

AN ALPHABET OF REINVENTION

by *Clint Ettinger*

1. **A - E is for Exchange**
2. **F - K is for Kimmy**
3. **L - T is for Trio**
4. **U - Z is for Zap**

ONE

A) The Oxford American Dictionary defines ‘reinventing oneself’ as *taking up a radically new job or way of life*. The Macmillan Dictionary defines it as *changing the way you behave or the things you do so that people think of you as a different kind of person*. Quite a difference.

B) So, must we really change? Or should we just wear a veneer of change so that others perceive us as having changed?

C) is for Change or Die

Writer and entrepreneur John Mashni firmly believes there are only three types of reinvention

1. Reactive Reinvention - when an external event occurs and forces you to change.
2. Proactive Reinvention - when you intentionally change to capitalize on an opportunity.
3. Reflective Reinvention - when you fail at something but still have a strong desire to continue in that particular endeavor.

D) “Make reinvention your lifestyle, and you’ll stay young at heart no matter your chronological age. Keep on reinventing yourself, and death becomes nothing more significant than the period at the end of this sentence.”¹

E) is for Exchange

Last week during my second-year writing class, I asked everyone what they thought about the topic ‘reinventing oneself.’

“These two words bring both happiness and fear,” Apple said.

“It’s more complex than that. It’s both courage and desperation,” said Bertha.

“Reinventing oneself is a trap,” Curtis scoffed.

“I disagree,” said Desmond. “I believe reinventing oneself means to reinvent the soul.”

“This is good,” I said. “Keep going.”

“Become the person you want to be. Don’t let society or others affect you,” Elsa said.

Francis raised his hand. “To add, I think reinventing oneself is to instil some belief or perception into one’s mind so that they can meet the expectation of the people who instil that idea.”

“Nice. Anyone else?”

¹ Stephen Pollan and Mark Levine - *Second Acts: Creating the Life You Really Want, Building the Career You Truly Desire*

"Cosmetic surgery is a way to reinvent oneself," Gucci said. "Generally speaking, beautiful people are often more successful than those blessed with lesser looks."

"I object!" exclaimed Harper. "I hate that idea. Maybe it will make me 'perfect' but that's not 'me.' I just want to be myself."

"No!" Ichabod shouted, rousing from slumber. "Did I hear 'reinvention?' When I hear those words it makes me think of time regression. I have to acknowledge that I really wasted time in the past," he said before falling back asleep.

"Reinventing oneself is just a fancy term for psychological maturity," opined Jacaranda.

"Too serious la," said KK. "Use terms we can understand. Deadpool is a superhero reinvented. Bamboo is a plant reinvented."

"That's an interesting connection to m—"

"How about a visual?" Lisa Lisa interjected, holding up a picture. "A pot of crabs are cooking. One crab abandons his claw and escapes from the pot. The crab survives although one of its claws is lost. The crab sacrificed its leg in order to reinvent itself."

"That's great," I said. "Maybe I get one more and then we move on. Anyone?"

Matilda raised her hand, spoke softly. "I didn't reinvent myself but my friend did. She killed herself last year but her last words were 'I can finally get rid of this cruel society and become a new me.'"

No one spoke up again.

TWO

F) Reinventing means changing, not staying the same. It means moving, not stopping. It's emerging *from* the cave after hibernating *into* it. It means living *the* life, not living *a* life.

G) is for Gossip Rag

Middle school graduates, looking to escape the hell that was pimples, penis jokes and puberty, reinvent themselves as optimistic and self-assured teenagers at high school.

High school graduates, looking to escape the false bravado and fake acts, the hormones and hell that was their last 4 years, reinvent themselves again as cocky and whip-smart young adults on college campuses far from home.

College graduates move to new places, where they get new jobs and start new lives. If they're fortunate. Others move back home, live in their parent's basement or the attic space in the garage, wait for the spark of reinvention to strike. Sometimes it never does.

Hardcore guitarists become math-rock, then indie-rock, then pop-rock stars. Metal vocalists start doom-folk side projects, then lo-fi, Americana singer-songwriter crap. Bass players for metalcore bands, realize the futility of their craft, reinvent themselves in South Florida on the Bang Bus. Drummers keep on drumming because they're in short supply.

Celebrities reinvent themselves with makeovers: hair extensions, puffy lips, fake tits, chin tucks, neck tattoos. They join Scientology, or get baptized in an NBA player's bathtub by an Evangelical megachurch pastor, or even join a pyramid-scheme sex cult, get their leader's initials branded on their flesh.

