

Flying Upside-Down

'What are you reading?'

It took a few seconds for the soft, lilting tones to interrupt my thoughts and for me to register that the question was aimed in my direction. The voice sounded Irish to me but I've never been that good at recognising accents. I looked down to see her glancing towards me over her shoulder. I showed her the book's cover, then returned to my reading. She may or may not have been close enough to read the title but I didn't particularly care.

'Such a light day,' said the girl, 'and such a heavy book. Such a dark book. Such a shame.'

When I'd sat down on the bench, half an hour earlier, the river bank had been deserted. I hadn't been aware of the girl's arrival. She was squatting on the grass, her legs beneath her. She wore a long cream-coloured muslin skirt, and a mauve tie-dyed t-shirt. Her black hair was braided with pink ribbon.

'What are tensors?' So she had been able to read the book's title.

'It's complicated.' I wondered fleetingly whether there was an explanation I could give that would make sense to her. I assumed she was an arts student. Inspiration failed me. 'They're rather like vectors, only more so.'

She seemed to be making a daisy chain. I grew more conscious of the soft September sun. Perhaps she was right, too nice a day – what had she called it? Light. Yes, too light a day for tensor analysis.

'So what are vectors?' she asked after adding three more daisies to her chain.

'Sort of like tensors, but rather less so.'

She looked up at me. I pretended not to look back and tried to concentrate on the book, but I wasn't trying that hard. At the edge of my vision I could see the pleasing shape her body made as she leant back and lifted her face, eyes closed, to the warmth of the sun. There was a mauve tinge on her eyelids but otherwise her face was free of make-up. Small button nose and small mouth, a trace of faint freckles. But I wasn't really looking. After a while she returned to her daisies.

'Gossamer,' she said. 'Isn't that a lovely light word? Not used enough, I feel.' She seemed to be talking to herself. I didn't respond. 'Wings of butterflies are always described as gossamer, aren't they? But what about other things? A gossamer sky. A gossamer day.' She plucked another daisy. 'I wonder what a gossamer book would be like.'

'It would get blown away,' I suggested.

'Or maybe it would fly away all by itself,' she said. 'Escape the clutches of its diligent author and its delving reader. Glide away. Flimsy and colourful, taking all its complicated secrets high into the sky and scattering them among the clouds and stars. Later it would rain fragments of book. Snow-flakes of pages. Slivers of tensors.'

My eyes had reached the end of the page but I didn't turn over. I couldn't remember a word. I started the page again.

'Is that a maths text book?' she asked. 'A gossamer book about maths. Are you a maths student? A student of gossamer mathematics. Or maybe a gossamer student of mathematics. Which would you prefer?'

'You ask a lot of questions,' I said. 'I think the answers are yes and no and neither.'

She considered my answers. 'Explain, kind sir.'

'Yes, it's a maths book. But no, I'm not a maths student. Scientists have to do lots of maths, whether they like it or not. I can't remember your last question.'

'Scientists make bombs and bombs kill people,' she proclaimed.

I snorted, but tried not to rise to the bait. 'Well, that is rather a simplistic view.' I was pleased with my constraint.

'The truth is always simple.'

'Ah, you may be right. But that doesn't mean that all simple things are true.'

She looked at me. 'You're weird,' she said. Later on, she often used to call me that, but always with affection. It became a standing joke between us. That first time, I thought it was quite uncalled for but I resisted the obvious counter. Perhaps it was her weirdness that made my ordinariness seem weird. I pondered over the consequences of contrasts. Reason should always be sufficient. Could I be bothered to explain? Yes. I tried.

'Not all scientists are involved in the arms race. It is true that *some* scientists have developed *some* theories that have enabled *some other* people to develop weapons that *could* be used by *some other* people in warfare.' I thought I was doing well and I hoped she was impressed. 'And anyway, sometimes having bombs stops other people using theirs. So bombs can save lives.' I

wasn't much convinced by the 'mutual assured destruction' argument - MAD always seemed an appropriate acronym to me - but facile assertions tend to attract facile responses.

'Hmm,' she said. She didn't sound convinced either. She went back to her daisies and started to sing softly and melodically. 'Picture yourself on a boat on a river ...'

A slight breeze was gathering strength. Water at the edge of the river lapped at the bank, like a toy version of an ocean. A nearby willow tree rustled, its tendrils skimming the gentle river-flow. I put my book, open and face down, on the bench. 'Are you a pacifist?' I asked.

'No,' she said. 'I'm not an anything-ist. I reject all labels.' She paused. 'I just don't think people should die, that's all. And if there were fewer weapons in the world, there'd be fewer people killed. It's logical.' She looped the completed daisy chain around her slim wrist and held it up to the sun.

