-rate partner. I told him I want a real man, someone who can protect me and provide for me. I'm sick of being a slave.

Tony got all furious, screamed a lot and insulted me like crazy, but he's such a wimp, he couldn't even raise his hand to hit me. So he just walked out of my flat, threatening never to return. Which would be fine, if he didn't owe me so much money. I'm sure he'll come crawling back really soon, anyway. I am his provider, not the other way round.

Fortunately, I've managed to keep most of my heroin neatly hidden from him and still had enough to get me comfortably high. Now I'm going to take a nice long bath, fix my hair, put on some makeup, select a sexy outfit and shoes. I want to look absolutely dashing tonight.

Somehow I'm relieved by this latest turn of events. I don't feel like continuing this business with Tony, I need to do my own independent thing, perhaps try out something new. I'm pretty creative and versatile, plus I look really attractive in a quirky way. Even Bea's new boyfriend, some Danish guy, said that. He's been hanging out with us for a few days now and took some pictures of me, just sitting around in the living room or at breakfast. He says I'm very photogenic—but I think that was just his excuse to flirt with me. I don't mind at all, he actually looks cute. He probably has a hang-up with fat women, that would explain why he feels drawn to somebody like Bea. And it's really annoying when he starts behaving like a clown, making all kinds of strange grimaces which are supposed to be funny but are mainly embarrassing—though my sister laughs all the time.

Anyway, Dirk says that there are many photographers looking for daring and unusual models who appreciate real art. In order to get connected with those people, I must move in a more exclusive scene. I have to get out of this hole.

I'm totally fed up with Portugal, everything's so small and petty. I want to check out other countries, explore my talents. Here I feel paralysed.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

THE PRICE OF AFFLUENCE

Posted: 15.07.200. . . , 13:59

Moving to Portugal was as painful to my daughters as it was to me. They were teenagers at the time and experienced a great cultural shock. I am ashamed to admit how much prejudice we had to contend with in our small town, G.: people called us “niggers” behind our backs, even though we are all perfectly white. My girls were actually asked by their schoolmates if they had ever had any direct contact with “real blacks”! They couldn't understand that all races were equal in independent Angola.

For quite some time, my daughters simply didn't know where they belonged. My youngest kid quickly picked up the typical accent and slang words used in G., but my other two kept their more musical and expansive Angolan accent. I think this is what made people call us “niggers”—we talked like the blacks they saw on TV, fighting the civil war.

Kids here grow up knowing no hardship or limits. I was very shocked when I was first confronted with this reality. I can guarantee that my daughters became more selfish as soon as we settled down in Portugal. It was a hard battle to keep them loyal to the values of decency and respect my husband and I had tried to instil in them.

Fortunately, they eventually grew out of their teenage foolishness—although the process was particularly difficult with

my youngest girl. Now they're all responsible young adults, able to deal with any difficulty. We have a wonderful, close relationship and can talk openly about everything.

Still, I do believe that, had there been a possibility to raise them further in Angola, my daughters would have found a way to channel their energy into more constructive activities and charitable principles, which they lacked here in Western Europe.

I'm sure many readers will agree that the world has become a much colder, emptier place. Of course, a lot of children can grow up in affluence, get a good education and a decent job—but they have lost all spiritual connection to each other, as well as their capacity to dream. One of the reasons why many places in the world are still so dramatically underdeveloped and oppressed is that people in more affluent societies don't care about anybody but themselves.

I only hope our descendants will soon realize that their passivity and nihilism will be of no help to future generations. Young people must fight for the answers of tomorrow, they need strong ideals and a genuine urge to attain them.

// Comments: 1 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

CLOSE UP

Posted: 17.07.200... , 22:56

Of course, even my stay in England wouldn't be complete without a typical "girl meets boy" story. So I've met one—János Széneky is the poor creature's name.

I didn't actually go out looking for anybody, mind you. But I have exposed myself to the world lately: I had some overdue books to return to the library. And as I was paying my fine, somebody behind me in the queue tapped me on the shoulder, produced a silly little smile and claimed that we kind of knew each other—or had in any case exchanged a word or two. Really? I couldn't remember where I had seen him before, but I liked his looks. What else can a gal hold on to these days?

I'm pretty demanding when it comes to appearance, dear reader. Most humans are absolutely unattractive to me. But János had a conspicuous sloppy quality, with his untidy hair and shabby jeans and SO WHAT? printed in big washed-out letters on his t-shirt. He kind of looked like *me*.

So I agreed to accompany him to the campus café, where I hadn't set foot for months. It was a real pain to sit there surrounded by happy young people celebrating summer, with their naked shoulders and perfumed armpits, half-visible push-up bras, exposed bellies and bare flabby legs. On top of this, we had

to put up with the loud pop music and giggle-giggle-giggles all over the place. János and I were off to a good start.

Then he wanted to buy me some ice cream. I told him I suffered from diabetes and was lactose intolerant. In fact, I added, I was intolerant of most things I saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. But he didn't seem to get it. So much for communication. Still, I thought I should give the guy a fair chance. At least it was a variation from my usual monologues.

János is Hungarian. His family left Budapest after the collapse of communism and settled down at Scotland's North Sea coast, where his father works for the booming oil industry. Oh boy, oh boy, could we share stories! After all, János and I have so much in common, from our socialist childhood to our displaced families' more or less close involvement with fossil fuels and all their implications. Yes, this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship—if anybody were interested in that at all.

For a moment I thought I had finally met someone with faint intellectual interests and thoughtful opinions. But in the end our conversation was as exciting as listening to my flatmates gossiping in the kitchen. János soliloquised about such fascinating issues as British politics and online computer games. He was quite disappointed that I don't even own a playstation.

I only managed to catch his attention when I mentioned *en passant* that I had lived in East Berlin for a while as a kid. As it turned out, his own dear mother is of German origin and still has relatives in West Berlin, whom János has visited several times. So I got to hear a long eulogy of this great city, its free spirit, cosmopolitan flair and all the wonderfully creative characters one meets everywhere. I had no idea what he was talking about. Call me nit-picking, but when I bother to roam a city, I

always bump into ugly blocks, dirty streets, blaring traffic and masses of miserable humans with shopping bags.

Anyway, János wanted to know how it had felt to live in “unfree” Berlin. “Didn't The Wall leave an indelible imprint on your memory?” he poetically asked.

Well, it certainly gave me something to remember. I told János about a nice Sunday afternoon in East Berlin, when mum and dad decided to go with their three little girls for an innocent walk to the famous Brandenburger Tor, dressed in our best outfits. We had been in the city for no more than a couple of days and were still expressing lots of “aws” and “ahs” about every little thing we saw and identified with Europe's beauty and culture, at least as compared to the African squalor. Dad thought it would be interesting to show his kids the “Antifascist Defence Wall”, as the Berlin Wall was officially called in the East, and explain how the city was divided in two and everything on the other side was corrupt and decadent—even though we were so small that we couldn't understand a word of what he was saying.

Unfortunately, the efficient East German border-guards watching the Wall found the whole show a bit less entertaining. They surrounded my family with submachine guns and big dogs, making a huge hullabaloo, threatening to shoot us down if we dared to take another step. They were convinced that we were East Germans trying to escape to the corrupted capitalist side.

I described to János how we were hurled into some kind of checkpoint barracks, where two armed chaps thoroughly studied our documents and another one yelled something at father—who seemed only able to repeat “we're comrades” or something in broken German and Russian alternately. All the while my kid sister Jo screamed in my mother's arms, whereas my older sister Bea and I silently held onto our dad's trousers. It then took about an hour for the authorities to clarify our situ-

ation and send somebody over from the Angolan embassy to shake hands with the guards and take us back home.

But I assured János that everyone had been most polite towards the end. In fact, after the initial shock, my sisters and I were given some lollipop and became much more comfortable with the situation. When the embassy representative picked us up, Jo was sitting on the lap of one of the guards, who was showing Bea and me how to operate an unloaded gun, making “bang-bang” sounds while pointing it at the other guards and our parents. This was nothing new to us kids, we were used to being surrounded by armed soldiers all the time in Angola. I had learned to regard them as nice and cooperative chaps, so long as they wore the proper uniform.

To all this János had only one thing to say: “Wow, cool!”

And then he recounted in length some horror movie about a city where all the police officers were being turned into zombies by an alien force, only to kidnap innocent citizens and turn *them* into zombies—until one heroic cop managed to break the spell with the help of a dissident alien woman. Yes, I certainly saw striking resemblances with reality.

János told me this was his favourite cult film and even invited me to watch it with him one of these days. He praised horror stories for their ability to make us “painfully aware of our fragility”. Really. He asked me if I also read or watch horror. Yes of course, I replied, every time I open a newspaper or step outside.

That profound conversation just about killed any enthusiasm I might have had for revealing my carefully preserved personality and sound opinions. János is much more dull and mainstream than I idealized—in spite of his tastefully selected

rebel-look-alike clothes and confident pseudo-radical posture, which I found so appealing.

As usual, I was fooled by an appearance. Isn't that what attraction is all about?

// Comments: 0 //

HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

WAR GAMES

Posted: 17.07.200... , 23:48

Hello everyone, today I'd like to share my views on radio controlled toys, one of my greatest passions. If you understand their basic mechanics and are experienced enough in the field of electronics, you can very well improve or even build your own toys, be it cars, ships, submarines, helicopters or tanks—there are no limits!

All radio controlled toys have three main parts:

- The Transmitter, which you hold in your hands to control the toy by sending radio waves to the receiver.
- The Receiver, basically an antenna and circuit board inside the toy that picks up the signals from the transmitter and activates the motors inside the toy, according to commands.
- One or more Motors, which turn the wheels, steer the toy, etc.

The circuit board inside your toy has several capacitors, resistors and diodes, as well as an internal circuit for the motors. The radio receiver, on the other hand, consists of a crystal that oscillates at a specific frequency, plus the inductors and an antenna. Finally, the electric motors receive power from batteries, while the flow is regulated by internal circuit. Most radio con-

trolled toys operate at 27 or 49 MHz, and manufacturers often provide the same model, say a racing car, with both frequency ranges, so that users can play with two toys simultaneously.

What actually happens when you use a radio controlled transmitter is as follows: you press a trigger to make the toy go forward (for example), which causes a pair of electrical contacts to touch, thus completing a trajectory connected to a specific pin of an integrated circuit in the transmitter. This sends a sequence of electrical pulses that alert the receiver to incoming information. These are basically bursts of radio waves. Now, your toy is constantly monitoring the radio frequency, so when the receiver picks up the radio bursts from the transmitter, it will send that signal to a filter—in order to block any other signals apart from the assigned frequency. What passes through that filter will then be converted into an electrical pulse sequence.

This sequence will in turn be sent to an integrated circuit in the toy itself, specialized in decoding—in order to start the appropriate motor, make it go forward or backward or whatever, in accordance with the amount of pulses. The motor's shaft has a gear on the end of it, so it doesn't connect directly to the axle. This makes the motor's speed lower but it increases the torque (the force causing rotation) and gives the toy adequate power.

If you're comfortable with integrated circuits, motors and radio signal transmission, you can be very innovative. For example, I've recently built myself a new tank that reproduces machine-gun sounds and even firing (with infra-red). I've got altogether four tanks with different radio frequencies, so that my friends and I can simulate battles!

I've always been enthusiastic about telecommunication technologies. I was very fortunate to specialize in that field and meet

some of the most famous scientists in the world. Particularly my visit to Kazakhstan, in the late 1980s, provided me with a rare opportunity to update my knowledge at the famous Baykonur Space Centre—which sent Laika and Gagarin on orbit around the Earth! You wouldn't believe the huge radars and long-range missiles I saw there!

But most of my practical experience with radio controlled devices I got in the Angolan battlefield. One of my functions was to deactivate antipersonnel land mines buried in the fields or on the roads, a most dangerous task. Antipersonnel mines nowadays are pretty small and consist mainly of plastic. This makes them inexpensive to produce, but the problem is that they can't be found with the traditional metal detector.

The Angolan interior is absolutely packed with mines, as many people probably know. Some of them were buried by the Angolan army, but others were put there by the enemy. I was in charge of finding only the latter, of course. This made the team I worked with (mostly Russians and Cubans) come up with ingenious tricks to perform the task without risking our lives!

We tried out several remote controlled small vehicles, equipped with lightweight tele-operated systems that could move over minefields without producing too much ground pressure (which would have set off the mines), and were able to detect objects underground. Unfortunately they didn't always function 100% accurately. We couldn't avoid provoking some explosions incidentally. And quite often it turned out that we had not even been deactivating enemy mines but our own! This was impossible to tell for sure beforehand, because most landmines from either side were buried in unmarked areas...

Anyway, this experience really helped me develop interesting concepts for small remote controlled vehicles, which I can

now construct for my own entertainment and the delight of many of my friends who are into such hobbies. We have the greatest fun setting up car races and tank battles. Sometimes I can even enjoy myself for hours on my own, experimenting with and improving my toys!

// Comments: 7 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

THIS GENERATION

Posted: 19.07.200... , 17:53

I would like to thank Dr. Mary Clark, the reader who kindly shared her comments with me. I don't fully agree with her views and will try to present my arguments.