Novelists change hats and write memoirs; hard sci-fi writers switch to Young Adult fantasy. Poets write plays. Playwrights switch to the screen. Screenwriters don't like the justice being

done to their hallowed words, decide to direct and produce on their own; leave the screenwriting to the hacks.

Wannabe writers reinvent themselves by having children, spending all their time enamored with the daily lives of their progeny, pining for the days of old when they could sit around without a care, unencumbered, and daydreaming of writing that prizewinning novel.

H) “We are who we choose to be”²

I) Thomas James Gabel was a huge Guns and Roses fan growing up, but as he delved deeper into the punk rock ideology, he became disillusioned with the rock and roll excess and hedonistic lifestyle that lead-singer Axl Rose represented. When his punk band Against Me! released their debut album in 2002, he titled it “Reinventing Axl Rose.” Gabel aimed to bring a new punk ethos to the world of rock n’ roll music and this was his first shot fired. In 2012 Gabel would cease to exist, beginning the transition to a woman, reinventing herself as Laura Jane Grace, and becoming one of the first highly visible punk-rock musicians to identify as transgender.

J) We reinvent because we’re bored, because we’re unhappy. We reinvent because we want to turn our worlds upside-down, perhaps because they’ve already been upended, perhaps not.

K) is for Kimmy

Excerpt from *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*: Season 4 Episode 10

“Lillian, can people change?”

“Are you talking menopause or werewolves? ‘Cause one of them is a legend made up to scare children, and the other one is werewolves.”

“No, I mean can a bad person all of a sudden become a good person? Like Slimer from *Ghostbusters*? In the movies he’s a bad guy, but in the cartoons he’s just part of the team. What changed?”

“Oh, honey, this is the real world. People don’t change. Not like that.”

“But what if the person I’m talking about was inspired by a very special book.”

“If this is about Jesus, pass!”

THREE

L) “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”³

M) My toddler son has reinvented Mr. Potato Head as Sweet Potato Mister. I will forever know of him as this moniker. When my daughter is born and she later asks me what the lumpy brown plastic thing with an ear on his mouth and feet on backwards is, I will say, “That’s Sweet Potato Mister.”

N) Random bathroom story idea #212. Man reinvents himself every New Year. Fails miserably. Decides to start celebrating Chinese New Year so he can reinvent himself twice a year. Fails even more miserably.

² Green Goblin, *Spider-Man* (2002)

³ George Bernard Shaw

O) "When I go to Shake Shack, I give them a different name every time."⁴

P) What's to reinvent when every day is a blessing? What's to reinvent when tomorrow is not guaranteed?

Q) "People who cannot invent and reinvent themselves must be content with borrowed postures, secondhand ideas, fitting in instead of standing out."⁵

R) The enemy of reinvention is contentment.

S) is for Segue

T) is for Trio

I asked three close friends to give me their thoughts on reinvention or reinventing oneself.

1. "Reinvention. Taking what once was and making it seem new again... Recovering from the idea that you can't be fixed... Remembering all the versions of yourself, for better or worse, for richer or poorer. Retrograding through a closet filled with a hundred skin suits that look like you and keeping the vintage stuff around for when your neuroses are considered retro. Reconceptualizing your understanding on what it means to be reborn, reinvented and released into a multiverse brimming over with the possibilities of you."⁶
2. "I wouldn't necessarily say I reinvented myself. Yes, I moved 2,600 miles away from the small town I had spent my entire 35 years alive in. Yes, I am in a completely different environment than the east coast which there was an adjustment period. Yes, I am now legally selling cannabis for a living but I'm still the same dude, I think. Just got to finally combine something I am passionate about with the thing I'm good at. So, I wouldn't say reinvent but reposition."⁷
3. "Every moment our minds are inventing our self. So where does the "re" come in? This is the paradox: we are both the inventor and the invented. The question is where in this recursive process do we pay attention. Where do we become attached? Typically, we identify with the present from the perspective of our past—the invented stories that we tell ourselves about who we are, what we believe, what we're capable of, etc. However, there is another alternative. We can start with what's true for us now and focus on the process of invention. This is where the "re" takes place. We hold the initial fabrication of the mind as an object to be molded and exert future-oriented actions to craft a new story. The "re" is what makes us human. It is the gift of becoming conscious of consciousness itself. While the process of inventing one's self is an unavoidable fact of life, the re-inventing of one's self is an act of highly evolved human intelligence."⁸

FOUR

U) "I am still making order out of chaos by reinvention"⁹

⁴ My friend Mickey, when asked his thoughts on 'reinventing oneself' some night in early February, Kennedy Town.