'So these scientists that don't make bombs,' she continued, gazing across the river. 'Presumably you're one of them. What do they do? Do they cure diseases?'

'Well,' I said, 'that's more the province of the medical scientist. Something of a specialist breed.'

'I'm guessing you're not one of those, either. So, you make our lives better in other ways, is that it?' She turned to look at me. 'Better light bulbs, better washing powder. Or is it trains and boats and planes? Better, faster travel. To help us get quickly away from here. So we can go somewhere else. Leaving all our troubles behind. While the people living there can quickly come here. So we swap places. And we are all much happier as a result. Or maybe not. Maybe we all just take our troubles along with us.'

I didn't know how to respond to this tirade. So I waited a while, and watched her while pretending not to. I wanted the conversation to continue.

'Really, it's engineers that make things.'

'Whereas scientists?' She didn't give me time to answer. 'I know, I know.' She jiggled about and waved her arms like an enthusiastic schoolgirl. 'You name things. Label them. Categorise. That's it, isn't it? Put things into boxes.' Almost inevitably she began to sing again. 'There's a pink one and a green one, a blue one and a yellow one, and they're all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same.' I enjoyed the sound of her voice.

'I hope you're not singing about scientists there.'

'What on earth would make you think that?' The sarcasm was blatant.

'But you're wrong again, I'm afraid. Or rather a hundred years out of date. There was something of a craze for classification amongst Victorian scientists. Since then we've grown up a bit.'

'Okay, then. I give up. Tell me what these grown-up scientists do.'

'Scientists ask questions, explore situations, analyse outcomes.'

She seemed to give the matter some thought. 'So what sort of questions do you ask?'

'That's the tricky bit,' I said. 'Hard ones. Ones that haven't been asked before. Ones that maybe don't even have answers in the normal sense. But ones that might generate ideas, might help to progress understanding.'

'Progress to what?'

'Well, to more questions, usually. It's really fascinating.' I was doing my best, but even to me it didn't sound too compelling.

She looked at me. 'I'm trying really hard here, Mr Scientist. You seem nice. Weird but nice. I want to dig you. To really get where you're at. I don't

think you want to kill people. Being a something-ist, as you are, makes for a difficult starting point, seeing as how labels are such a downer. They're so constraining, so limiting, don't you think? They so symbolise the opposite of freedom. But I still kind of wish I could get you.' Sounds odd now, but we really did used to talk like that. Well, she did.

We both watched the river for a while. A rowing boat came near to the bank. A young man – probably a student – pulled strongly on the oars. His female passenger was lying back, trailing her fingers in the water. Her dress looked gossamer light, shimmering in the sunlight. She leaned forward for a moment, reaching into the bottom of the boat, and then sat back, holding a camera. She held it up to her face, pointing it at her companion. She clicked the shutter and laughed.

'I don't dig cameras,' said the girl on the bank. 'They get in the way. Between people. Between the real and the unreal. Interrupt living.'

'How's that?' I asked. I think she would have told me anyway.

'Well, for a start there's the – what do you call it? Viewfinder, is that it? - In front of your eye. Then the lens, the shutter. All sorts of other bits and pieces. I'm not an expert,' she added, looking at me as if I'd criticised her level of expertise. It hadn't occurred to me. 'And you have to get through all that to get to the target, the subject. Really, more like the object. A multi-linked chain. But rather than connecting, it's a sequence of fractures. At every stage, cameras obscure, filter, intervene. And then there's all that, "Smile, please", "Move a bit to the right", "Do something interesting". All so phoney. Then later the film has to be processed. What a horrible word that is. Pro-cessed.'

'I quite like it.'

'No you don't. You're just saying that.' She looked at me and smiled. Her lips barely changed shape but the smile came from her eyes. I was too far away to see their colour. I found out later they were hazel. For the moment of the smile her eyes came alive, electric bright, like flashlights. This was the first time I'd seen it, but I never got used to the power of that smile, the life in her eyes. It lasted for less than half a second. Then she was back on her soap box. 'The film has to be processed by a processor,' she continued. 'Is that a machine or a person? The processor? Or does a processor use a processor to process the film?' I didn't think she was expecting an answer. She gazed at the river. The photographer and her companion had rowed away. 'It's like the word typewriter,' she said after a while.

'What?'

'I was reading. Some old book. Agatha Christie, maybe. Something like that. From the twenties. And apparently when typewriters first came out...'

'Maybe invented by a scientist?' I interrupted.

'An engineer. You said it's engineers who invent. Scientists just ask questions.'

'Maybe one of them asked, "How can we write without using pen and ink?" Anyway, I'm not finding this very credible.'