I cannot see any contradiction in my claim that the shallow culture here in Portugal was more detrimental to my daughters' maturation process than anything they had experienced during their time in Africa.

Let me tell you one thing about Angola, Dr. Clark: when people have serious difficulties making it through the day, they develop a tremendous sense of solidarity. I tried to teach my daughters to never look down on other people, always lend a helping hand, learn to appreciate all kinds of beliefs and cultures. Angola was the perfect setting for them to put these ideals into practice: my girls were so integrated in the local community that they liked to consider themselves black; they donated toys and clothes to less privileged kids; and they had great respect for our servants, who came from poorer areas and mostly couldn't speak proper Portuguese.

I do not doubt that my girls are rather exceptional—they've had an extraordinary upbringing in so many different countries and circumstances.

Altogether, though, this generation makes me sad. I think the main blame must be put on the politicians, whose irresponsible governance in the past decades has been moved by nothing but self-interest. They have disappointed our children, making them lose all faith in the democratic values we fought for with such fervour and sacrifice.

My friends and I did everything we could to attain concrete goals—such as independence, freedom, cultural tolerance and social justice on a worldwide scale. Whereas kids now are either absolutely passive or gratuitously rebellious. They don't believe in anything, have no hopes or demands for the future, can't be bothered to help change society for the better. It seems to me sometimes that the great majority of youngsters has gone numb.

I observed these phenomena quite clearly in my own daughters. During their adolescence, they were often angry and revolted, but could find no objective reasons for their moods, and no way of channelling those feelings into something positive and constructive, like I had done in my youth. I tried to encourage my girls to get more involved in social issues. And yet, although they readily agreed that there was still a lot of ignorance, intolerance, injustice, inequality, even racism and sexism in Portuguese society, they reacted to it all with a defeatist shrug.

I fear that this is a widespread attitude in our children. So many of them end up wasting their youth on the wrong activities. I have seen young people here in G. getting their lives destroyed by aimlessness, drugs, reckless driving, vandalism, teenage pregnancy, unfinished high-school or university degrees. On top of that, most youngsters now claim to be depressed whenever things get a bit tough, instead of facing the challenge and looking ahead with confidence.

My daughters have fought very hard to overcome their adolescent crisis—they are motivated to continually improve their own lives, even if sometimes there are great obstacles in their way. More than anything, they realize that the world is open to them in ways my generation could only dream of. There are barely any frontiers or boundaries, although it still takes courage to go out there and thrive. But I am sure it is worth the effort.

Today's young adults should embrace the opportunities they are offered, instead of squandering their energies on trivial pursuits. I've done all I could to help my girls follow their dreams.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Posted: 20.07.200... , 11:27

I'm packing all my stuff to move out of this lovely campus flat, my bedroom is an even greater mess than usual. The university administration had communicated some months ago that by the end of July I was expected to leave their student residence, because they only put people up for two years. After that you're supposed to "give other students a chance" to live in these dreadful boxes. Fine by me.

Michelle and Kathy also have to go, so they've invited me to rent a small house with them and some other guy. I said I'm not really looking for another home at the moment. I've had it with these holes. All the places up for rent are crap anyway—that's why they're available, isn't it?

In the meantime, believe it or not, I've been to a party—with dear János. I'm appalled by the things one does in order to find "pleasure" in this world.

János asked me to accompany him to a "unique club" downtown, where "all the freaks" would show up. My friend assured me that everyone at this party was "different", but he couldn't really explain why. I thought I could just as well make sure I'm not missing out on anything. Maybe I *would* actually meet one or the other interesting character. Who knows? Foolish Lou. As

soon as I arrived at the club, it dawned upon me: really exceptional people, if they exist at all, don't go to parties.

Still, there I was, for better or for worse, surrounded by hundreds of happy-go-lucky humans passing off as freaks, getting desperately drunk, shaking and wiggling on the dance floor to the sound of some industrial-techno-world-music noise. According to János, this is “the latest trend” in the alternative scene. It goes to show how much I'm lagging behind culturally. They had even bothered to hire a real DJ to play this cacophony. His greatest feature was that every inch of his body appeared to be pierced. How unique. He kept yelling “oh, yeah!” in front of a huge banner saying “NON-STOP FUN!”, advertising some local bank that had sponsored this whole thing.

It was such a degrading show, I actually felt embarrassed for all these poor people, pretending to have the time of their lives, although obviously nothing was happening.

These details seemed to elude my partner, who told me it was a great party and could “only get better”—whatever that was supposed to mean. He offered me some sweet alcoholic drinks and urged me to take a puff from his “fantastic joint”, which I kindly refused by continually repeating “maybe later”. It was bad enough to endure the evening with all my senses alert. I felt no necessity to make myself stupid in the process.

We didn't really talk to anyone else. János introduced me to one or the other acquaintance, but nobody paid much attention. So we ended up standing there, in the middle of this lonely crowd, trying to develop a silly dialogue about whatever. The music was so loud that I couldn't hear most things János was saying, anyway. But I didn't bother to tell him to speak up.

Of course, in the midst of all this boredom, my friend had the brilliant idea of trying to kiss me. How depressing. I had to

step back and propose a walk outside, “in order to talk about this”. Talking is usually a wonderful discouragement for hasty physical intimacy, dear reader.

As soon as we were out in the street, there seemed to be nothing to say. So we walked in silence for quite some time, bumping into a few happy drunkards and hooligans, until János summoned up the courage to ask me if I enjoyed having sex altogether.

Ah, well. I told him I was a firm defender of self-sufficient sex: it's 100% safe, tremendously intimate, creative, unhampered. And the best thing is, you don't have to put up with another individual's ridiculous fantasies and demands and frustrations and failures. Although this was slightly offending to my listener's ego, he found it intriguing enough. He actually confessed that he had never heard a girl talk about masturbation—except on TV, of course.

János immediately presumed I had discovered the wonders of masturbation after some more or less satisfactory experiences with males. Not at all, my dear. I didn't just sit around waiting for some clumsy chap to teach me what I could and couldn't do with my body. I told János I had actually been “exploring myself” uninterruptedly since the age of four (as far as I remember), and had even dispensed with Freud's latency period. I was obviously a corrupt soul from early on.

But before the whole thing would begin to sound like a huge perversity—much to my audience's delight, no doubt—I added that I consider this sex business a minor necessity, a bit like eating. Only less pleasurable.

At this point János found it necessary to produce some psycho-banalities to explain away my “unusual behaviour”: I must have been “mistreated by men” and ended up “producing a defensive mechanism against sex,” he concluded. In fact, if only I

would “give him a chance”, he would prove to me that “nothing is better than the communion between the male and female body”. János has obviously been reading far too many books for frustrated women.

Thus we had arrived at the core of the discussion. The point of no return. But instead of trying to enlighten my friend with a few simple points about the uselessness of getting physically involved with another dull member of my species, I rather suggested returning to the party, having a drink and “relaxing a bit”. And as soon as we were close to the dance-floor, I announced that I had to go to the toilet, made a swift escape outside, and happily walked myself home.

A wonderful finale for an unforgettable party. And another botched relationship.

I’ve even dumped Hal recently, dear reader. Although my family had so kindly invited him to come with me to Lisbon. I explained to mum that Hal and I had been “drifting apart” lately. Isn’t this what usually happens in relationships? We’ve remained “good friends”, of course. Just not good enough to carry him along to Portugal. Still, I shall miss him, he was such a nice chap.

Mum was pretty disappointed, I think. After all, Hal was just about the utmost I could ever reach—a doctor’s son *and* a future architect! None of my other lovers ever came even remotely close to that.

Whatever. I’ve always been much more comfortable with my one-woman-show anyway. It just takes guts to admit it.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

PARTING IS SUCH SWEET SORROW...

Posted: 21.07.200. . . , 22:12

Dirk left three days ago, he’s on his way to La Coruna in Spain. I envy his courage to just leave everything behind and travel until he has no more money in his pocket. Although he’s also involved in a research project in Copenhagen, he actually suspended his work for the whole summer. He finds pleasure more important—as he repeatedly told me, life is what we make of it. Just like Dr. Valerie, Dirk encouraged me to enjoy myself without constant hesitation and guilt. I think I’ve made progress in the past month or so.

There are quite some differences between Dirk and me, maybe that’s what made us feel drawn to each other. I really appreciated his permanent good mood, his initiative to seek new adventures and sensations, his aesthetic sensitivity.

Dirk showed me lots of photos from his trips around the world: fishing for piranhas in Venezuela, visiting a natural reserve in Zambia, diving in the Red Sea. He has documented every single detail and was really enthusiastic about sharing this with me. He even went through the trouble of explaining the pictures he had taken of a crocodile from eight different perspectives, or photos of a waterfall in Brazil made from the exact same spot at sunrise, midday and sunset. He has a real talent, even though it sometimes got a bit repetitive.

I can't wait to see what he has captured from his stay here in Lisbon. He was constantly photographing my sister and me and even MadMax in our flat. Plus he took all his equipment in a heavy bag with him wherever he went.

Unfortunately, I had to show up in the lab every day for at least a few hours, so I couldn't accompany Dirk on his discovery of Lisbon, as he put it. But we always met for lunch, and in the evenings we went out to downtown restaurants and some night-clubs I'd never visited before. Only on the weekend I managed to accompany him to the beach. I hadn't been at the seaside for ages, my skin looked appallingly white for the season. It was a bit packed, but Dirk had the exact opposite opinion. He loves being among people—they make him feel alive. He actually ventured into the cold water while I did some jogging along the shore.

Dirk isn't into jogging or meditation, he considers these activities selfish, they alienate you from the rest of the world. I respect his opinion, but I disagree—I think he might be afraid to look deep into himself.

I just found it a bit disturbing that he got drunk in the evenings. He didn't become aggressive or anything, quite the opposite, he was friendly to everyone and made me laugh all the time. Still, it created a certain distance between us, because I'm not into alcohol at all. After a while I got rather bored hopping from one bar to the other, meeting all kinds of people but not really talking about anything. Dirk explained that it's part of the Danish culture for a man to drink a lot when he's happy—and he assured me, he was very happy with me.

It was much nicer when we were back in my flat, lying on my bed and talking about all kinds of strange theories concerning the universe and life. Or making love.

Dirk is really exceptional, I'm so glad I met him—and somewhat sad that he's gone again. He wants me to come to Denmark, he even thinks I should continue my research there. It's a tempting proposal, I can't deny it. But at the moment I just can't walk out on my family.

Yesterday my sister Jo was hospitalised. I found her unconscious on the bathroom floor way past midnight. There was nobody else around. For a moment I feared that Jo might be dead, but she still had a pulse. I tried not to panic. I immediately called an ambulance and accompanied my sister to the hospital. I phoned my parents on the way. They were absolutely shocked but managed to come to Lisbon at once.

Now Jo is doing better. She's still a bit weak and has to stay under observation for another day or two. The doctors told my parents she had nearly overdosed, and would have probably died if I hadn't got help in time. They found traces of heroin, cocaine and alcohol in her blood.

I don't understand how my sister could have done this to herself. She has no reason to resort to drugs, with such a happy and secure environment. I'm not totally prejudiced against drug addicts, some people lead really miserable lives, in awfully poor conditions, violent neighbourhoods and unstable homes—perhaps for them getting intoxicated is the only way to make it through the day. But Jo can have everything she wants. She's totally privileged and doesn't know how to appreciate it.

Mum blames me for what has happened, she says I should have paid more attention to my sister, instead of flirting around with Dirk. I feel bad about Jo. However, I don't think I'm responsible. I'm willing to do a lot for my family, but I've also got to look after my own interests. And I'm getting sick of always paying for Jo's misbehaviour.

This time she just went too far—that’s really her own fault. She should learn to crawl out of the hole she’s dug for herself. I can’t help her anymore, and I’m not willing to let her interfere with my priorities. I want a simple, normal life. For once and for all.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU’S CORNER

BACK TO THE EPICENTRE (HOLD TIGHT!)

Posted: 28.07.200... , 23:50

I’ve been in Lisbon for only a couple of days, and it already feels like an eternity. It’s almost as if I had never gone away—at least everyone treats me accordingly. No matter how much effort you put into rising above your kin, as soon as they catch you you’re back to zero.

I was picked up at the airport by mum and Bea. Mother immediately made unpleasant remarks about my “ragged clothes”, just because I was already wearing them two years ago. No wonder I drove Hal away, she wisely concluded, blaming my “difficult personality” for the fact that I had ended up alone again. “You threw away a wonderful chance to be happy,” she told me. Indeed.

I didn’t add much to this gracious sermon. I was absolutely numb from the sedative I had taken, in order to endure the whole London airport madness and the packed flight with all the fat tourists and loud Portuguese immigrant families making their way to the beloved homeland. I had swallowed just enough to make me pleasantly indifferent to the surrounding environment—which proved very useful also for the reunion with my family. I sure understand little Jo’s needs much better these days.