⁵ Warren Bennis

⁶ Gary Klinger

⁷ Ryan Christopher

⁸ Jeffrey Siegel

⁹ John LeCarré

V) All this thinking of, and researching, and writing, and stressing about reinventing oneself is preventing me from actually reinventing myself.

W) I sit here and talk about reinvention in its simplest and most breezy form. The privilege of being from the Land of the Free, with parents who were supportive of whatever I wanted to do. A culture that allows for independence and the ability to make what you will, so long as all the right boxes are ticked. Reinvention without a second thought. Not reinvention out of necessity, out of the will to live. Reinvention for survival. What would I ever know of that? The true voices of reinvention are refugees and survivors, the marginalized and downtrodden. Not I.

X) The reinvention of daily life means marching off the edges of our maps."¹⁰

Y) All fiction is reinvention.

Z) is for Zap

When Zap was seven he had a crush on a girl named Chelsea Wanamaker. She wore her blonde hair in a long pleat down her back, and had a smattering of freckles on her cheeks and nose. She liked boy things, which was to say she liked comic books, played Atari 2600 games, and wasn't afraid to get muddy at recess.

One morning before school, Zap asked her to ride the see-saw with him. As they alternated leg lifts, he asked her if she would like to share his Lunchables during 5th period. He also had strawberry Capri Sun. Was she interested?

"I like Devon," she said. Zap hadn't asked who she had liked, he just wanted to share his lunch with her.

"Devon is cool", he said. "I like him too." Devon was the tallest boy in class, a full head taller than Zap and had won all the blue ribbons at events on Sports Day. He had never actually spoken to Devon, nor had Devon ever acknowledged his existence, but he felt fine saying he was cool.

"Are you faster than him?" she asked. "I like fast boys," she said matter-of-factly.

"I'm lightning," Zap said.

"If you beat him in a race you can be my boyfriend," she said.

It was agreed upon for after school. That whole day Zap felt the butterflies of nervousness. He knew he could run, but he also knew he was slightly pigeon-toed. Also, he'd never been in a race before. Despite this, he felt strangely giddy and confident. It was only a race. Two feet and a beat. So what if Devon had won all those blue ribbons in the 50-yard dash, and the long jump, and the shot-put, and all the other feats of physical skill. Zap had been absent that day, otherwise anything could've have happened.

What Zap may have lacked was confidence. He just had to will himself to win. He had to believe it could come true, and it would. After all, what did Peter Parker say in that *Spider-Man* comic he recently read? We are who we choose to be? Maybe it was someone else who said it, but it didn't matter. Zap was gonna choose to be a winner. To be fast for a day; to be a runner. He was gonna be Chelsea's boyfriend. Ernie Zapata would reign supreme.

At three o'clock, word had spread throughout second grade and filtered down into first. A throng of kids filed outside after the last bell to take their positions. Devon was already there, stretching. He had actual running shoes on. New ones. Zap wore Keds with

¹⁰ Bob Black

bald soles. Zap took his place next to Devon and scanned the crowd for Chelsea. He didn't see her anywhere. Then, he spotted her, not with everyone else, but waiting at the finish line.

Zap would have raced anyone if it meant seeing her at the end.

Both boys stood at the starting line. "On your mark", someone said. "Get set."

Zap looked at Devon, who wasn't even in a crouch. He was just standing there.

"Go."

Zap took off like a spooked squirrel. His first few steps felt so good he thought he was gliding on air. On the fourth step Zap felt the hard ground beneath his feet, and then, reality. He looked to see Devon solidly in front of him, legs pumping effortlessly. Three steps. Two steps. One. Devon reached the edge of the concrete.

At the finish line, Chelsea welcomed Devon a hug and handed him a Capri-Sun. It was lemon-lime.



UNDER THE LYCHEE TREES

Lychees also helped bring out a different fire in me. At school, Chinese was my favorite subject. My Chinese teacher, Teacher Li, was six foot tall and a slim man in his early fifties. He reminded me of the great writer Lu Xun that my mother revered. Like Lu Xun, Teacher Li had a dense mustache, and a pair of very thick eyebrows that were often locked together, giving him a strict, fearsome look. But, it was Teacher Li who enabled me to taste the elixir of triumph, the first taste of it in my life.