'What do you mean?'

'You and Agatha Christie don't seem to go together.'

'I only said it was some writer like that. May not have been. Anyway, I read anything and everything. Dostoevski. Ian Fleming. Dickens. Rabelais. William Burroughs. Iris Murdoch. And Agatha Christie. Do you have a problem with that?'

No, I don't think she'd have said that, that's a more modern expression, isn't it? She'd have used a term of the time. She was like that, of her time. Anyway she seemed defensive, whatever words she used.

I didn't answer.

'Apparently they couldn't decide when they first started whether the word 'typewriter' referred to the machine or the person using it. Presumably the word 'typist' didn't exist. So the typewriter used the typewriter to write her type. Or type her writing. Either way, it was all rather confusing.'

She searched around amongst the grass. After a bit of a struggle, she uprooted some long strands.

'So,' she continued, after a while. 'The film's sent off to some processing factory to get the pictures processed by a processor using a processor. And then it comes back and you go down to the chemist to collect your pictures – the negatives and the prints – and you fiddle around with all those corner things and put the pictures in an album. And I can imagine the conversation. She'll be saying "Oh, look at that. Do you remember that day? Wasn't it wonderful?" And if he was honest he'd say he can't hardly remember it at all. Or if he can, he'd say it would have been wonderful if it hadn't been for all that posing for the camera she'd insisted on. If she'd chucked the flaming camera away, we could have got on with living. That's what he'd say if he was honest. Then it really would have been a wonderful day.' She held the grass between her thumbs and blew gently across it. It made no sound.

'You do get steamed up about the strangest things,' I said.

'No I don't,' she said, looking quite steamed up. But then she calmed down. 'I'm not steamed up as you put it. Just saying.' She didn't seem to like being criticised. 'The camera always lies.'

'I think photos are quite good things,' I said. 'Memories.'

'But that's precisely my point,' she said, getting steamed up again. 'They only give you false memories. Posed. Artificial. They're not real memories. Real memories are what are in here.' She tapped the side of her head.

'But sometimes we forget,' I said. 'Memories are unreliable.'

'No, no' she said, emphatically. 'You've got it the wrong way round. Memories are the truth. Real life – supposed real life – is just a fiction.' She thought about this some more. I was enjoying watching her think. 'Do you ever get that thing?' she asked after a while. 'You're talking with an old friend about some event long ago – a party, a holiday. And she – or maybe it's he – goes on about the best bit, the bit that made it special. And you can't remember that bit at all. And you tell them the bit that you remember, but they've forgotten that. And you can't believe it. How could they have forgotten that most special bit? Or you might both remember, but disagree on some detail – say it rained in your version and in theirs the sun shone. What is the truth? What's real?' She looked at me. This time she seemed to expect an answer.

'I don't know. I wasn't there.'

'But that's the point,' she said, triumphantly. 'If you had been there, all you'd have had would have been your version which wouldn't have been any truer, any more real, than the others. And yet. For you. It's the absolute truth. Truth is what we remember. Not what happened.'

'I could look it up.' I felt inspired. 'There'd be records – the met. office or somewhere. That day it either rained or it didn't. Fact.'

She seemed exasperated. 'That wouldn't change anything,' she said. 'The memory would still be the truth to you. The records must be wrong. The date must be wrong. Or simply irrelevant. Either way, the truth is what you know, not

what you're told.' She was looking at me like I was really stupid. For a moment I thought she was going to get up and leave, or come over and hit me. Then she smiled. That smile got me every time, that smile was real. 'Do you really not see,' she said slowly, indulgently, the Irishness in her voice seeming more pronounced. 'Facts make no difference at all. Facts are just fiction.'

It's a different world, I thought. I didn't think it was worth arguing any more.

The girl delved into her blue string bag. She took out an untipped cigarette from a crumpled packet and I spotted my cue. I was really proud of my sleek Ronson gas lighter. Two quick steps and I crouched down beside her. For once, the lighter obliged by producing a sensible-sized flame, rather than imitating a blow-torch as it was inclined to do. I was relieved. It wasn't windy but she cupped my hand and I noticed her long slender fingers. She inhaled and quickly threw her head back, blowing smoke high into the air. I resumed my seat with only a minor awkward stumble which I didn't think she noticed. She sang another line or two: 'Sunshine came softly through my. Window today.'

I thought about what she'd said. She seemed to be denying there was a real world at all. I am no philosopher, but was that really a tenable position? I wanted to know how the universe worked. Isn't that a fundamental desire of mankind? I couldn't accept that my version of the secrets of the universe could be personal to me, those secrets had to be for everyone. No, she was plain wrong. I may not have been an engineer, but I knew that technology functioned because there were absolute principles that underpinned a very real physical reality.