Speaking of the devil. As mum was driving us home through the infernal traffic and stifling heat (Bea insisted on not using the air-conditioning in the car, because her “Danish friend” said it’s bad for the environment), and I was marvelling at all the depressing new blocks sprouting up along the freeway, my interlocutors began an enlightening discussion about Jo’s recent imprisonment in a neat “rehabilitation centre” outside Lisbon. Which is just a euphemism for a detox clinic, of course. Mum and Bea told me all the details of Jo’s hospitalization after her mysterious collapse, and how “emotionally unstable” she had been ever since her “traumatic experiences” in France and Holland—so that even Tony, who’s such a nice chap, couldn’t help her much.

Even now the issue of my little sister’s drug addiction wasn’t broached. Apart from an almost imperceptible reference to some kind of overdose (at least according to the doctors, but of course “what do they know?”), which was brushed aside as an unimportant detail. Instead, mum decided to focus on Jo’s “bad gene”. She obviously keeps up with the latest developments in the world of science. No more talk about evil spirits or psychosis, finally we can make biology responsible for everything.

Believe it or not, the main person to blame here is...dear dad. This because mum suspects that Jo might have inherited some “inborn defect” from our uncle Salvador, dad’s younger brother who killed himself at the age of only twenty, while he was serving in the Portuguese armed forces in Mozambique. Although nobody really knows this character, as father never talks about his past, mum and Bea concluded in unison that uncle Salvador must have suffered from “profound mental disturbances” caused by some “genetic error”—and this curse had been passed on to poor little Jo.

I was amazed particularly about my sister Bea’s apparent agreement with such a loony theory, in spite of her supposed familiarity with the highly complex replicating mechanisms of molecular information. In fact, I often had difficulties distinguishing between mum’s and sister’s words. There’s nothing like a bad gene to reinforce everybody’s alliances.

Mum and Bea spoke with great relief about the “long rehabilitation process” at the clinic, which keeps its patients locked up for a minimum of one year. During this period they are taught to “control their urges”, by being permanently exposed to an army of psychiatrists and psychologists and social workers. According to big sister, all this is necessary in order to “help the patient behave correctly in society.” One wonders who is making sure that the rest of us “normals” out here meet those high standards.

Only later, in the privacy of my bedroom, Bea revealed the main reason behind Jo’s sudden need for “rehabilitation”: it was actually uncle Mario who pressured my parents to put our kid sister away, after she had stolen lots of things from granny’s place, including some of her very old jewellery and Krugerrand coins, and even grandfather’s valuable stamp collection. Bea’s explanation for this most unusual behaviour was that “Jo is seriously dysfunctional, probably a kleptomaniac”. This would explain “why she always needs to have everything she sees”. Right.

Meanwhile mum and dad have already shifted their attention to me and my “future options”. So this morning I introduced my new “academic project”, by proudly showing them an official letter written by none other than my professor Marianne.

Here’s what it said:

Dear Ms Louisa D. . . ,

It is with great pleasure that I communicate to you a personal invitation from Professor Nigel Harmsworth of the University of California, Berkeley, to join his course “Introduction to Metadiscursive Transversality—The Multireferential Literary Turn” at the Berkeley Summer School this August.

After an attentive reading of your outstanding essay “Dissonant Climaxes in the Early Works of Shakespeare and Byron—a Dialectic Comparison”, Professor Harmsworth feels that you are prepared to further develop your critical capacities in his course.

This is an honour for any serious student of literature, and would undoubtedly be of great profit to your promising academic work. I therefore urge you to take up this opportunity and wish you all the success.

Sincerely,

Prof. Marianne Forbes.

I explained to my parents that Professor Harmsworth is “one of the most influential literary critics in our times,” so being taught and even praised by him is a rare privilege among literature students. I also told them that Marianne had highly recommended Berkeley for its “innovative approaches” to literature.

Of course, I was talking absolute nonsense. Apart from one or the other superficial e-mail, Marianne has never ever written to me. I just took the liberty of composing a nice letter for myself—and signing it. As for Nigel Harmsworth, he actually does teach some kind of literature at Berkeley, but I know nothing about his work or relevance, and hadn’t even heard of him until I thoroughly looked through Berkeley’s staff directory. In any case, I can assure you that *he* cannot possibly have read an

essay of mine. I haven’t bothered to write any ever since I landed in England.

Minor details. The important thing is that there really is some kind of “summer school” at Berkeley and poor Harmsworth will be teaching one or the other platitude about literature, multireferential or not, to disinterested students. I collected all this information from the internet before producing my letter of invitation. I wanted to make my case absolutely watertight.

My parents agreed that studying in America wasn’t such a bad idea—so they would pay for my stay at Berkeley for the summer. However, mum hastened to add that this was a “big sacrifice” she again made for my education, as my family is experiencing such “financial difficulties”, what with my younger sister’s expensive recovery at the centre, and granny’s complicated illness, and even—imagine that—the “economic crisis” affecting all levels of Portuguese society.

The first thing I did after that friendly conversation was buying myself a plane ticket to San Francisco with mum’s credit card, before even this got endangered. But I don’t believe for a moment that mum and dad are as penniless as they claim to be. They probably just have different ideas about how to invest the family’s wealth.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

BALANCED

Posted: 02.08.200... , 00:27

I didn't tell Suresh about Dirk's visit. For some strange reason I felt like I was betraying Suresh's trust in me, although we are both free to do what we want. Our connection is more profound and beyond jealousy. But I didn't want to hurt him. Already in Spain I had refrained from telling him that I had spent a night with Dirk. It somehow seemed indecent to admit how easily I give in to my bodily urges. I feared that Suresh would consider me a superficial and easy woman. He's pretty critical of the importance we put to sex here in the West.

Anyway, Dirk doesn't know much about Suresh either—even though I briefly mentioned my “spiritual friend” and how dear he was to me. Dirk just told me he isn't into spirituality at all. He's very concerned with the here and now, he tries to make the best out of every concrete situation. I miss him a lot, and often regret that I didn't accompany him to Denmark.

In her books Dr. Valerie says it's important to follow our dreams, that's what makes life worth living. But she also advises us to be very careful about our priorities and not risk important connections or positions in life because of a passing whim. “Balance is the true secret of happiness”, she wrote.

So now I've decided to seriously concentrate on my career. Work is absolutely indispensable to maintain a healthy balance in life. I know how hazardous idleness can be. Whenever I don't occupy myself with well-defined and meaningful tasks, I become depressive and apathetic, my head gets filled up with negative thoughts. Plus I eat too much.

In November there's going to be a big international congress on industrial meat processing techniques in Germany, I'm participating with a paper of my own. This will be the first time that I actually address an audience of experts as representative of my research group. I'm pretty nervous about it, but also flattered that Professor Helder chose me to take up this task.

My paper has to be delivered by October, so I don't have much time to write it. I'm still very confused about some of the formulas we are using, as I often get contradictory results. On top of this, a Japanese research group has just published an article claiming that the approach groups like ours are using to the problem of bacteriological fermentation is completely fallacious. I don't agree with them, even though their arguments are well presented. Now I have to make an extra effort to prove them wrong. I'm very excited.

I'll spend the rest of the summer preparing my paper. I just hope I can keep a nice working environment at home, I don't feel like going to university every day in this heat! The flat is quite packed at the moment—my parents are here on vacation and my sister Lou is back from England. At least Jo isn't around anymore, she has to undergo treatment at a rehabilitation centre and will remain there for a while.

The centre charges a lot of money, but it promises satisfactory results. Of course, an absolute recovery depends very much on the patient's willingness to admit mistakes and change habits. The psychiatrist in charge of Jo's case says she's quite difficult.

I'm not surprised. Jo needs time to adapt to new environments, she doesn't like to follow strict routines and regulations. Maybe her current experience will help her understand that sometimes it's safer to play by the rules.

When my sister finally comes out, in a year or so, mum wants her to lead a stable life: no more all-night parties, no more strange people like those wasted neighbourhood friends of hers coming up to our flat, no more silly fights with her boyfriend. I'm totally supportive of these changes. Jo has behaved immaturely for far too long. It's time she sorts out her life.

I for once am proud to have found my balance. At last.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

Name: Joana D.

Age: 23

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Interests: rehabilitation, emotional balance, shopping, my family, my dog

BOTTOMLESS PIT

Posted: 06.08.200... , 22:48

Oh, my beloved freedom!

I've spent two weeks in hell. I would have gone nuts in that rehab centre, I swear. I was so happy when mother got me out of there, I cried like a child.

Now I want a real new beginning, without drugs, cheating or dirty business. I've discovered this power inside me: only I can help myself. For the past years I have lived in a nightmare. I was a junkie but couldn't admit it, I was very ill. I manipulated everyone around me, just to get high. I regret everything I've done—particularly against my mum and dad, who always stood by me. But I was confused and full of hatred, I couldn't see how blessed I've been. I have the best parents in the world.

I felt so hurt when my family forced me into rehab, yet I was much too weak to fight back. Mum actually suggested that uncle Mario would get the police involved if I didn't comply. So

I had no real choice. I don't want a police record, I've had it with the law.

As soon as I saw the centre—just some ugly buildings in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a eucalyptus forest outside Lisbon—I realized I was being imprisoned and punished for all the terrible things I had done. Mum promised to call and visit me as often as possible, but I was convinced that she just wanted to lock me away and forget about me. I wasn't even allowed to see anybody for at least a month. . . .and this was just the beginning of my torment.

They put me up in a tiny bedroom with another girl, we had to switch off the lights by 10 p.m. and couldn't listen to music or anything. Plus there was no TV in the room, and I can't fall asleep without watching TV. Then there were all these stupid "common decency rules": no makeup, no sleeveless or tight tops, no miniskirts and high heels, no hugging, no screaming, no swearing. It was like a concentration camp, there were always supervisors watching our every move and scolding us for doing things wrong or breaking the rules.

The rehab was supposed to be "open-minded" and "progressive", but it felt more like a mediaeval convent. I had to live with nine women, mostly around my age, in the main building. There were also five guys, but they stayed in a separate bungalow to avoid "night visits". We only met during meals and group therapy sessions, permanently surrounded by these stupid professionals. I really liked one guy who had been delivered to the clinic only shortly before me. We had some nice conversations whenever possible, but it was very difficult because flirting was forbidden. They considered it a sin to fall in love, or something. It was stifling. We were expected to behave like robots.

The first torture I had to undergo was the detoxification process. For days I felt on the verge of dying a horrible, painful death. They said my system needed to be purified, I had all these bad chemicals in my bloodstream and they were the cause of my addiction. Part of me knew this would release me from my sick habits. I kept telling myself that I had to be strong and the pain would go away soon. At times I felt so desperate, I wanted to bang my head against a wall just to relieve my suffering. But that would have led me directly to the real loony house. These people had all the power, I was at their mercy.

After a week I was clean and felt reborn. However, my ordeal was far from over. During my first "sober therapy session", the psychiatrist, Tobias, said they planned to keep me in rehab for at least twelve months! According to him, my disease isn't just a physical addiction to drugs, but above all a psychic disability. He promised that if I worked hard, participated in all the communal activities, cooperated with the therapeutic team, admitted my failures and personality flaws, and agreed to correct them with his help, time would pass much faster. As if he knew how *I* felt! Tobias was totally arrogant. He didn't really believe in my recovery, I know it. To him I was just another lost case. He thinks he's so superior to his patients.

On top of that, I couldn't really stand two girls who thought they were very experienced, just because they had been in treatment for several months—they kept telling everybody else what to do and how to behave. They were jealous of the attention I received from all the guys, so they indirectly insulted and even threatened me during the group sessions. I would have beaten them up if we hadn't been supervised continually.

And then there was the chief supervisor, Osvaldo, always with a stupid smirk on his fat sweaty face, ordering us around. We had to clean up the place ourselves and water the plants

outside and things like that. Plus we had to spend four hours a day doing what they called “therapeutic art”: learning to knit and draw and sculpt, all that crap. I’ve always hated those things, they’re for bored housewives.

I would have rather killed myself than put up with this regime. I need to be free, if I’m caged I wither away. I don’t want to be a junkie ever again, but I won’t be treated like a mental case either.

Anyway, nobody could have forced me to stay there, it’s ultimately the patient’s decision that counts. It’s not like in jail, where you have to do time. This is what Tobias told me: if I thought I couldn’t take it, I should just leave and not cause any problems. So one evening I totally broke down, insisting to go home. The supervisors and even my roommate tried to dissuade me. It was useless, I couldn’t stand another minute in that madhouse.

Fortunately, mum wasn’t against my decision. I know she immediately thought I had failed again, but she was also eager to get me out of there after I told her what terrible conditions I had to endure. Mum loves freedom just as much as I do. As we drove back to Lisbon we had a very honest talk. I promised I would never let her down again.

This is a new Jo, open towards myself and my loved ones. I want to face my weaknesses—and defeat them. I was a real druggie, and I’m not making a secret of it any more. One thing I learned at the centre is that once you hit the bottom of the pit, you have to admit you’ve got a serious problem. So I’ve told my family straightforward that I suffer from a cruel disease that makes me do bad things. I swore I would overcome this handicap. Particularly dad was very upset to hear me talk frankly about my addictions and all the years I’ve actually been consum-

ing. As if he didn’t really want to believe my words. But I’m being truthful for the first time in my life.