Every week we had to submit a composition. Teacher Li paid great attention to our work. When it was time to return the compositions to us with his comments, he often kept mine. Then he read them out loud in front of the class. It happened frequently during the two and a half years that I studied with him. The image of his first reading of my composition burned wondrously into my memory.

There were four rows in our classroom. I sat at the front seat of the second row from the door. He stood next to my chair when he read my composition. The way he held the piece of paper with my large, strong hand writing on it was as if he was holding a precious stone; it was full of tenderness and appreciation. He stood elegantly with his long straight legs together. As he read, his body swayed slightly forward and backwards, in sync with the rhythm of his reading. When he encountered a verb that was ingeniously used or a beautiful phrase, his forward movements extended further and he was on his toes for a second or two. Then he landed back on his heels gracefully and launched on another round of gentle rocking.

When he finished the reading, his thick eyebrows parted and his mouth widened. An approving, transfiguring smile blossomed on his wise, wrinkled face. Gradually, he turned to me and said, “Young Lady, you can certainly write.”

A delicious shiver of excitement ran through my body. His smile and words became a surge of energy that enfolded me. It felt like bathing in the early morning sun, and such a gentle sun gradually warmed my heart and brought a glorious glow to my cheeks. It helped lift the weight of self-hatred from my stiff neck, my tight shoulders and my sore back. I sat upright. Some of my classmates looked admiringly at me. I received their silent praises with grace, a virtue I did not know existed within me before that moment.

I wished to bottle that moment – the moment of recognition, of triumph, show it to my father and mother and tell them, “*Ba, Ma*, Look! Your *Wou Ling* isn’t so useless!”



DIAMOND HILL

The factory work was killing my mother. One day she came home from work around 7pm and began cooking. I was in the upper bunkbed doing my homework. Mother started talking to Brother who was watching TV. I heard her say to him, “You know son, they think I’m stupid.”

“Er, why?”

I could barely hear Brother’s mumbling over the background noise of the TV. Putting down my homework, I peeked at them from my bunk.

“This morning, our assembly line’s leader asked me if I knew how to write my name!”

She sounded like she was about to cry, then continued, “If they would only know – I was a teacher who had taught Chinese to hundreds of students!”

She was crying I knew, since the hot oil on the wok in front of her was sizzling from meeting her tear drops. This violent sizzle was followed by the *kuang, kuang*, noises of the spatula striking the wok.

I hurried down from my bunk and asked, “Ma, are you ok? Can I help you with anything?”

“You go away!”

She brandished the spatula and shouted.

I froze.

Brother gave me a quick look and a smirk. His eyes said, “Who do you think you are?”

He walked toward the narrow kitchen, and standing on the second step, looked in on Mother. There was no space for him to go in. He stretched his hand, reached out to the dish on the stove, picked up a slice of pork and slid it into his mouth. I drooled.

Mother calmed herself. She turned to him and said:

“Oh my son, you must be very hungry now. I will finish cooking soon.”

Mother and Brother continued to have some small talk. They ignored me totally as if I were non-existent. I did wish I could become non-existent. Then I would not feel so ravenous. For food. For attention. For validation. For love. Pressing my lips together, I shut my eyes for a long minute to prevent tears from coming out. But they stung behind my eyelids and formed a hard, painful lump in the back of my throat. A sense of worthlessness gathered its power and seized my stomach, it hastened upward into my lungs and heart, and it ran further up into my brain and embedded itself there for good. I wanted to shake it off and scream. But I found neither the nerve nor the energy to do so. My stomach snarled and howled before. Now it was silent. Only pains persisted. And it felt like a part of me was annihilated. Maybe I would become non-existent in this place called home.



THE MOON IN A DOG’S EYE

I walked and jogged away from the ravaged earth until my legs were sore and my adrenaline had subsided. At the exit of the catchment channel, there was some grass to sit upon and regain my composure. Tall bushes shielded me. Drawing up my knees and wrapping my arms around them, I leaned back on the wall. The moon was complete, clear and close. I gazed at it and dreamed that I became a whole self again. The sound of my breath shrouded me, soothed me. Resting my head on my kneecaps, my eyelids were about to shut when something stopped them. A dog stood before me. Its bones poked out of its flanks.