'So you don't believe there's a real world out there?'

'What?' She looked genuinely shocked. 'Of course there's a real world.'
She spread her arms, encompassing both of us, the river, the sky and the rest of the scene around us. She thought a little. 'I think you're confusing reality with truth. The truth is what I know. That's my truth. Your truth is what you know. Reality is something else. Unknowable. Probably.' She looked at me and smiled. 'Unless you're an arrogant scientist.'

She could see I was about to erupt. 'Oh, don't be so sensitive.' She paused. 'A man once made me a promise.' I don't know how her mind worked, but it was different from mine. Where had this come from? 'He was not a deceitful man. But the promise he spoke was different from the promise I heard. It makes you realise. You never know. Make no assumptions is my advice. Draw no conclusions. Except on the wall.'

Later, she turned to me. 'What sign are you?'

I had gone back to my book. Not reading, only looking. 'I don't believe in any of that.'

'Course you don't,' she said. 'But you still know. Don't you?'

'Pisces,' I said.

'I knew it,' she said. 'Romantic, poetical ... You shouldn't be doing science.'

'That's just crazy,' I said, even though I was well aware I was merely rising to the dangled bait. 'How can the population be arbitrarily divided into twelve subsets, based solely on the month each person was born in, and somehow all the members in any one of those subsets are supposed to share identical characteristics, preferences, personalities and attributes. And then, according to these horoscopes as they call them in the papers, all those people born under a particular sign have identical experiences each day, meeting dark

strangers, suffering set-backs, avoiding risky encounters. Nonsense and balderdash.'

There was a pause. 'You do get steamed up about strange things,' she said. I had to smile, despite my genuine exasperation. Well, astrology, I ask you.

'It's only a bit of fun,' she said. 'Don't you like fun?'

I didn't respond. I was too surprised at her coquettish look, lowered eyelids, a sideways glance. Unexpected. It passed almost as soon as it arrived, a bit like her smiles.

'Horoscopes aren't meant to be taken seriously,' she continued. 'But you shouldn't be so dismissive of what you don't understand.' She could see I was about to explode. 'Hush,' she said, in the most lyrical of whispers. 'Be cool. Lie back. It's a grand day. The sun is shining. Think wonderful thoughts.' She lay back on the bank and closed her eyes. 'Make the most of today. It is the last day of the first part of your life.'

There was another long pause in our conversation, but it was pleasant, a companionable silence. I knew there was no point in resuming my reading.

'Hot air balloons are wild.' It was as if she were mumbling in her sleep. 'They float on air. A gentle rise and fall. Silent. Peaceful.'

I looked up to the sky, thinking I'd missed it, but there were no balloons to be seen. 'Have you ever been in one?'

'Not yet. It's on my list. An ambition. Along with flying a glider. Not a proper airplane, though. They're always so big and noisy and dirty. They seem to be fighting against nature rather than working with it. Being tuned in to nature is good. Opposing it is a bad scene.'

'Tuned in and turned on?' I suggested.

She sighed, but it was a sigh of pleasure. Contentment.

She may not have said all those things as we sat on the river bank that first afternoon, but conversations with Maria were always like that, and yes, there were many more meetings and many more conversations. They never had a smooth trajectory. We'd exchange some words, build a bit of a structure as we made our different cases, argue the pros and cons. Her view, my view, nearly always different. I tried to give as good as I got. Then she'd suddenly veer off at a tangent. No, more like a right angle. And she'd come out with something quite outrageous with no connection to the previous topic, or she'd offer up one of her sayings. She seemed to have an endless supply, always with a twist. 'There's only one way to skin a cat,' that was one of hers. I don't remember the context. 'Always look a gift horse in the mouth,' that was another. It always threw me. Sometimes I thought she did it deliberately, but mostly not, it was simply how she was, how her mind worked. I'd say randomly, but that's not quite right. It was a different sort of logic from the rest of us. Well, different from mine, anyway. I saw the world as organised, systematic, evidence based; she not. For her the world was ... I don't know how you'd describe it: mystical and mysterious, yes, unknown and unknowable, hugely rich and glorious in its infiniteness, yet gossamer-like, light. And eternally interesting. On that, at least, we agreed.

'It's time for me to go,' she said and stood up, brushing her skirt and picking up her bag. She swung the bag onto her shoulder and set off up the bank.

'Wait,' I said. I was never one for making quick decisions, for grasping the nettle, so to speak. But now seemed a good time to start. She stopped and looked back. 'Can we? Will I? I mean.'