My main priority is to find a decent job. This way I can start saving money to pay my family back what I have stolen. I also want to spend as much time with them as possible, be helpful in every way I can. I’ve been such a selfish person. Finally I can correct that.

Above all, I need to keep some emotional balance. I’m sick of being dependent on men, they’re just as bad for my health as heroin. I want to be alone for a while, learn to communicate with myself. I’m going to prove to everybody that I’ve got great potential, I’m not wasted yet. I’m young, I’ve made a few mistakes but I can still correct them. Now I’m ready. I want to be normal.

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PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

ILLUMINATIONS

Posted: 07.08.200... , 20:11

Good old Jo! Just when everybody was beginning to feel relieved by her absence, little sister decided to turn up again. And in spite of mother's recent pledge to only take her youngest daughter back after she had undergone "profound treatment", Jo has happily settled again in our flat. Apart from some great speeches nothing much has really changed. Why should it?

Believe it or not, Jo claims to have seen the light while she was locked up for "rehabilitation"—and now she wants a new life. Who doesn't? It was quite amusing to witness the tragic confession of her "addiction illness" to my incredulous family, granny and uncle and aunty included, during our big Sunday meal. I hadn't had so much fun in a long time. My relatives were tremendously embarrassed by Jo's detailed account of her detoxification treatment at the clinic, and her tearful recollection of how utterly dependent she had become on heroin before our family "rescued" her. This basically ruined everyone's appetite.

Only aunt Silvia managed to break the uncomfortable silence that followed Jo's touching story. She mentioned the latest TV report about some important politician's teenage son who was addicted to amphetamines and had just been put away in some expensive clinic in Switzerland. Soon everybody overcame their shock and started chipping in with their own "I also know a famous addict"-stories.

We ended up covering the whole spectrum of Western culture—from the latest teeny music idols and glamorous top models to Jean-Paul Sartre. I added the latter, just to give the conversation some intellectual flair. Granny scored the least points in this fun family game, as she couldn't think of any junkie celebrity. And we all agreed that her old friend Dona Diana's daughter, a depressive anorectic who alternates between cocaine and laxatives in order to remain skinny, didn't really qualify as famous.

Who said that families don't talk about their problems?

Now we're reunited and redeemed. Even MadMax has visibly cheered up with Jo's return—he barks much more frequently. And my parents can endlessly discuss whether my little sister should take up a job or perhaps start a new university degree, in order to “get back on track”.

Also I have shown more dedication to the clan, by keeping old granny company. We've been taking some walks down memory lane, all the way to colonial Africa. Grandma really rejoiced to have somebody interested in her stories. Apparently, recalling the past is much more entertaining than always being alone in her bedroom with the TV on at full volume. But who has time to listen to granny?

I was surprised to find out that in spite of her advanced age, she actually has a pretty intact memory—or just powerful hallucinations. In any case, she was happy to answer a bunch of innocent questions concerning her adventurous escape from Angola in 1975.

Granny began with an emotionally charged criticism of the “irresponsible decolonization process” in Africa, blaming the

“infantile revolutionary ideals” of the sixties and seventies for the “downfall of a decent society” in Angola. According to her, giving autonomy and freedom to the blacks had been a “grave mistake”, because “they simply don't know how to govern themselves”—they just get drunk and sleep all day, she assured me.

And of course, people like my grandfather had “put a lot of effort into civilizing the country and making it grow”, only to have it all snatched away by “mindless rebels”. Granny talked of Angola as if it had been the promised land, where “blacks and whites coexisted peacefully”. So everything would have been fine if the colonial regime had continued eternally. “At least back then everybody got work and something to eat. What else could people ask for?”, she wondered. The wisdom of old age.

I nodded in extreme understanding and pitied her for all her suffering, particularly since our family hadn't managed to keep any of the fruits of their lifelong “hard labour” in the colony. Here, to my surprise, dear granny fervently disagreed: they might have lost quite something, but grandpa had seized at least a portion of their “entitlement”. After all, she said, they weren't stupid, were they?

So she proudly told me about this tremendous grey flannel suit grandpa wore, in spite of the unbearable heat, on their packed flight from Luanda to Lisbon in 1975—just shortly before Angola was passed on to mindlessness. It wasn't only a very elegant outfit, dear reader: it also had strings of diamonds sewn into its pleats.

Yes, some of the glitter of the glorious colonial times did manage to remain with my family. Of course, the diamonds weren't the only thing transferred to Portugal—they were just the more flashy side of grandpa's deserved “reward” for civilizing Africa.

However, granny wasn't in the mood to get into details. She did inform me, though, that grandfather had been "careful enough to make investments" even before he settled down in Lisbon. You're not a colonial administrator for nothing, are you?

Most of it was put into real estate, so there are a couple of buildings or so in Lisbon belonging to my dear kin. How reassuring. All this is fundamentally in granny's hands, as the lawful inheritor of her husband's little treasure. No wonder everyone is impatiently waiting for her to join the choir invisible.

Even more interesting was grandma's mention of a savings account our beloved grandfather had opened for each of his grandchildren as soon as they were born. He wanted his descendants to have some "future security". Plus he never had much faith in his son Mario's or his daughter Alda's ability to save any money themselves. What a wise chap! Fortunately, our granddad died of a heart attack when we were still pretty small, so he didn't get to see what became of us kids. As far as I remember from our occasional summer visits to Portugal, he was an arrogant bigmouth who always ridiculed our mother for her liberation ideals, and told stupid jokes about blacks and communists and prostitutes. A real colonial gentleman, in short.

Be that as it may, somewhere in a bank some dirty money has been growing specifically for my sisters and me and even our cousin Carlito, however worthless we all actually are. Talk about undeserved luck. I can't even begin to describe the storm this bit of information has set off in my brain: my parents have obviously omitted some interesting facts about our family's past.

So now that there are concrete investments to talk about, I guess dear Lou will once again have to become a pain in everybody's neck. But I'm willing to go through the hassle in order to

get my share of that grey flannel suit. I'm sick of being dependent on my parents' whims to get a meagre monthly allowance. For once I'm fighting for a noble cause: my liberation.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

NEW BEGINNING

Posted: 10.08.200... , 23:41

I've done lots of shopping downtown with mum. I needed smart clothes for my new life: no more miniskirts, provocative shoes, sexy lipstick colours. I want to look like a serious professional.

Mum has convinced me to start a new university degree, as it is now obvious how much I hate Business Administration. In many ways this influenced my negative outlook on life. Mum says we should choose a profession that brings us pleasure and fulfilment. This time I want to do something more creative, like web design or TV broadcasting. Since I can only apply for another degree next summer, I still have some time to ponder over my options. I'm pretty undecided. I think I would also love to work with children and handicapped people, make myself useful.

In the meantime, I've been to a job interview for a secretarial position at a notary's office. I put on a beautiful dark two-piece outfit and discreet high heels, my hair was caught in a bun and I had very light reddish-brown makeup on, just enhancing my beautiful eyelashes and delicate nose. The interview wasn't conducted by the notary himself, as I had expected, but by some middle-aged fat female assistant. It was immediately clear that she disliked me, even though I was very eloquent and convincing about my sense of responsibility and desire to improve myself continually.

I was pretty nervous, but I didn't show it. Only my hands kept shaking, which was a bit disturbing. Ever since I've stopped taking heroin I have quite some difficulty keeping still. Anyhow, the bloody cow turned me down with the excuse that I had not enough qualifications or experience—whereas the job-offer ad had clearly stated that beginners were welcome. She was threatened by my looks, obviously.

Mum thinks I should perhaps begin with simpler work, even if the salary might be less attractive. But I refuse all the crappy part-time occupations, like serving burgers at McDonald's or stacking up products in supermarkets. Those things are for teenagers and single mothers.

What I would really like is to start my own business, become a "young entrepreneur", it's the hottest thing at the moment. My dream is to have my own second-hand boutique. I've always wanted to do something with fashion. I've got what it takes to be an independent businesswoman. Even mum has praised my taste and great talent for selling. I'm very persuasive, I know how to appeal and cater to people's desires.

My new shrink, Amelia, says I'm too demanding and unrealistic. She can talk, she has a beautiful office downtown and gets all these messed up people who pay a lot of money for each appointment. What does she know about menial jobs?

I've seen her only twice and I already can't stand her—but my parents insisted that I need some professional help in order to keep my emotional balance. I know mum and dad would never make me go through this if they weren't pressured by uncle Mario and aunt Silvia. This really offends me, I don't want anyone interfering in my relationship with my parents. I gave in just to show how cooperative I am, even though I think these sessions are harmful to me.

Amelia is a real bitch. She doesn't believe that I have overcome my addiction, she says people like me are always falling back into their habits. And she's nosy, asking me all kinds of questions about my childhood and relationship to my parents and sisters. I don't see why I should tell anybody anything about my life. So I've decided to continue going there twice a week, to please my family, but I will only talk bullshit. That way I can at least have my fun.

I have no intention of exposing my family to Amelia's stupid judgements. I'm very happy to be surrounded by people who love and understand me. Just yesterday the whole clan had a big dinner at my favourite Chinese restaurant to celebrate my birthday. Everyone was really nice to me and supportive of my struggle against my illness. However, the whole mood of the evening was disturbed by Lou. As usual. She has done nothing but nagging my mother about money. There was this permanent tension, it almost ruined our dinner.

Because of Lou, mum has hardly had any real opportunity to be with me, although we had agreed to spend more time together, getting to know each other's feelings better. Mum only turns to me when my sister is not around. It's just like in my childhood, I have the impression that I'm second (or even third) choice. I don't understand why my parents give in to Lou so easily, while I have to fight hard to get just a bit of attention.

I hate my sister. She always treats me with contempt, even if surreptitiously: Lou never insults me directly or anything, she just looks at me with a cynical expression on her face. I'm not surprised, she does this to everybody. I think we're all very happy that she's leaving again.

Altogether things are much better now. I'm proud that I'm not a junkie anymore. Yet I often have to cry a lot over nothing. I feel so lonely at times. I can't find real pleasure in any of my old habits, such as watching action films and talk-shows, reading comics, buying pretty clothes. I need to have a few glasses of whisky or vodka to keep me in an acceptable mood. At least I can freely drink and smoke in front of my family, they don't mind. My aunt Silvia also smokes a lot and dad likes to have the occasional wee drop, even though it's bad for his stomach and heart. So these are habits we share, which is nice. I don't want to do things in secrecy anymore.

When I feel very unhappy and can't keep my tears, I hide in my bedroom. I don't want to upset anyone. I don't want them to think that there might be something wrong with me. I'm sick of being the freak in the family.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

VOODOO ECONOMICS

Posted: 11.08.200. . . , 23:58

Something tells me that mum regrets ever having summoned me home. We've been debating my "options" most thoroughly, mind you—but we had quite some difficulties reaching an agreement. Mother just complained that she and dad are almost broke—which is probably not far from the truth. So they obviously couldn't go on indefinitely wasting money on me. Whereas I promptly reminded mum of *grandpa's* saving funds, which I would now very much like to cash for my "further academic endeavours", as I put it.

This came as a bit of a shock. After a longish pause, mum actually confessed that grandpa's money had "already been spent". And before I could even express my surprise, she started whining about all the "traumas" she and dad have suffered because of Jo's "instability", Bea's lack of "proper support" for the family, and of course my "cruel and unfair demands".

All very true perhaps, but I couldn't see how such nastiness from their daughters could have inspired my parents to use up grandpa's special funds for his grandchildren. Why had that money never been mentioned to us before? Where had it all vanished, anyway? Had Ahmed been able to pocket not only Jo's but also my share? What about Bea's savings? I plagued mum with these questions, much to her dislike, of course. Mothers aren't used to being cross-examined by their children.

Still, nerved by my inquisitiveness, she ended up sharing some concrete details. A very simple story, in the end: those original lootings from Angola that dear grandfather had so considerably put aside for little Lou's future had in the meantime been siphoned off—by none other than my father. Nobody else in the clan is aware of this fact, it's been kept even more secret than my little sister's drug addiction.

Well, well. Talk about a Pandora's box.

Incidentally, father wasn't present during any of these solemn dialogues. He spends most of his time at shopping centres when he's in Lisbon, looking through his favourite fishing&hunting or electronic appliances shops, and going to the movies. All the better, otherwise the whole discussion would have led only to meaningless screams. This way mum had another chance of expressing her own dissatisfaction and powerlessness against her husband's whims. Mother is an expert in taking up the role of innocent bystander.

So what had dad done with my "future security"?

I immediately hinted at my usual suspicion that there might be some other woman, perhaps even a bunch of illegitimate children in the background. After all, any self-respecting male is deeply familiarized with these practices. But mother rejected this idea without any hesitation. She assured me that father had actually speculated on the stock market.

Back in the blissful days of the e-economy bubble, dad had become all excited at the prospect of "making money grow quickly", by buying and selling what he didn't understand to begin with. Mum described how dad had grown more and more addicted, "as if he were in a casino". And then, lo and behold, the little bubble burst and part of grandpa's fortune went hap-

pily down the drain—or more accurately, into some luckier investor's pocket.

That's what I call poetic justice.