From ten feet away it stared at me with its wide, light-gleaming eyes. They seemed to bulge out of its skull. And when those eyes focused upon me, they turned livid.

“Do you know what I do to girls?” challenged those dog eyes.

Slowly, I uncurled and shifted myself into a different position by placing my hands flat upon the ground, sitting erect, glaring back at it. The dog tilted its head sideways and I saw the moon in its left eye. Neither of us flinched. The moon’s cool, sharp light beamed through my brain advising me to hold my ground, steady my gaze. Emboldened, I determined to protect myself and reclaim the sovereignty of my body. Head raised, shoulders pulled back, spine straightened, I intensified my glowering at the black dog.

The sudden extension of my upper body and escalation of my spirit astounded it. It cocked its head to the right and cowered slightly, still glaring at me. But its muzzle lowered and the light of its eyes dimmed. It whimpered and slunk away. A few times, it craned its neck to check on me. I kept my posture and met it eye to eye.

When the dog's tail was entirely out of my sight, I fell onto the grass. Cool dew chilled me to the bones. My sweat drenched body shivered.



HOME TO LOST SOULS

Ricky picked up the beat afterwards. He began by cracking a few light jokes about his old life back in London, stealing cars to get his father's attention. He spoke as if the events did not belong to him, and as if he tried to keep himself away from that other self – the self that seemed at once intimate and alien to him. Then he went on to tackle some edgier issues, such as the similarities and differences between the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish. It was my introduction to the United Kingdom. I realized that those four kinds of British people did not really speak to each other in the guesthouse where I was staying. Most Hong Kong people came from Guangdong province, versus, we, the Fujianese who mostly speak *Hokkien*, are *ngoi saang yan*, “people from other provinces,” the outsiders. We learn Cantonese and try to fit in. But our accent almost always betrays us and attracts inquisitive or worse, denigrating looks. I turned to Kate and smiled sadly. She put her arm around me and gently rocked me from side to side.

Realizing that I had people to turn to and was no longer the lonely fourteen-year-old I once was generated joyous rapture in me. Such rapture propelled me to stand up and walk toward the short wall in the front yard. There was a brick balustrade. I took off my shoes and climbed on top of the wall. Its surface was gravelly with small rocks that stabbed at the soles of my feet. I managed to steady myself and rose. Spreading my arms, I took a few baby steps forward and quivered like a fledgling. Park and Kate came over and stayed close to me.

The fourteen-year-old me felt suicidal after the sexual assault. The rooftop of my secondary school building was quite high up as our school was built on top of a hill. Many times, I tried to figure out a way to reach that rooftop. It would be good to eradicate the screams in my head by one jump. But then I heard a song that begins as follows.

Don't ask me where I come from
My hometown is far away
Why do you wander
Wander afar

It was *The Olive Tree* – a folksong sung by Taiwanese singer Chyi Yu and its lyrics came from a poem by Taiwanese poet / writer San Mao. The song called out to me. It gave me permission to depart, to wander, to live. Hence, I decided to run away to Taiwan in hopes of reinventing myself.

A gust of wind came. I swayed and cried. The rest of my gang ran over. Kate seized my forearm while Park grabbed at my leg. Julie, Takeshi, Marcus, and Ricky stayed close by. My body recovered its equilibrium. Knowing that my friends were there and cared for me buoyed up my spirits. I stood back up, taller and steadier than before. And I gave my gang a grin. They returned it with broad smiles. Taking a gleeful glance at the glimmering road ahead, I drew a deep breath, turned to them and jumped. I landed on the yard and in the outstretched arms of Park. Others joined and encircled me. I felt like a lustrous, unscarred pearl protected by the shell of my friends.

Later, we sat atop the short wall and looked out at the harbour. I closed my eyes and imagined the dawn that would come – the sky resembled a prism with all the colors blended perfectly into each other, the sun peeking out of the horizon and its brilliant rays shined brightly, the glistening reflection of the sun on the ocean. My heart swelled with awe and excitement.



ONE

You are the one sitting quietly at the front of the history class, because all of the other seats are taken. You arrived at West Park six months into your first year, and everyone has already delineated those invisible, yet impenetrable lines between their friendship groups and the outsiders.

In the foolish optimism of a ‘fresh new look,’ you let your mum cut your hair, yesterday. Now you look like an extra on a cheap, eighties T.V re-run. Your head is a mushroom with a mullet, and you’ve already heard the other girls whispering as much.