She waited. She wasn't going to help me. I wanted to see her again and she knew that's what I wanted but she was enjoying my struggle.

'Would you like to go to the pictures?' Pathetic, I know, but my limited experience of dating centred almost exclusively on trips to the cinema.

'All right,' she said. 'When? What's on?'

Of course, I didn't know and it was all awkward and embarrassing. She laughed at my confused stammerings but somehow we ended up meeting outside the Astoria two days later, in time to catch the main feature - Antonioni's *Blow Up*.

After the film, I went back with her on the bus. We went upstairs so we could smoke and we talked about the film. 'What was the best bit for you?' she asked.

It was when the girls were cavorting naked with the photographer, but I didn't say that. I said something about the way the enlarging of the photos brought everything into a different perspective, helping the characters focus on the important parts of their lives. For Maria it was the propeller. It was a symbol, she said. Something about its function. Man's flight is a wonderful thing, escaping from the constraints of gravity, but the propeller, even though made from natural wood, is an unnatural object. It doesn't fit. The contrast raised interesting dilemmas and paradoxes. Also, there was something about its phallic connotation. I'm sure at one point she said that it symbolised a nothing and a negativity, but in doing so it became a positive, the emptiness became its own version of fullness. I might have got some of that wrong. Not that it mattered

because when she started talking like that, I could have listened to her for hours. My conscious, logical mind was disturbed and wanted to fight against such nonsense, but if I relaxed, chilled out and let her words flow over me, I found them entirely soothing. Not to mention stimulating. Sexually.

'Then again,' she added, 'the rolling around naked was also quite fun, didn't you think?' She looked at me. I tried to be casual, but I knew I couldn't carry it off. I had to agree. My reward was the coquettish look followed by the smile.

I walked her from the bus stop to her door.

'I enjoyed that,' she said. 'We must do it again some time.'

'How about'

She put a long finger to my lips. The first time our skins had been in contact. 'Hush,' she said. 'Nothing definite. Relax. Hang loose. Be cool.'

'But,' I tried again even though I already knew there was no point.

'Keep going down to the river,' she said. 'Sit on that bench. Keep reading your heavy books. Keep thinking your weird thoughts. One day we'll bump into each other again. I'd like that.'

She turned and walked along the dark passage by the house and was lost to my sight. I walked back to the flat, under dim lamplight and a light drizzle. I could still feel her fingertip on my lips, gossamer light. 'I'd like that,' she'd said. I laughed out loud.

* * * * *

Oh, Maria. That year of my life seems so separate from everything else. Maria was so original, so rare, of a different world, a different dimension. Not connected with the rest of my life, all the plainness, the grey, the humdrum. Above and beyond, that was Maria.

I don't think of her so much these days. But when I do, I realise she's at the heart of it, at the heart of my life, at the heart of me, always has been. Looking back now, to the time we were together, that sense of joy so quickly returns. Swiftly followed by the pain, the wound as raw as ever. I still miss her, it's as simple as that. It's the truth. It's what's real. Maybe Maria's the only ingredient of my life that's been real.

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I went back to that same spot by the river at the same time the next day. Of course I did, even though it was raining. It's only a shower, that's what I told myself, it'll soon leave off. But it didn't and I got very wet and what was worse, Maria didn't show. The day after was sunny, but by the time I arrived at the river bank two people were sitting on the bench and they were embracing. It made me angry. Yes, quite unreasonable, but I was somewhat confused and not, you might say, at my most rational. I walked up and down and smoked several cigarettes, cursing under my breath. Eventually the courting couple moved away and I was back in what I regarded as my rightful place, on the seat, waiting for Maria. My Maria, as I'd already started to think of her. Again, she didn't come. On the third day I began to get a familiar feeling. She had dismissed me as a dull and boring scientist; she had no further interest in me; she would avoid this area of town at all costs. If she spotted me, she'd walk away. I even began to read the text book that I'd carried around with me for the last three days or at least tried to.

'Guess who?' I felt soft fingers against my eyelids.

'The Queen of Sheba.' No idea why. I wasn't good at easy quips.

'Wrong, wrong, weird and nerdy Bertie. It's Maria from Korea.'

When we'd exchanged names, Maria had thought Kevin simply too weird. She'd already called me Einstein a few times, so decided Albert suited me better. During our one date this had somehow become Bertie.

She came and sat next to me, but quickly stood up again. 'I feel too high for sitting still, Bertie. Let's go for a walk. Soak up some of this sunshine.'