Of course, that money had been stolen in the first place. That's what wealth is all about, isn't it? So I could hardly regret having lost it so "unfairly" before I even got to see it. Still, it's a bummer that specifically *my* nest egg had to be "reinvested" in this fashion. Incidentally, my sisters' funds haven't remained untouched either: Bea's share was used as deposit for our Lisbon flat, which is in big sister's name anyway. And Jo's was passed on to Ahmed. In fact, my little sister received just about the last money left over after father's fun experiences in the world of financial speculation.

In the face of this little domestic muddle, mum tried to console me with the promise that I could receive my share by the time I managed to finish my master's. This, she said, would make all my efforts "really worthwhile". How enticing.

Now, as much as I would like to understand my family's shortcomings and bad luck, it just seemed very unreasonable that both my sisters had been able to benefit from our clan's heroic colonial past, while I had to go on waiting for better days to come. In the meantime, even more of my grandparents' resources might be wasted on all kinds of funny investment schemes—from stock market gambling to illegal drugs.

So I wasn't particularly willing to give in, especially knowing that my dear relatives are still sitting pretty, with the real estate and whatever other unmentioned spoils hidden somewhere in my kin's memory bank. I actually proposed a "big family meeting" to discuss this issue. I'm sure granny would have enjoyed hearing that her son-in-law has been fumbling with her

grandchildren's money. However, mum found this idea slightly less appealing, because "it would only upset everyone". So she came up with a more friendly alternative. In the end, my parents made arrangements to transfer to my account just about enough money to allow me to survive humbly for the next couple of years.

A rather frail "future security", you might argue. But I was pretty relieved. Who can count on more than a temporary respite these days?

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

END OF TETHER

Posted: 15.08.200... , 17:57

Jo's back from the clinic and nothing has really changed. She behaved very nicely while my parents were around, but ever since they've returned to G., our flat here in Lisbon has become a mess. For two evenings in a row Jo has been partying with her disgusting neighbourhood pals in her room. She claims she wants to celebrate her freedom.

Even Tony dropped by yesterday, but my sister kicked him out after about half an hour of fighting. Jo told me she never wants to see him again, apparently it was Tony who convinced her to betray our family's trust by stealing all the valuables. She says he is the real junkie.

I don't know how to communicate with my sister—and I'm getting fed up with her. Sometimes I just want to pack my things and get out of here forever. Of course, mother expects me to support Jo. So I try hard to be nice and always ask my sister about her mood and therapy and job interviews and all that. I really don't get very friendly replies, it's as if Jo showed one happy side to my parents and a gloomy and aggressive side to me. Particularly last night she was behaving rather strange, a bit like in the old days, she was all hectic and talked incongruous things when I asked her to please put down the TV volume in her room.

I think Jo drinks too much. When I tried to point this out to mum, she just shrugged and assured me that a little drink can even be healthy. My parents sometimes have whisky in the evening, a leftover habit from their social life in Angola, when many of their friends from the party and the military would come over and discuss politics till very late. But Jo's case is different. She doesn't seem able to control herself at all. And I don't hear any serious conversations between her and her pals. They just scream and laugh a lot.

Maybe Jo still needs more time to be fully cured from her bad habits. She has been prescribed some antidepressants which appear to have a nice effect throughout most of the day. However, I wonder if she should be mixing those pills with alcohol—it doesn't look like a very nice combination.

At least I have to deal with only one sister now. Lou has finally left to America. She caused so much trouble, as if she had only come to Portugal to blackmail everybody in order to get money. I was really appalled. Lou had always pretended to be totally indifferent to possessions and material goods, she doesn't even dress up and go to parties like Jo.

Our parents have provided us with security throughout our lives, so that we would never have to worry about money. We're still young, we should concentrate on having healthy relationships with other people, developing our tastes, interests and social awareness. Money isn't everything.

What's really upsetting is poor granny's health. We had to take her to the hospital this morning because she complained of chest pain. Aunt Silvia feared it might be the beginning of a heart attack. At the hospital they confirmed that granny's blood pressure is very high and her life is endangered. We're all hoping that the doctors can do something for granny. Uncle Mario

and aunt Silvia had planned to spend next week with her at the seaside, which she absolutely loves. It would be such a shame if she missed it.

When I visited granny at lunchtime, she began to cry, she was afraid she might never return home. She spoke of waiting for the Lord to pick her up, or something—I think she was a bit delirious. The doctors say that we have to be prepared for everything, you never know with old people. This really puts me down, I'm so used to having granny around, I'm really very fond of her.

But I can hardly think about my family now. I feel like I've arrived at a vital crossroad and can't make up my mind about which way to take. Dr. Valerie wrote: "There are several stages in your life when you must make decisions that will change everything." I think I'm at one of those stages, and it's not such a nice feeling.

Yesterday I made a home pregnancy test and it came out positive. I'm still under shock. I love children and have for some time entertained the idea of having a baby, but I hadn't planned it to happen this way. I wanted to receive my doctorate before starting my own family. Now everything is different, there's this living being growing inside me. I'm terrified.

I didn't want to decide anything without consulting Dirk, who's back in Copenhagen. So I immediately wrote him an e-mail. He called me up some time in the afternoon—I was in the lab and had to interrupt my work. He wasn't friendly at all. At first I thought he was only a bit anxious. I tried to calm him down, so we could have a decent conversation about our options. However, Dirk refused to discuss anything, he just insisted on an abortion and offered to pay for it.

I explained that I understand his point, but this child is also mine, I don't know if I can simply kill it off like a laboratory mouse. Suddenly Dirk started calling me irresponsible and even crazy! He told me he never wanted children—even though just a few weeks ago, when we were lying in my bed, he had confessed his longing for a traditional marriage and a big family. I was absolutely crushed by his rudeness, he seemed like a totally different person. So I just hung up on him and went back to the lab.

Later in the evening Dirk sent an e-mail, apologizing for his behaviour. But he insisted that I should be reasonable and forget about this baby. After all, we're so far away from each other and don't even have a proper relationship. What kind of life would this be for a child? I know he's right, but every time I think of aborting I feel an immense sadness and can't contain my tears.

This is a totally new sensation, stronger than anything I've ever felt before. I'm completely transformed already. Whatever the outcome.

// Comments: 0 //

HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

PLAYING WITH FOOD

Posted: 18.08.200... , 16:41

Hello everyone! Today I feel a bit domestic, so I would like to share a few cooking tips with you. I will focus solely on fish, because many people disregard its nutritional value.

Fish is one of Earth's natural wonders, in my opinion. The light and delicate flesh is packed with protein, the anti-oxidant vitamin E and Omega-3 fatty acids. These elements help our hearts and immune system function properly.

In general, fish should be bought fresh and used no later than two days after purchase, as it deteriorates very quickly. Nothing is worse than the after-effects of eating non-fresh fish, so be careful! You can seriously damage your health if you don't follow simple hygienic rules. The exception is salted and dried fish, of which I will give one example here—but don't just buy any such delicacy, make sure you know and trust your fishmonger!

Here are two of my favourite fish recipes (you can look at pictures of the finished dishes by clicking [here](#)):

In Portugal nothing is more typical than codfish, or “Bacalhau”. This fish is much better for our health than red meat such as beef and pork—because of its excellent dietetic qualities. Cod has few calories, since it has no sugar, which makes it also

ideal for diabetics. It is a fatty fish but with the right kinds of fats: linoleic acid and Omega-3, both lowering the bad cholesterol. It is rich in calcium, thus preventing osteoporosis. And it contains phosphorus, which is essential for our brain.

Cod is caught mainly in the North Sea and can be bought all over Portugal in its dried and salted form, which preserves it. There is even a street in Lisbon made famous by all the stores selling cod and spreading its characteristic strong smell. This might be disturbing for foreigners, but it is very appealing to the Portuguese nose!

I've selected a simple recipe of oven-baked "Bacalhau". For four persons you will need two big pieces of cod, three garlic cloves, about one cup of olive oil and eight potatoes.

First of all, you have to soak the dried cod in water for some thirty-six hours, changing the water frequently. After that, the fish is ready to be placed on a baking tray. Now peel the potatoes and cut them in halves or quarters, then place them around the cod. Slice the garlic cloves finely and spread over the cod. Finally, pour the olive oil over the cod and potatoes.

Place in the oven at 230° C for 35-40 minutes (until everything is light brown). Add some olive oil over the cod and potatoes at least twice during the baking process. It's delicious and good for you!

Now, from Germany I have brought an even more mouth-watering recipe, using trout. This is one of the most appreciated sorts of fish in the world, I believe. It is low in fat, with high levels of A and B vitamins, calcium, selenium and the vital Omega-3. It is also quick and easy to cook, as well as being very versatile.

One of the nicest things about the trout is that you can catch it yourself. I have the good fortune of belonging to a great fishing club in my area. In spring we held the annual trout-fishing contest, which drew dozens of participants to the artificial lake outside our town. Some guys came from far away, our club has such a good reputation. There were several mighty trout, raised in captivity and especially added to our lake for this occasion. One of them weighed more than 8 kg! I made it to the top 10 rank and won a brand new fly-fishing equipment. Plus I took quite some fresh trout back home!

For the following recipe you will need one big cup of typical German "Sauerkraut" (nowadays you can easily buy this delicacy in tins from German supermarket chains anywhere in Europe), plus one minced green onion, a quarter cup of bread crumbs, two tablespoons of green pepper, a quarter cup of small diced mushrooms (preferably fresh), four boned whole trout, two tablespoons of whipping cream, some lemon juice and vegetable oil, one tablespoon of medium hot mustard, salt and pepper.

Start by mixing the sauerkraut, onion, crumbs, green pepper and mushrooms in a small bowl. Then place an equal portion of the mixture onto one side of each fish. Fold the trout to enclose the filling, and lay them on an oiled baking tray. Bake at 200°C for about twenty minutes. Whisk together the rest of the ingredients in a small bowl to make a sauce. Place the fish on dinner plates and pour the sauce over it. Bon appétit!

I hope you appreciate these dishes as much as I do! My family is very happy when I decide to cook fish—with the exception of my middle daughter, who has become a strict vegetarian, a not very healthy decision in my opinion. But she's all grown-up now

and very stubborn, so there's nothing anyone can do to dissuade her. At least my other two daughters are more sensible when it comes to their eating habits.

// Comments: 1 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

KISS OF LIFE

Posted: 21.08.200... , 01:37

I've dropped Amelia, she was driving me crazy. If it were up to her, I would already be back in the rehab centre. All Amelia did was pumping me full with antidepressants, claiming that I still have no self-control, whatever that's supposed to mean. I took those pills for a few days, to see if they would do any good, but they left my mind in a huge fog—I was only able to sit in front of the TV watching those cartoons for little babies. Or tennis. Plus I felt hungry all the time, and kept stuffing myself with chocolate and cookies, till I got really really sick. When I complained to my shrink about these side-effects, she accused me of being too passive and unwilling to put some real effort into my treatment. What does she know about my efforts?

Even worse were the stupid “in-depth conversation” sessions I had to undergo, answering questions about my “interpersonal relationships”. I had prepared a bunch of silly stories for the occasion, but at our last meeting Amelia started digging out all sorts of facts which could only have been revealed by my mother. Amelia knew about my suicide attempt when I was thirteen, Tania's death, Jean-Luc and Ahmed, even the things Tony and I had snatched from granny and uncle. I couldn't believe that mum had confided these intimate details to a total stranger without consulting me first. I got totally out of control there in

Amelia's office, insulting her and my whole family. I felt backstabbed by everyone.

Once I had calmed down Amelia started telling me her "diagnosis of my case", as she put it. According to her, I suffer from manic-depressive disorder combined with pathological narcissistic tendencies, or some other understandable bullshit like that. She says people like me tend to be auto-aggressive and therefore develop all types of harmful addictions. Auto-aggressive, my ass! What I really wanted was to throw a good punch at *her* ugly nose. Destroy that little self-satisfied look on her face.

I didn't say anything, though, I just nodded in total numbness. But I knew right then and there that I wasn't putting up with this any more. What a charlatan! She didn't even try to show some understanding for my situation, she just sat there behind her desk, writing notes about my "case".

Screw them all, I can take care of myself much better on my own. I've learned my lesson: you can't trust anybody in this world. Not even your parents.

I've also decided to quit my new job at a coffee machine shop downtown. The pay is lousy and it's a real bore to stand there behind the counter and wait for people to come over and talk about the great espresso some expensive machine supposedly makes. The job offer was for a sales manager, so I thought it might be interesting—but this has nothing to do with management. I'm just a little sales girl and have to follow orders from my "superior", some middle-aged overdressed woman with bad breath, who keeps calling me "dear" when clients show up and starts criticizing me as soon as they're out of the shop.

I've only worked for three days, maybe they're testing me

and will promote me if they like my performance. But I can't stand this environment for eight hours in a row. Most of the time there's no selling to be done, so my superior just makes me dust the machines and rearrange them. I wasn't born to be a cleaning lady, I'd rather be unemployed than put up with this humiliation.

My mother will be really disappointed when I tell her I've quit, but I couldn't care less. She doesn't have any consideration for me anyway. She thinks I'm nuts.