Whenever Ms Amarran asks a question, it has you torn between the need for her validation and the need to stay unseen, unheard and safe. But you always put your hand up anyway. The surge of adrenaline that accompanies the act, bleeds into your cheeks, red with the catharsis of pride and shame that you’ve got it right.

‘Well done!’ She beams ‘Such a thoughtful answer.’ She has lipstick on her teeth again. Near the end of class, she begins to hand the test papers back. She told you not to worry on the day you sat the test, because you’d missed half the content, but still, you hold your breath. She hands you the paper with a quizzical look,

“Well, done! You scored top marks, despite not being here!”

Eyes bore into the back of your head, whispers and murmurs ‘teacher’s pet.’ Your small ears glow, underneath your mushroom hair. You know at lunchtime to find a place to hide. You saw them stamp on that other girl’s head last week, hyena’s fuelled with cheap blue soda and cigarettes.

But you so want the teachers to notice you. There must be an adult in this world that can see you and hear you, to affirm that you are more than a little wandering ghost. The other girls here call you a snob and in some ways it’s true. Your lack of humility in the classroom makes you unlikable. What was that song Dad used to play on his guitar? ‘They hate you if you’re clever and they despise a fool.’ According to John Lennon, you’re in a catch 22 situation, but you’d rather be hated for trying, than for giving up.

I wish I could warn you though. At some point, the balance will tip. You’ll become more concerned with looking like you’re not trying than actually trying. Three years of feeling unsafe every day can do that to a girl. You’ll weaponise words, weaving ‘no fucks to give’ through your trashy new accent and dialect. You’ll wrap yourself in comforting anaconda plumes of cigarette smoke, you’ll drown the sweet girl protests in bottles of cheap, neat vodka, that’ll heat your throat until it burns away any residue of pride. You’ll walk like those girls and dress like those girls until you become invisible to them too, and then you will feel numb. The freezing process has already begun. It’s a pity, that it’s the closest to safe as you can find.



TWO

EXCHANGE, UPGRADE OR REFUND?

The Setting is a store, with wooden benches. A portly old shop keeper, with ruddy cheeks, wearing a leather apron is humming and whistling to himself, whilst polishing the table tops. It is not immediately apparent what this shop sells, or its purpose. He steps back for a moment, polishing the round lenses of his bottle-bottom glasses and then continues on his task. A woman enters, looking a little harried, rustling around in a shopping bag.

-Can I help you miss?

(Lady places a human brain upon the counter top and looks at the man) Yes, I'd like to return this brain please.

-What edition is it?

1983. Is it still under warranty?

-(The shopkeeper reaches under the countertop and pulls out a yellowing booklet.) Let me see, ...according to this manual, you're covered until 2020. How can I help you?

This brain is broken.

-What's wrong with it?

Well, for a start it looks ugly. Like a trainee butcher made a mistake and just tossed it aside.

-Brains aren't supposed to look good miss. they are to be worn on the inside.

But I want my insides to match my outsides. For authenticities sake.

I'm sorry miss, I can't refund on that basis.

(The woman looks irritated.) I should mention. It also doesn't want to get out of bed in the mornings.

(The shop keeper raises an eyebrow) How often does this happen?

About...five times times a week. Monday through Friday.

-Ok... We can image the brain, to see if there are any internal faults? Pass it over and I'll take it out back to the scanner yes, thank you. *(The shopkeeper takes the brain carefully from the counter and carried it through a beaded curtain to the back of the shop which is unseen. He returns some minutes later)*

-It seems to have some synaptic links missing from the pre-frontal cortex, though the amygdala seems unharmed. Any other symptoms, miss?

Yes. It also imagines. A lot.

Well, that is a key skill of any brain. Particularly good ones can imagine very well.

Not this one. It only imagines bad things.

You mean you have hallucinations?

No. No Hallucinations. It just imagines every single interaction that might go wrong during the next day, how awful that would be and concludes that it's safer to stay in bed.

-That does sound a little tricky. Though the manual here says it could just be a case of the standard 'winter blues'. Nothing that a week's vacation in the sun mightn't cure.

(the woman scoffs) Will a holiday cure its self esteem problem?

Well, generally you do have to pay a bit more for the models with high self esteem miss. Do you want an upgrade?

No- no upgrade, but there is really something wrong with this one. It's below standard.

How so?