She was wearing a simple white dress, very short and with a low neckline. It showed a lot of bare, softly-tanned skin. She was wearing her black hair loose and I saw for the first time how long it was, nearly to her waist. She had some small blue flowers – perhaps forget-me-nots – fastened above her left ear and a glittery choker around her neck. I found it difficult to focus on conversation. Following the river, our steps took us away from town. We were soon within meadowland, immersed in greenery – hedgerows, riverside plants, trees in the distance.

'Isn't the country air wildly exhilarating?' she said. 'Intoxicating. Who needs drugs or alcohol or sex. Nature just turns me on.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'It's a nice day.' I was proud of my maturity in hardly reacting at all to her mention of s.e.x.

'Nice?' She made it sound like an insult. 'No, we can do a lot better than "nice", Bertie. Every day's a carousel. A happening. A space flight. An opportunity to be who you want to be. To do your own thing.' She looked at me. 'Don't you feel it, Bertie? All that potential in the air? It's living. Being alive is fab. The greatest trip.'

I took a risk. 'It is when we're together.'

'Aaah. Bless him. So sweet.' But she smiled when she said it, and gave me that flirty look.

I took a second risk and reached for her hand. 'Unhand me, sir,' she cried. But she didn't pull away. Instead, she leant against me, just for a moment, and smiled up at me. 'Oh, Bertie,' she giggled. I was in heaven. Yes, life was grand.

Our conversations rather blur together now, as I look back from this point in time, so far in the future of those two naive youngsters. I do remember it was during that walk that I began to get to know her. We exchanged information about families. I told her my parents had retired to the coast, but were now regretting it, missing all their old friends and neighbours. She seemed a bit guarded about her family. She was born in Ireland but had lived in England most of her life. I got the impression she was from quite a well-to-do family but she seemed to feel somewhat guilty about that. Turned out she wasn't a student at all. She filled her days making and selling miscellaneous craft items, mostly jewellery, made from various odd bits of material, found or cut from something else. She also made clothes, using a variety of skills like crochet, knitting, macramé (she had to explain to me what that was). She liked adding embroidery to things she bought cheaply from Oxfam – t-shirts, shorts, skirts. She then sold them. She had a share of a stall in the market on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

'Such talent,' I said. 'You must show me some of your creations.' She pointed to the choker around her neck. I looked closely at it. That gave me an excuse to get so near that I could breathe in the smell of her, no perfume, the pure natural essence that was Maria. I found it the most intoxicating of scents, but I didn't tell her, not then. The choker was colourfully embroidered with flower motifs and appeared to be studded with diamonds.

'No, silly,' she laughed. 'Just bits of glass. But it's quite effective, don't you think?' She posed.

As we walked, she flitted about like a butterfly. She'd spot a dragonfly or hear a snatch of birdsong and skip off in pursuit. Then she'd return, clutching some treasure - a leaf, a wild flower, a smooth pink pebble. She'd grab my arm and lean against me as she explained her wondrous find. In between these excursions, she sang snatches of songs - 'Nights in White Satin,' I seem to remember and, rather bizarrely, Dylan's 'Lay Lady Lay'. Then she'd launch into a never-ending stream of questions, about religion and politics and literature: who was my favourite poet? my favourite artist? my favourite novel? what sort of music did I like? what was my view of fashion? where in the world did I wish I lived? To most of her questions I could manage little more than a mumbled, hopelessly inadequate reply. If only she'd asked about physics or science fiction, I'd have been okay, but about anything else I knew virtually nothing and hadn't even thought about it enough to form an opinion. On the other hand, Maria seemed to know everything about everything and had an opinion she couldn't wait to share. I fell in love with her that day, although it was a long time later that I told her. Amazingly, she also found something in me to admire. Maybe also to love, although she never said.

As we were coming back towards the town, we were caught by a shower. It was that sort of September. We sheltered rather inadequately under the heavy branches of a gnarled old oak tree. We had to stand close together to share its meagre protection. Our first kiss felt the most natural thing in all the world, slow and sure, so different from the hesitancy and tentativeness that had typified my previous experiences. I felt I was born to kiss Maria. The sun came out before the rain had stopped. We were rewarded by a bold, extravagant rainbow, which gave Maria great delight. She twirled around, her hair swinging out like a ceiling fan. She jumped up and down on the spot, clapping her hands

vigorously, and shrieking. It was a performance I was to get used to: it was how Maria signalled elation and elation was a frequent emotion for Maria. I too admired the rainbow. Then feeling at last on safe ground, I explained as best I could how the sunlight reflects off raindrops and the coloured rays with different wave lengths contained within the white light come off at different angles. That's why they produce the appearance of the spectrum we call a rainbow.

'Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,' Maria recited. 'Keats wrote that. He meant science.' She looked at me. She was not smiling. 'Unweave a rainbow, that's what scientists do.' She seemed genuinely sad, as though she blamed me for taking away all the mystery of the world.