I'm sick of everything, I get bored to death at home. Even though I've thrown a few parties recently, I don't like hanging out with any of my old friends, anymore. They're all so dull! As for my relatives, they just get on my nerves—none of them has any trust in me. They would have preferred if I had stayed in rehab forever, that's the truth.

But I'm not sad, quite the opposite. I know that if I do my thing, I'll be successful. I'm not even sitting around any more, getting drunk and feeling sorry for myself. The latest pills Amelia prescribed are quite okay, they make me feel better, particularly when I mix them with a shot of plain whisky. Nothing much, just enough to keep me in a good mood.

Also my social life is improving. Yesterday evening I had dinner with a very exquisite man. He took me to a really chic restaurant. He thinks I'm the most beautiful woman he has ever met. I like him too, he's so sexy and sophisticated. I could fall in love with him. Maybe I already have.

His name is Nuno, but everyone calls him "Lobo", that's "wolf" in Portuguese. He's a big, strong, gorgeous mulatto from Angola, and is here in Lisbon on business. We first met some weeks ago at a distinguished party in one of the best clubs in

Cascais, the real exclusive area outside Lisbon. I was actually accompanying this businessman client who liked my brains so much, he introduced me around as a “good friend” and a Business Administration student. That was sweet of him.

Anyway, at that party Lobo and I really hit it off, we spent most of the night just talking away. I think he was very impressed by my Angolan origins. It immediately made us feel so close. I was fascinated by his experience, he’s a general with the armed forces and told me lots of stories about the war. He got his nickname because of his courageous fighting and tactical thinking: he’s very good at creating ambushes for the enemy. Hence, wolf—a cunning and fearless animal. Every time he smiled and looked straight into my eyes, it sent shivers down my spine.

But then it got pretty late and my businessman friend offered to drive me home. So I decided to leave the club with him. I wanted Lobo to fight for me. On top of that I was beginning to miss my heroin fix—at the party there was only cocaine and marijuana. When Lobo said he would love to meet me again, I gave him a piece of paper with my phone number. He caught my hand and gave it a tender kiss. A real gentleman.

I was so unlucky that I had my overdose shortly after the party, and was put away in the rehab centre. Lobo kept calling me at home, but my sister told him I was abroad and wouldn’t be back for some time. We almost missed each other. I’m so glad I got out of that prison again. Stupid Bea only remembered Lobo’s calls a few days ago. As soon as she informed me I ran to the phone and re-established contact. Lobo sounded happy to hear from me again. He wanted to see me at once, because he’s returning to Angola pretty soon. We must make up for lost time, he told me.

We haven’t slept with each other yet. I’m taking things slowly with him. I don’t want to seem too easy. Lobo is convinced that I’m a serious Business Administration student, but I’ve told him I want to quit and do something else with my life. Which is the truth, in a way.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

QUANTUM LEAP

Posted: 25.08.200... , 09:08

What's the point of fighting against destiny? Some things were meant to happen in our lives, we can't avoid them. Like when mum and dad needed to return to Angola in 1975 because it was their home, no matter how insecure. Or when I had to drop my Medicine degree, which just wasn't right for me. The important thing is never to regret our deeds, they have made us who we are today. In the end, our most difficult choices often turn out to be correct—it's as if some invisible force had pushed us in that direction anyway.

I have decided to keep my child. I feel absolutely wonderful, happier than ever before. Even if it was all a bit clumsy and unplanned. But that's fate, you can't foresee or prevent it, you can only accept it.

Of course, I thereby went against Dirk's opinion, or rather demand. But I don't really care, I don't even want his help rearing my child. In fact, I find this new fashion of single mothers pretty attractive. Nowadays men only get in the way, they're too unreliable. They have no sense of duty, don't behave like grown-ups at all. As soon as they must take responsibility for their actions, they panic.

So I wrote to Dirk announcing my irrevocable decision, and urged him not to reply at all if he was against it. I also promised

I would never ask him for money or any other kind of support. And he would only be registered as the father if he wanted to.

My baby will have everything it needs. When I told mum about my pregnancy, she was a bit surprised but didn't oppose my decision. She sounded quite enthusiastic, actually. My mother loves babies, I think she'll be a perfect granny. And aunt Silvia has already offered to do babysitting whenever I'm away at university.

Just because I'm becoming a mother, it doesn't mean I'm giving up on my career. I want to be good at both. I'll continue my research at least until I get into the ninth month. By then I hope that most results will be clearer and I can move on to the final phase of my doctoral thesis. That way I can try to get a good job soon after giving birth. Fortunately, here in Portugal there are quite some private nurseries. I have to start getting informed about prices and conditions. My baby should have the absolute best I can provide.

Professor Helder wanted to cancel my presentation at the German conference in October because of my pregnancy, but I opposed this. My paper is already underway, I'm sure I will manage to finish it in the next few weeks. I was able to convince my group that I'm even more motivated now to defend our research.

This new situation has given me tremendous strength and self-confidence. I can't afford to be aloof now that I'm completely responsible for another being. I'm beginning to understand why my mother was always so protective of us when we were children. In a way she hasn't changed at all. Motherhood really is a lifetime occupation.

I'm just undecided about what to tell Suresh. We've been chatting frequently on the internet, but I haven't let him in on my problems. It would require so many explanations. Now I'm

getting a bit uncomfortable—we had arranged to meet around Christmas in New York, by then my state will be evident. It might make him very sad. I think Suresh has really fallen in love with me. Just the other day he sent me this beautiful poem:

*Like a single white cloud in the blue sky
or a sudden fresh breeze on a warm day,
Love comes unannounced,
quietly, softly and yet commandingly.*

*But once it hits you,
like a great deafening explosion
—fear not, my love—
It will transform you inside and out
revealing the core
of your true being.*

*Rise up from the ashes
of your former shell:
Now I can dive into your depths,
I am no longer afraid.*

It made me cry. Nobody had ever written something like that to me. At bottom I have equally strong feelings for Suresh. However, I'm afraid I cannot get further involved with him. Right now I'm not able to love anybody except my baby. My priorities have totally changed.

I only hope that granny will recover soon, she would be delighted to know she's becoming a great-grandmother. I wish she could participate in this wonderful new experience I'm going through. Grandma has been unconscious for the past 24 hours,

we fear the worst. Everybody would be shattered by her death. We all know that old people can't last forever, but it's still difficult to let them go.

Altogether, though, my mood has improved enormously. I'm planning to refurnish Lou's bedroom for my child. Mum will help me, she has very good taste. Even Jo has shown lots of support, she says she actually envies me. She has offered to accompany me downtown one of these days, to shop for "pregnant woman clothes". We're very excited, we've never been to such places before. And yesterday she baked a wonderful chocolate cake with BEA&BABY written on it, she says that now I'm feeding two mouths all the time. It was quite funny, and I really did have most of the cake.

My little sister has finally overcome her lethargy, I think the new pills she's taking are good for her. It also helps that she has a new admirer, an Angolan called "Lobo". He came by yesterday evening to take Jo out to dinner, and we had a little chat. I really liked him, he's so polite and funny. I imagine he must be about forty. But he's in great shape, no doubt because of his activities in the army. I was impressed by his stories from Angola. He only had a very slight Angolan accent, it was hardly perceptible. Clearly he is a well educated man and must have travelled extensively.

I'm glad that Jo's doing so well again. But nothing can compare to my happiness at the moment. The feeling alone tells me I've made the right decision. I can't wait to bring my child into this wonderful world. This is my ultimate work of art. I am fulfilled.

// Comments: 0 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

Name: Louisa D.

Age: 26

Location: boled up in Oregon, USA

Interests: Bitching

THE GARDEN IN THE MACHINE

Posted: 30.08.200... , 13:16

Salut au monde!

Yes, here I am in the New World. Not very promising, really. Then again I may have arrived a tad too late—some 300 years, to be more precise. But I didn't want to be a party spoiler from the beginning, so I tried very hard to ignore all the awful blocks and factories and shopping malls and huddled masses I passed on my way to my new home. Now I've left those milestones of modern culture behind me, to settle down in a comfy little hut in the middle of nowhere.

In case you're wondering, dear reader, I really was in Berkeley for a couple of days. But I didn't bother to meet Nigel Harmsworth or any other academic specimen for that matter. I mainly sat around watching the exciting "campus life", as I had some time to kill while waiting for an appointment with Molly and Jim. They gave me a ride to my new den up north in Oregon, on a hilly little estate with lots of trees, a babbling brook, an

artificial lake—and a few humble lodgings for a few freakish humans. A nice little land commune, in short.

I had started making arrangements for this grandiose occasion months in advance. You don't just land in a place like this. Molly and I exchanged quite some e-mails in order to discuss my possible "integration in the community", as she put it. But honestly, I had no idea that these plans would actually materialize. You never know with life.

So the summer school story was just a pretext to get me to California by the 15th of August to meet Molly and her boyfriend Jim, who were spending a few weeks with her family in Sacramento before returning to the Oregon land commune, where they've been living for two years now. They're nice people, about ten years older than me, and full of apocalyptic ideas regarding the future. I always had the suspicion that I wasn't the only Cassandra in this world.

We had interesting chats on our way in their beat-up van, mainly concerning the organization of the commune, our personal experiences on this planet, everyone's disappointment with everything, and so on. I particularly enjoyed the discussion about "where mankind had gone wrong". According to Molly, organized religion had ruined it all, because it "established hierarchies that put people down" and made them "blindly obedient to oppressive forces". Her father is an evangelist. Jim, on the other hand, was of the opinion that machines had "destroyed human happiness", forcing everyone to "behave like little cogs" in the service of "negative progress". When they finally asked me where I thought life had become fucked-up after all, I proposed the Big Bang. But I didn't seem to be very convincing.

To my parents (yes, we're still on talking terms, for better or for worse) I sent a colourful postcard from San Francisco,

with an image of the Golden Gate bridge and a silly "I-little red heart-USA" caption, announcing that I was soon moving to Oregon to do some field research on the topic of "21st Century Pastoral Poetry". Just to keep up appearances—you never know when I might need these people again.

I also added that due to the "primitive conditions" under which I would be working, communication would be possible only sporadically and via e-mail. And of course, I would be happy to hear from all of them. No hard feelings.

Nobody has written to me yet.

Now I share about 150 acres with eighteen people, plus the occasional visitors. Children aren't very welcome, as it's a kind of meditative monastery and nobody is in the mood to do babysitting. But uncomplicated dogs and cats are most appreciated.

Fairly acceptable, I would say.

We all have private little homes. Mine is a bit away from the others, it's called "Hermit's Retreat". Luckily enough nobody else seemed to be as mad about it as me. Still, I do socialize far more than in England. I go over to other people's places for a cup of tea, and even participate in the communal meals every now and then. People here tend to be as dull as any other human, but I enjoy listening to their stories. Usually they just consist of complaints. So I'm obviously in my element.

In our commune everyone is waiting for the collapse of civilization—a healthy outlook on life, no doubt. I first came across them on the internet some months ago, while consoling myself with information about the approaching end of the world and similar merry topics. I checked out their website and found their ideas and habits surprisingly logical. Plus they invited "disaffected people" to join them. A lovely thought for little Lou.

I even go through the trouble of talking about myself. Though mainly I get on one or the other person's nerves with my funny little "cyber-project"—something I like to call "The Spooky Reality Show", for which I've been collecting internet material for over a year now. It's really somewhat chaotic, a bit like my own head. But some members of my new extended family claim to understand what I'm on about. I have my doubts.

In any case, they don't consider me much crazier than themselves. That's one advantage of living amongst social outcasts: nobody is pretending to be normal here. What for? We don't count anymore, anyway.

Yes, it's about as cosy as it gets.

// Comments: 0 //

DARK SECRETS BLOG: THE INTIMATE JO

Name: Joana D.

Age: 24

Location: Luanda, Angola

Interests: high life, business, diplomacy, my African roots

WONDERLAND

Posted: 08.09.200... , 20:59

I'm back in Luanda, my real home, where I was born and raised. This is where I truly belong, I can feel it!

It's absolutely fantastic, as if I was suddenly in a fairytale! Here I live like a millionaire: mansions, chauffeured bullet-proof cars, bodyguards, servants, private swimming pools, parties, and all the drugs I want. I don't even have to beg for any of these things, they're just *there!*

Mum is so happy to hear how great everything is. Although I leave out the more disgusting details, to not hurt her feelings. She has the fondest memories of life in Angola. But if you go beyond the exclusive Miramar area where Lobo and I live, you wouldn't believe all the squalor!

Everywhere in the city are poor, dirty people, buying and selling all kinds of stuff in open air markets, or doing repair and construction jobs with whatever they have at hand. There's hundreds of such little primitive businesses, side by side in the

stifling heat. These parts of Luanda have no water, not even a latrine anywhere around, and the smell is enough to knock you over. There are open sewage holes and piles of accumulated rubbish all over the place, where little naked children are playing, oblivious. Plus millions of flies everywhere! It's a miracle that these people don't just die off of all kinds of infections.

The outskirts of Luanda are even worse, with huge filthy slums where everyone hangs out not really doing anything. Lobo told me that some of the slum dwellers had actually lived in the downtown area, before they got banished by the government riot police and army, in order to build some new luxurious blocks.