It doesn't like itself very much. It's fine when with friends, but when it gets alone it can really get quite nasty. If it makes a mistake or lets something slide it thinks things like -why didn't you speak up for yourself? You let them walk all over you again! Why are you so pathetic? Everyone else can be normal, why can't you?

-I see. Ok miss, that does seem to be a deviation from the base manual description. But I must say, I don't see the impact of these symptoms upon yourself miss. You look very well put together.

(she snaps) Are you saying you don't believe me?

No miss, sorry. No offence meant. I'll write those down : Lack of motivation, rumination, negative self-talk...anything else I should add to the report?



THREE

She wheeled her case toward the elevators, eyes dry and back sore from the long haul. Flying was basically slow-motion time-travel, and her mind needed a twilight space to adjust the new-country variables incrementally, like slowly turning the volume up on a new track. Cue visuals, then sounds, before the grand exit and bodily envelopment by the new climate and culture.

The seeds of conversations germinated everywhere, no longer the semi-coherent Vietnamese that bubbled away in the ambient background of her awareness;

“So I told her”

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Don’t do that- Adam! Don’t do that.”

“Listen though.”

Adverts cried out from billboards and walls;

Beach Ready?

Been in an accident?

Just Do it

Buy it

Book it

Need it?

Take it

She could understand the words, yet every sign seemed unfamiliar. The exact moment her mother tongue became too much, she wasn’t sure. She could understand it all, yet her brain didn’t know anymore, what to use and what to ignore.

Next stop, Piccadilly Circus, Mind the gap please. On the train, she opened her egg and cress sandwich from its triangle. It was soggy and smelled of plastic. She would rather be eating the salty beefy broth of Pho Bo, with fresh coriander and chilli soaked noodles, or choosing a chicken so fresh, it still walked. The English countryside rushed past -a washed out version of green palm fringed paddy fields, minus the conical hats.



FOUR

(A personal Essay)

Last year I was pondering on a question for a long time. It had been confusing me, so eventually, after exhausting my own mental resources I decided to do what any self respecting scholar would do.

I googled it.

“Am I a Lesbian?”

And there is a quiz! More than one in fact. I suppose I searched out of habit more than anything.

Most of our contemporary experiences teach us to look for answers in the external world, as opposed to internally. I didn't see why sexuality had to be any different. So, I thought I'd have a go at this quiz.

One of the first questions is 'Have you fallen in love with a woman?' Now, I'm no expert on sexuality, but...this level of self-knowledge, might alleviate the need for the quiz?

Suffice to say, I lost my faith in the quiz pretty early on. But then I realised, in a bizarrely obvious way, it *had* answered my query. Because, after a lifetime of relationships with men, including an ended marriage, I *had* fallen in love with a woman.

Yet, it didn't surprise me. An attraction to women had already been part of my identity from an early age. To my family, and many of my friends however, this appeared to be a big 'reinvention,' which inevitably aroused a certain level of curiosity. So I thought I'd try to give you an insight into a lesbian relationship. I can't claim any grand universal truths, but this is about my relationship with my partner.

What attracts women to women? The level of emotional intimacy I experience with my partner, is beyond any previous experience. That is part of what drew me to her. Her capacity for openness and vulnerability is truly beautiful. And she understands what it is like to walk as a woman in the world, to live through the seasons of a woman and to communicate as a woman. The lesbian capacity threshold for mush, is very high. She calls me cornball.

Women like myself, enjoy androgyny. When my partner wears a suit, I melt a little bit inside. This is not about desiring a male substitute, rather there is something inherently attractive about a woman who embraces her 'yang' or masculine energy, dresses in what society deems as more masculine clothes, and assumes supposedly masculine gestures and behaviours. It speaks to me of a fuller integration of Jung's anima and animus, of a more fully actualised, less constrained being.

The fluidity of behavioural roles gives me a sense of greater freedom than I have experienced in heterosexual relationships. Sometimes I want to nurture and sometimes I want be nurtured. There are times that I feel like I want to provide for my partner, to bread-win, fix things and treat her. There are other times when she makes me lunch, or drops me off in her car, puts her arm around my shoulder and in truth, in those moments, I feel more like a lady than I ever did with a man. So, in answer to my initial question, Am I a lesbian? Whilst realising a reductive label isn't going to enrich my nuanced experience of sexuality, I also know that right now, I'm comfortable, and it feels authentic for me to say, yes. Yes I am.