'But I can still admire a rainbow's beauty,' I insisted. 'Even though I know why it's there. Its beauty doesn't have to be based on something mystical or magical or inexplicable.'

'Your truth, Bertie.' This was the first time she showed me her stern face. 'It's different from my truth.'

We headed back, walking a little apart. But this was not an argument that ran deep, or lasted long, and we were soon sharing more of her light-hearted fancies. The rainbow became something of a symbol for us, a symbol both of our differences and (at my insistence) our sameness. The world was beautiful, we agreed. But we perceived and appreciated that beauty in different ways.

Walking together was our main activity throughout that Autumn and on into the mild Winter. We walked and talked, holding hands or with our arms around each other. We often stopped to kiss. During the one significant cold snap, we spent days sitting together in Maria's room. She had her own room in a shared house, with an effective two-bar electric fire. I would watch her for hours, as she

stitched and sewed, polished stones, crafted necklaces and bracelets. In the evenings she played the guitar and sang. I loved watching her long fingers stroke the strings. Sometimes I'd sing along, but our voices didn't really fit and anyway I preferred to listen and watch. We made love in that room, many times. I told her I loved her. She told me she loved everyone and everything.

Maria managed to combine a lightness of spirit with genuine commitment in a way I'd never met before nor since. She cared passionately about so many serious issues and yet could laugh and sing as though she had not a care in the world. She lived for the present, she thought the past should be forgotten and she cared nothing for the future. She was a committed women's libber, went on marches, waved banners, chanted slogans. She bought me Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and tested me when I said I'd read it. She protested about hunting and about circuses; she was a vegetarian and spoke about the rights of animals (a bizarre idea so it seemed to me) long before it became fashionable. She was on the pill and was quite open about the fact, a further revelation to me. It was still usual in those days for girls to pretend they were virgins even if they weren't. She believed in pantheism – another term she had to explain to me - but insisted she wasn't a pantheist (because she rejected all labels). She was opposed to the Vietnam War, she was anti-American, she had a vehement hatred of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, a cause she explained to me at great length. I didn't buy goods from South Africa for years afterwards. She believed that much ancient wisdom had been lost. She always used natural remedies for illnesses rather than chemical potions. She thought money should be abolished.

From casual conversation in the house Maria shared, I realised that drug-taking was a way of life there. Maria admitted to having tried drugs, but, as

usual with her, the story was complicated to the same extent as she claimed it to be simple: 'Drugs give you a different view of the world,' she said. 'They help you see that you don't need drugs.' I tried to make sense of this but I couldn't so she explained further. 'It's not about expanding your mind, Bertie. It's about freedom. Freedom from cages. The cages of seven colours in the rainbow, of five senses, of three dimensions. Of one sun and one moon. The cage of yes and no being the only options. Of the choice between yin and yang. The cage of taking pot and the cage of not taking pot.' When she looked at me, I was sure she was having me on. Almost.

By the early days of summer, we were boyfriend and girlfriend, or at least that's how I saw it: we were a couple, an 'item' as they say these days. Term had finished. We took the train down to the coast and camped for a week on a cliff top. We hadn't planned it and no-one knew where we were. That was the point (so Maria explained).

The weather was fine but there was a strong onshore wind all week. We walked a lot, we talked a lot, we laughed a lot. We made love. We paddled in the sea, lay on the cliff top, watched the seagulls and made love again. We flew kites. Every morning, Maria wandered on the beach while I got breakfast. By the end of the week she'd collected enough shells and pebbles and seaweed to fill a rucksack. 'Raw material,' she called it. Our lunchtime table was a blanket spread out on top of the cliff, or sometimes in a sandy cove beneath. We devoured hot crusty bread and cheese and drank cheap wine out of paper cups. Dinner was usually fish and chips and more cheap wine. Apparently, Maria's version of vegetarianism didn't extend to fish. I didn't ask her to explain because I knew I wouldn't understand the explanation.

All the days were wonderful, but one particular afternoon has stayed in my mind. We were lying side by side on the cliff-top when Maria spotted, against the pale blue sky, the white vapour trail of an airplane. Of course, she found it to be a thing of beauty. She didn't ask me to explain it, but a little later she did ask me a question. 'Tell me this, Bertie, my wise scientist. Airplanes are made of metal, aren't they?'

I nodded.

'And metal is heavier than air?'

'Sure is.'

'So how is it that airplanes stay in the air, and don't just fall down?'