I somehow pity all the miserable and underfed blacks, most of them came from the countryside, driven down to the coast by the civil war—they're totally unqualified for any kind of job, they can't even read, write or speak proper Portuguese. Now that the war has finally ended, the government is trying to relocate these people to their home villages, but many don't want to return. They still prefer the city and the opportunities it offers. In the interior you just die of starvation and terrible diseases. The fields are still loaded with landmines and there are no proper hospitals or doctors to treat you, they have all moved to Luanda or left the country altogether.

At least the NGOs and UN aid agencies are trying to keep some order in this chaos of poverty. Their presence also gives Luanda a real cosmopolitan flair, with all kinds of nationalities and professionals hanging out downtown. I like that, it's much less provincial than Portugal.

There's so much to do here, so many places to go, particularly in the evenings. I usually accompany Lobo to dinner and cocktail parties in hotels or clubs or ambassadors' homes.

He has valuable connections with several foreign entrepreneurs because of the private security company he runs, mainly defending visiting businessmen. Plus he's involved in big international firms specialized in construction, telecommunications, oil—you name it. He's not only a distinguished general, but also a very smart and up-to-date investor. I admire him so much!

Many army officers and government officials in Luanda engage in commercial activities, so the social gatherings are actually a central point of economic life here in Angola. They're also lots of fun, I love hanging out with the cream of society. I haven't met with any prejudice against my white skin.

Now I'm anxious to meet the President. Lobo has promised to take me along to Futungo, the presidential palace, one of these days. I'm really honoured. Lobo says it's important to keep a good connection to the palace, that's how you get great financial bonuses and privileges. If you fall from the government's grace, you might as well leave the country. It's like an old-style monarchy, really.

Mum was tremendously proud when I announced that I was accompanying my new boyfriend to Luanda. I have already invited her to come visit me. She always wanted to return to our homeland.

I don't miss Portugal at all. Here I have everything I need and everyone treats me decently. Lobo doesn't know much about my past, and I think that's good. I don't want to be judged for my mistakes. I was very ill and lost for a while. But I've found my way—I've returned to my real roots. That's all that matters.

I want to start a whole new life. I even plan to continue my studies here in Luanda, at the very exclusive private Catholic

University. Lobo says I could become his business partner. He knows I'm a smart woman.

I've never been so confident about the future before. For the first time in my life I am really happy.

// Comments: 0 //

HEART IN AFRICA BLOG: THE STORY OF ALDA

TORCH OF HOPE

Posted: 10.09.200... , 11:44

I was so often assailed by doubts and even hopelessness regarding my homeland. There were many times when it really appeared as if my family would never again be able to return to Angola. Now I know that these were moments of weakness. Everything is possible, if we put our mind to it.

My daughter Joana has just settled down in Luanda with a very respectable member of the Angolan army. They met while he was on a short leave in Lisbon. General Nuno has helped my child find her way back to her origins—and thus also to a profound knowledge of herself and her possibilities, which had been lacking ever since we were forced to flee to Portugal. I am eternally grateful to him.

It's wonderful that Joana is together with someone who has spent most of his life fighting for the end of a senseless civil war in Angola. Now that this aim has finally been achieved, our vast and beautiful country can be thoroughly reconstructed. People like general Nuno have the possibility to make this dream come true. They are the new hopeful generation in Angola.

Many things have changed in Luanda. Certain areas of the city have been vastly improved and look as beautiful and inviting as Rio de Janeiro. There are lots of new mansions and luxury

buildings, as well as lively bars, restaurants and clubs. Everything that makes a city tick.

However, some aspects of society still require profound reform. Corruption is a big problem, particularly since a few members of the government and even the army are deeply involved in this crime. General Nuno believes that things will change soon, and the billions of dollars the government annually collects as revenues from the offshore oil industry will finally start being redistributed more equally—instead of remaining in the hands of a privileged elite.

For this Angola requires more qualified professionals who can take up the difficult task of building a functioning administrative body, to secure such basic services as health, education, transportation and public security for the whole population. My Joana has very quickly grasped this necessity: she is finishing her Business Administration degree in Luanda, in order to contribute with her knowledge to the future prosperity of her homeland.

I will probably travel to Luanda very soon.

This reconnection with my family's real origins makes me very optimistic. For a long time I had feared that my grandchildren would inherit only an uncomfortable feeling of displacement, of not really belonging anywhere. Particularly now that my older daughter Beatriz is expecting a child, it is very reassuring to know that our family's attachment to Angola remains truly strong.

The next years will be full of extraordinary experiences. I have seen my girls develop into responsible and promising adults—now I can accompany them as they build their own future.

I finally feel ready to pass on the torch and watch with faith all the remarkable things these young adults will achieve.

It won't always be easy, but improvements are possible with some good will. If we give in to defeatist thoughts, we may cause lots of unnecessary damage. Mistakes are made to be corrected. Without hope, I assure you, this world is lost. We must never give up dreaming. That's what makes humans unique.

// Comments: 2 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

MESSAGE TO THE ALIENS

Posted: 11.09.200... , 08:00

For all it's worth, our refuge isn't as primitive as some would idealize. We do have electricity, running water and even a permanent connection to the internet. Each home has a little wood stove for the winter. There are spacious communal rooms where everyone meets: for meals, discussions, the daily meditation rituals. And people drive to the nearest town on a weekly basis to buy stuff, run errands or just sit around watching the rest of civilization.

Practising "self-subsistence", as one would expect from a land commune, is rather expensive these days, dear reader—because you can't really live exclusively "off the land". You continually have to purchase things you can't grow yourself, plus pay all sorts of taxes. We live far away from the money economy but not really outside it. This makes the whole commune's spiritual enterprise kind of funny: everyone is supposedly trying to rise above earthly possessions—and yet, you need quite a bit of money to begin with, in order to achieve that aim. So we are a pretty exclusive bunch, even though some members like to imagine they are noble savages.

When I joined the commune, I had the option of either working five hours a day in whatever has to be done around here, or putting a money equivalent in the communal pot. I chose the

latter. Only three other members have done this—we're known as "the reclusive lot". We are kind of the weirdoes in the commune, because we claim to be so busy with our heads that we don't need any extra work to distract us.

The recluses are, of course, my favourite chatting companions. I consider them slightly different versions of my own madness. There are Michael and Susannah, my closest neighbours, in their forties, who moved in last year to fully concentrate on their practice of Zen Buddhism. Before settling down here, they travelled around Asia—from India through Burma to Japan—and lived in a proper Zen retreat in Washington State, until it broke up "because of member rivalries", i.e., lack of funds. Michael and Susannah provide complimentary instruction to other commune members in the art of meditation. Their only interest in life, they say, is to "practise non-being".

And then there's a 60-year-old chap called Vince. He's writing a "Complete Survivalism Guide"—for anyone interested in knowing how to manage after the Apocalypse, when all the so-called amenities of civilization have crumbled and we're back to Stone Age. Vince has been expecting the collapse for the last 30 years. He says one learns to be patient after a while. Still, he's convinced that "any day now the shit must hit the fan". From overpopulation and environmental destruction, to fossil fuel depletion and nuclear catastrophes, there will be no way around the "final Big Bang".

Vince is living off a comfortable inheritance from his father, who was a successful entrepreneur in the french fries business. Vince himself eats only raw vegetables. He was once married and has two grown-up children in California, whom he considers his "contribution to the human catastrophe"—which probably explains why they don't talk to him. His dog Diogenes, though, is quite fond of him.

I myself am pretty busy managing my Spooky Reality Show. That's basically all I do, day in and day out. And my project is still far from complete.

The premise of my futile activity is very simple: I'm trying to rectify a series of striking misconceptions we have about ourselves as a species. The whole thing was inspired by a newspaper article entitled "We Humans and the Outer Space: a Success Story". This beautifully stirring piece, written by some distinguished British scientist, celebrated the launching of yet another unimaginably costly unmanned space capsule into the vast universe—with the childish hope that it might one day, many many years from now, reach some intelligent alien species far away from here (unlikely as this prospect is).

Interestingly, our brilliant scientists found it fit to include in the capsule such things as a highly complex but dull "Greetings-From-Planet-Earth"-message designed to be deciphered by any alien intelligence, some nice classical music, and a candid little picture of a naked man and woman with their hands raised in a gesture of peace.

Gesture of peace?

That's what I call a selective approach to our great civilization! The least we could do is proudly show those aliens out there our impressive arsenal: portray Adam and Eve loaded with machineguns, hand grenades, bazookas, surround them with tanks and rockets and helicopters and warplanes, and frame the whole image with a nice mushroom cloud. Plus the capsule should have included some samples of glossy magazines, trashy TV shows, bombastic best-seller novels and blockbuster movies, irritating pop songs, fast-food, a pack of Marlboro and at least one big bottle of schnapps. But no, our visionary scientists

had to go for the worn-out “we’re-so-enlightened-and-cultured” cliché.

Now, it’s one thing that humans always have to deceive themselves and each other, but trying to cheat everybody else in the universe (literally) is really the utmost. So I’ve decided to correct this little inaccuracy.

My project is an attempt to convey a more realistic picture of the prototypical man and woman and all their wonderful achievements. Since I’m a bit more humble (and possess far less financial means) than our hubristic scientific community, I have decided not to bother with the whole capsule story. Instead I’m diligently collecting and saving internet material in my laptop, hoping that it might be retrieved one day, many many many years from now, when some intelligent alien species with nothing better to do lands on planet Earth and starts digging out all the leftovers of our dead and gone civilization.

The Spooky Reality Show is supposed to be like any fun (virtual) visit to a great theme park. A bit like the London Dungeons or Disneyland’s Spooky House—but without the tedious fantasy and cheap special effects: I’m showing only the naked horror of reality. The visitor can stroll through several cyber-rooms presenting different scenes of human life, with all its conflicts and squalor and confusion. Now I’m trying to separate countless texts, pictures, videos and tunes into distinct thematic categories. Which is a hell of a job, believe me.

Of course, my show is all about information—there’s no entertainment here. Unless, like me, you have a ball whenever you’re confronted with the desert of the real. But I haven’t met many people who share my views. Which is why I’m more optimistic about alien intelligence.

To my basically disillusioned new neighbours I present only glimpses of my project. Most communards are still hoping for some kind of salvation. Even if it comes in the form of the Apocalypse. Then, they say, “we can start from scratch”, “avoid all the previous mistakes” and so on. As if we wouldn’t simply go through the same show all over again, with only very slight and probably just as annoying variations.

// Comments: 0 //

TRUE SELF BLOG: CONFESSIONS OF BEA

Name: Beatriz D.

Age: 28

Location: Lisbon, Portugal

Interests: meditation, elevating books and films, self-improvement, my family, my baby

NESTING

Posted: 14.09.200. . . , 12:52

My research project at university has been temporarily suspended. Our sponsors withdrew their funding, the results of our experiments were simply too unclear. Professor Helder has suffered a breakdown, I believe—his whole career is at stake. He's been on sick leave for over a week now and there are rumours that he won't be returning to university for quite some time. I pity him, but I'm also relieved to get a proper vacation and not even bother about the conference in Germany. My paper was lagging behind, I had too many things on my mind lately.

I already feel lots of changes in my body due to the pregnancy, it's really astonishing. I sleep like a baby, have great appetite, and meditate every day on the balcony. I'm also much more patient and gentle.

Mum is staying with me here in Lisbon for a while, to help me rearrange Lou's bedroom. She's taken up knitting again, which she hadn't done for years, ever since we had left Russia.

She's now working on a beautiful little pair of warm woollen socks for my baby. We still don't know if it will be a boy or girl, so she uses what she calls "ambiguous colours", that suit both sexes: yellow, green, white. I don't really care what kind of colours my baby wears. I have the impression that my mother would like me to have a boy, though.

Fortunately, granny has returned home from the hospital, she is still somewhat feeble but feels great. At least she hasn't lost the ability to complain: she says my aunt Silvia doesn't clean her properly (grandma is now unable to take showers alone), my mother doesn't know how to prepare her soups, my cousin Carlito's music is too loud, and my uncle Mario doesn't pay any attention to her.

To me granny has been most kind, she can't wait to see my child. But she was very upset that Jo has moved back to Angola with a "coloured man", as she put it. Granny isn't really a racist, she just has lots of old colonial ideas—luckily enough, nobody takes her seriously. Now she misses Lou, supposedly my sister was the only one who talked to her in a "decent way". That's very easy to do when you visit grandma for a fortnight or so. Putting up with her every day is much more exasperating. Old people can be a real drag. Still, we're happy to have her back. She's part of our routine.

Ever since I've become pregnant, I find it so important to hold on to simple, reliable habits. I no longer miss great adventures. Security can be very appealing, too.

Just a few days ago, while I was downtown shopping for one of those modern Baby Buggies for jogging mothers, I ran into Artur. We hadn't seen each other for months. He is doing so much better, he's lost some weight and has a new haircut, enhancing his eyes and cheeks. He was wearing a very nice suit and tie, which made him look more adult and professional.