It wasn't often that Maria asked me to explain things, so this was a big moment for me. Fortunately, we'd had a course in fluid mechanics and I'd mugged it up for an exam only a month or so previously, so I felt confident I'd got a good answer. The shape of the cross-section of the wing ('like this,' I indicated) makes sure that the air flows faster above the wing than below. Hence the air-pressure is greater below the wing than above. Hence uplift. Hence flight.

'Wow,' said Maria. 'That's really cool. You're so clever, Bertie.' She leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. When she lay back down again, I could see she was mulling over my explanation. Then a worried frown crossed her fresh face. 'So how is it, Bertie, that sometimes airplanes fly upside down?'

I felt deflated like a pricked balloon. I had no answer. Somehow, Maria could always wrong-foot me.

Later we watched the seagulls. Maria didn't ask me how they managed to fly. We laughed about seagulls flying upside down. The wind rose and the gulls relished it. They seemed to simply float on the air, as they spread their wings

and leant into the wind, hovering and keeping their balance through small twitches of head or tail. Maria found them fascinating and, alongside her, so did I. We had a competition to try and pick the bird that would stay longest before it resorted to flapping its wings. I won. The winning gull's prize was the remaining crumbs from our lunch. My prize was conferred when we returned to the tent. It was personal and magical.

Magical is a good word to describe that whole week. It was a culmination of what was, in effect, my alternate education. In so many ways Maria taught me about the world – or her version of it - and brought me into that world. She taught me about simplicity and complexity, about the important things we ought to care about, but also about how two people can care for each other and create something special. I'd say unique, but I know now young lovers always think like that, as if they have invented love, and perceive it in a way that no-one has ever done before. It's never true, of course, but it feels like that. What was definitely true was the sense of enchantment that surrounded us throughout the holiday: it was the best week of my life. Now, so many years later I am in a position to confirm it. Yes, I never experienced anything better, before or since.

During the nine-and-a-half months Maria and I were together, I often tried to talk to her about the future, our future. I wanted to share my future with her and I told her so, not necessarily to get married because I knew her dislike of labels extended to regarding the notion of 'wife' as barely removed from that of 'slave'. No, I accepted marriage was too bourgeois an institution for Maria, her wild spirit was not to be stifled by matrimony, but I couldn't imagine us not being together. I wanted us to share everything, beginning with living together. Maria told me not to talk of such things. Live for today was her motto. Be cool, chill out. So I suppose I should have realised she didn't feel the same way as I

did, that for her our relationship was simply a pleasurable interlude, a bit of fun, no more, no less. For me there was a certainty that we were going to be partners through life. How could it be otherwise? I couldn't imagine life without her. So the end came as a thunderbolt. A catastrophe.

I remember letting myself into her house. I had a key by this time. Jake was in the living room, lounging on the sofa, listening to music, smoking something that was probably not tobacco. 'Hi Jake,' I said as I passed the open door and bounded up the stairs. When I opened Maria's door, the first thing I noticed was the bed. It was neatly made. Maria never made her bed. Then I saw the desk, the bare wood with just a lamp standing in one corner. All her bits and pieces, pots and boxes, scraps of material: all gone. The guitar wasn't leaning in the corner. I opened the wardrobe. It was empty. I ran back downstairs.

'Where is she?'

Jake looked up, but said nothing.

'Maria. Where is she? Where's she gone?'

'Oh, Maria,' said Jake, slowly, taking a puff on his cigarette. 'Gone out. I think.'

'But where, man? Where's she gone? Her room's empty.'

'Oh, yes.' He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. 'Yes, Maria.'

'Jake. Just tell me. Where. Has. Maria. Gone.'

'Away,' said Jake, suddenly coherent. 'Yes, I remember now. She said she was going away.'

I tried a lot harder, but got no further. Either Jake didn't know where Maria had gone, or he knew and wasn't saying, or he was too high to know whether he knew or not. I went back to her room and stared for a long while at the bareness of what had been such a warm and loving place. I searched in vain

for some remnant of her, some evidence she'd been there. I could smell her on the pillow. Essence of Maria. And under the pillow I found the note. But it didn't say where she'd gone.

Later, I went to the house again and spoke to the other people who lived there. Either there was a general conspiracy of silence or they genuinely did not know where Maria had gone. In the end, I thought the latter more likely. To just up and leave, with nothing but a wave and a smile, was Maria's style. A free spirit. Blown away on the breeze. Gossamer-like.

* * * * *

Dear Bertie

Thank you for the good times.

Thank the seagulls when next you see them.

Please forget me immediately and remember me forever.

Good luck with finding the questions but don't believe the answers even if they are upon you proved.

Maggie said that love was the flower of life and blossomed unexpectedly and without law, and must be plucked where it was found, and enjoyed for the brief hour of its duration.

Maria

xx