Artur was having his lunch break, so he invited me to join him. He has a fantastic job with a renowned insurance company. His function is to acquire new clients. He says it's very challenging, because you're in permanent contact with different people. This is still his probation period, but his boss has grown quite fond of him. So there are great chances that he will become a regular employee soon.

While we were eating in a classy Italian restaurant, I told Artur about my latest tribulations—including my pregnancy and how indecently Dirk had treated me. I couldn't help crying a bit. I'm still offended about Dirk's heartless reaction to my e-mail. He never bothered to reply.

Artur was very understanding and assured me that I would be a wonderful mother. He then told me about his involvement with some woman he had met at the pizza service where he worked before. He had even considered marrying her, although she was only eighteen. But then he realized it wasn't true love. It couldn't compare to what he had felt for me, he confessed.

At this point we understood that there are still very strong feelings between us, and it's not just friendship. We have supported one another on countless occasions before, we're familiar with each other's desires, necessities, even moods. And we share lots of basic opinions and simple pleasures. Artur said he would like to accompany my pregnancy, to be there for me at such an extraordinary period of my life. That's so sweet of him!

By the end of the meal, we had agreed to give our relationship another chance. We're taking things very slowly. I need my independence—and my child will always come first. Still, the prospect of true companionship makes me happy.

I haven't told my mother yet, but I'm sure she will be delighted. She's always liked Artur. He could even move in with me. It

would be nice to have a man around the place, to protect my child and me. It's a big flat, there's enough space for everyone.

My sisters are probably not returning to Portugal that soon, if at all. I had a chat with Jo on the phone the other day, she sounded so enthusiastic and full of projects for her future in Angola. She also wants to have children soon. It's impressive how much her life has improved lately.

Only Lou has remained distant from the family, as usual. But I'm going to write her an e-mail. I want to keep a good connection. Mother told me that Lou is somewhere in a land commune doing research for Berkeley—living conditions there are pretty primitive, they don't even have a TV set. Lou has always had strange ideas about life, so I'm not surprised that she ends up involved in such weird projects.

It's wonderful to see how everything is working out nicely for my family. We've been through some trouble, but now everybody is feeling better. Even my parents have been more peaceful lately. They were probably just under stress because of all the difficulties dealing with Jo and Lou. Mum and dad's relationship has really improved a lot since MadMax has moved in with them. They've grown very fond of the dog, he keeps them company and is so sweet and well-behaved now.

I feel fortunate to be surrounded by caring, dependable people. Friends and lovers come and go, jobs nowadays are insecure, even fortunes can be easily lost. But our family will always be around—that's all we have in this world. My mother repeatedly told me these things, but I never quite understood their meaning. Now I know. And I will make sure to pass on this wisdom to my child, too.

// Comments: 0 //

HANDYMAN BLOG: MARTIN'S VIEWS ON EVERYTHING

CONTAINING YOUR BEST FRIEND

Posted: 16.09.200... , 21:08

Hello everybody, today I would like to share one of my most recent discoveries in the world of home electronics. This will be particularly appealing for pet owners.

Have you ever gone through the painful anxiety of driving around your neighbourhood, calling out the car window for the family dog or cat? If so, maybe the time is ripe to start thinking about the latest effective pet containment systems!

People have different reasons for containing their pets, such as health or reproductive issues—and, of course, to keep from getting into trouble with the neighbours! While there are many conventional options, including fences and even the barbaric tradition of chaining down or caging your pet, there's now a new and increasingly popular alternative: the Underground Pet Fence (UPF).

This is a fantastic combination of training, technology, and electronics. Most systems consist of three components:

- A transmitter, which plugs into a standard electrical outlet (in a dry location, such as the garage). It emits a radio signal that travels through the installed underground wire. One transmitter can accommodate as many pets as you have collars.

However, keep in mind that while UPFs are meant to keep your pet in, they cannot keep other pets out!

- Underground wiring, which is just a single strand of buried insulated wire that makes a big loop: from the transmitter around the protected area of your property, and back to the transmitter again. The wire must be some centimetres below the surface of your yard, otherwise you risk cutting it with the lawnmower or even tripping over it! The great thing about UPF is that you can also enclose swimming pools, garden patches, or any other area you don't want your pet to access—all without the aesthetic horror of a fence.

- And finally, a waterproof, lightweight receiver worn on your pet's collar, usually powered by a small battery. Be sure to replace the battery at least every three months for the receiver to remain effective!

As you can observe, the UPF mechanism is really very simple and ingenious: the transmitter uses the buried loop of wire to broadcast a radio signal. The signal is normally just a sine wave, or possibly two sine waves at different powers. The buried wire acts as an antenna and turns the signal into electromagnetic waves. Inside the collar is a small radio receiver (essentially a basic AM radio). When it gets close enough to the buried wire, it receives the signal from it. The radio then triggers a correction sound, so the pet knows it is nearing the boundary.

UPFs are wonderfully humane, because they are intended to be a correction deterrent, not a punishment. With a bit of patience and training, your pet will be able to identify the signals on the receiver (don't worry, the sound doesn't hurt the animal's ears) and will turn away from them. You can determine where your pet goes in a safe and effective way.

I have just finished installing one of these contrivances in my yard last week, in order to keep MadMax, my new Rottweiler, inside our home premises. Although we do have a fence around our yard, it turned out that the dog could easily jump over it—he's wonderfully fit! Even though I tried to discipline MadMax into staying where he should, I soon realized that this was a fruitless task: Rottweilers are known to be a tenacious breed, it takes time and effort to convince them of your intentions. But because I could not always be at home, it was impossible to keep MadMax under control. And my wife found herself incapable of getting the dog to obey her! She's much more into cats.

For two days I tried to keep our Rottweiler chained while I was away—which only inspired him to howl almost uninterruptedly! This convinced me to start looking for alternative ways of containing him. UPF functions perfectly, and MadMax is quickly learning to react to the correction sound. It will even prevent him from harassing my wife's cats at their food and water bowls!

Due to the success of my new experiment, I'm seriously considering using this system to keep the cats away from certain rooms in the house—particularly my home office! The only problem here is that UPF only works when each individual animal has a collar with a receiver—and we've got dozens of cats by now! So I'm wondering if the investment would be worth the trouble.

Finally, I'd like to leave one more tip: as a loving dog owner you should keep in mind that containment is all very nice and useful, but your dog will still require your attention and company—especially some nice long walks outside your premises. I take my Rottweiler out twice a day for at least one hour. It's

great exercise for both of us. I really do not exaggerate when I say that MadMax has put me back in shape! Thanks to my canine companion, I feel young again.

// Comments: 5 //

PET HATE BLOG: LOU'S CORNER

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Posted: 20.09.200... , 10:17

The Hermit's Retreat isn't as isolated as it might sound. In fact, there's a bunch of yacking neighbours living just underneath my window, in a little wooden shed attached to my humble hut. These are the commune's chickens: ten females and one proud male. They spend the night quietly locked up, but at sunrise they make a huge fuss to be released again.

Usually one of the communards living downhill, closer to the so-called centre with the collective buildings, would take responsibility for this merry lot. This involved walking up to the Hermit's Retreat several times: to let the chickens out in the morning, check up on them during the day, see them to their coop again towards nightfall. The same procedure, day in and day out. Even on Sundays or when it rains. Chickens don't mind routines.

Ever since I've moved in, I've decided to take up this dignified function, to everyone's delight. I strive to get up as soon as the rooster starts calling. Then I let all the chickens out, give them food and fresh water, and watch them walking around. This has really brightened up my life—we all have a vocation.

Every now and then I also join the group meditation sessions. Under the friendly guidance of Michael and Susannah, we are practising a little “free-thinking” technique: we sit still with our eyes closed and just let our thoughts pop up and disap-

pear again, without paying particular attention or importance to them. Which isn't such an easy thing to do. Watching your own thoughts can range from boring to uncomfortable. No wonder most people avoid reflection at all costs.

I must say I'm having lots of fun with my nutty head. It comes up with everything from embarrassing memories and silly fantasies, to publicity tunes and passages from books I don't even like. Sometimes I cheat, as I get very entangled with a particular idea that appears brilliant and claims to explain everything about everything. But then I'm distracted by something else, especially concerning the physical strain of sitting in half lotus for 20 minutes in a row. Before I realize what's happening, Susannah has banged a gong and we can all go outside for a relaxing walk. The procedure is then repeated twice more, and after that we're off to our other useless occupations. So another chunk of life has just been successfully wasted. A brilliant achievement, no doubt.

Some commune members claim to be much more enlightened ever since they've started practising this meditation thing. I myself feel as ignorant and confused as ever. But who cares?

And while I'm struggling with my head and back and legs in order to achieve transcendence, my dear family is involved in a series of very earthly new events. Big sister Bea has recently informed me about it all in one of her delightful e-mails. Here's what it said:

Dear Lou,

How are you? What's the weather like in Oregon? Have you met interesting Pastoral poets? When are you returning to Berkeley? I hope this e-mail reaches you, mum has told me that you're a bit cut off from civilization these days. If you need anything, please let us know.

Here everything is wonderful!

Granny almost died because of her high blood pressure about three weeks ago. That made everybody very anxious. But now she's doing better again, the doctors even said that with proper medication and food she can go on for years and years!

And our little sister Jo has just moved back to Luanda—isn't that exciting? She met a really nice guy, a general in the Angolan army, and of course fell in love with him. You know how Jo feels drawn to challenging relationships. You wouldn't believe how much she's changed, she's much more interested in social matters and politics. Apparently she is mingling with the high society there! I think she's finally found her path. We're all so happy for her.

Mum, of course, is tremendously proud that her little girl has returned to Angola. She can rave about it for hours! Sometimes it gets a bit annoying. . . In any case, mum says she's going to visit Jo as soon as she can. But she doesn't want to leave my side at the moment. . . nor for the next eight months, for that matter!

Yes, I'm expecting a baby. The joy I feel is indescribable! All that really matters in my life is this power to give total love to another being. Dirk isn't participating in this adventure, but I don't even want to talk about it. I can raise my child on my own without problems. Mum and dad and everyone else in the family will help me.

I'm no longer working on my research, it's interrupted for the moment. Which is sort of nice, because I just feel like sitting back and not doing much while my belly grows! I keep imagining what it will be like to breast-feed and change diapers and all that. I can't wait!

If it's a girl, I would like to name her after granny—if it's a boy, he should have grandpa's name. I think this is a beautiful way of honouring them for all their efforts in life. Mum was very supportive of my idea.

Well, I have to rush again, I still have lots of shopping to do for the baby. I've actually been spending most of my days downtown, you wouldn't believe

how many things are available for mums these days! But now you know that we are all doing really fine and we think about you very often and wish you all the success with your new project. We hope you can come by for a visit, maybe at Christmas? Jo will probably fly in with her general, it would be so nice if you could join us, too. . .

Do let us know how you've been doing, dear Lou. Mum also wanted to write to you, but she just has so little time. She and dad say hello.

*Lots of love,
Bea.*

P.S.: Could you please send a nice little T-shirt from America for my baby? Something with the Statue of Liberty or a picture of Manhattan. . . That would be so cute!

Well, that's what I call off-putting news.

One would imagine that Jo had already been through all the commotion life has to offer, with her remarkable drug-experiences and thrilling tours through prison and rehab, but no—she had to get herself back to the Angolan hell. That must be fun. At least this time little sister has gone for the proper social layer. As my family knows, you can only make it in Angola if you're part of the ruling elite. Otherwise, you are treated like rubbish. And I don't mean it figuratively.

I'm not surprised that my mother is all excited about her little daughter's questionable activities with the Angolan army and government. After all, Jo is just following in our kin's footsteps—even if some of the political pseudo-convictions have

changed. But who cares, so long as the resources remain appealing? Perspective is everything, dear reader. So Jo has finally become the star in the family show. A true revolutionary—without a cause.

And then there's Bea, finally giving up on any pretensions of fighting for a career in the booming business of manipulated micro-organisms. I'm sure everyone is quite pleased with her wise and much more reliable decision to produce a child she (and all my relatives) can eternally nag and feel worried and disappointed about. Big sister's idea of giving the poor kid granny's or grandpa's name does sound reasonable: after all, their admirable fortune is all Bea can hold on to, in order to raise her offspring. If anything is still left in a decade or so, of course.

What really kills me is Bea's optimism—even though her child's future will be as bleak as they come. You'd think big sister would have had ample opportunity to realize all the horrors our family endured in the last century. What can WE possibly offer the next generation?

Maybe I just have too much foresight. Worrying about breast-feeding and acquiring little T-shirts from America seems much more adequate. Let the kids find out for themselves what terrible experiences are in store for them. It functioned pretty well with my sisters and me, didn't it? Fortunately, only one of us ended up being such a whiner.

Now I've got a fresh bundle of troubling thoughts to keep me occupied during my meditation sessions. Lucky me. I obviously have no plans for the next months or even years, other than revolving around human miseries—while my family happily engages in another round of jolly adventures and tragic fiascos.

CLARY ANTOME

See, dear reader, there's my epiphanic spooky reality all over again: even in the midst of the best of families, there's nothing to look forward to but conflicts, squalor and confusion.

But try and put *that* into a space capsule.

// Comments: 0 //
