

Down and out in Paris and Kensington Gardens

"As for me, I am totally and truly ready to go" - Patti Smith.

25th July 2003, 2:39pm, Mrs Robertson's Calculus Class

It is absolutely official, psychologically proven in fact, that certain forms of pure mathematics inhibit the creative mind. I know this because, as I sit in a grey classroom, a third room on a third floor, trying to evaluate trigonometry functions, I feel as empty and as bleak as the industrialised carpet on the floor. I hold the calculus textbook responsible for the lack of *bohème* and the insipid fluorescent lights. As the teacher's voice drones on, I long for a life of poetry - for T.S. Elliott, red wine, a long black scarf and a man in a trade union. I have eyebrows like Frida Kahlo; I am an artist. I do not belong here.

2:43pm, two questions and a conversation about what I'm doing in the weekend later

Maybe even this equation with its long lines of scrawled algebra has a solution; a resolution for my discord less dramatic than jumping off a bridge or deriving a gradient formula. Last night, I received a phone call from my boyfriend. Well, not really my boyfriend, more my friend who is a boy who I like to kiss sometimes. He is also imprisoned by pure mathematics, but unlike me seems unperturbed by this fact. He has a silver heart and a thousand colourful friends - some of whom live in a council-owned doomed for demolition next year. They have free electricity and in certain hours of the evening, hot water. They also have a spare room with a high ceiling and a dirty double mattress. "We could try it, just for a while," my boy who happens to be a friend enthused. "It might be an adventure."

3:40pm, my house in Karori

We have agreed to rendezvous at the base of the bucket fountain at six o'clock. This leaves me a mere two hours to gather the paraphernalia needed for such an ambitious expedition. Hairbrush, sketch block, art-charcoals. My Feminist-Action-Aotearoa T-shirt, pale pink taffeta skirt, an English-to-Russian dictionary, my gold Orotan wallet, a plastic pokemon figurine. I have no bag sufficiently big, or bohemian enough to transport the mountain that I have created in the middle of my bedroom floor. Panic. Three minutes of unbridled stress and rage during which many shoes, books and cushions are thrown at the wall. In an attempt to calm down, I sit, smoke the last of my weed, and realise that no moment like this is ever flawless without the eating of a muesli bar.

I amble to the kitchen, pondering the pressing ethical issues of oatly chew versus boysenberry-apple twist, and have an idea of shining brilliance. I am a genius. I am an artist. I take a rubbish bag from the bottom shelf of my pantry, and an oatly chew *and* a boysenberry-apple twist in celebration. Indulge in another pleasant interlude of narcotics, eat my muesli bars, gather the mountain on my floor into the rubbish bag, add two extra safety-pins to each leg of my jeans, don a pair of big, black Jackie-O sunglasses, and hoist the rubbish bag over my shoulder. I

look in the mirror.

Petunia Love stares back at me. Petunia is a woman with frosted pink lipstick that I become on Tuesday afternoons, or on escapist Friday nights filled with vodka and cherry syrup. Exceptionally flirtatious, Petunia Love has another half, an accomplice, a partner in crime. Derek the Pink has a leopard-skin chiffon scarf and can make paper cranes out of napkins in cheap coffee houses. Derek and Petunia are just the sort of people who would squat in a high-ceilinged room in a house on Kensington Street. Mischievous night children with irrepressible imaginations. They have read every book ever written by Tom Woolfe, as they are artists. They always refer to themselves in the third person. Petunia sashays down her hallway - "So long Karori," she sings. My graceful exit is impeded at the front door, as my carelessly flung rubbish bag cannot pass through at the same time as me.

6:05pm, under the Bucket Fountain

Petunia Love and Derek the Pink begin their adventure five minutes late, which shows, by their standards, an unprecedented level of punctuality. Derek has added a pair of aviator goggles to his ensemble. Petunia tells him that he is exceptionally beautiful, and how nice it will be to have a house almost all to themselves. Derek tries to kiss his Petunia-fairy, but she dances away towards Ghuznee Street, swinging her rubbish bag behind her. Derek shrugs (real ladies are always elusive) and runs after her.

6:30pm, number 15 Kensington St

Derek pushes his goggles up onto his forehead, and knocks on the door. It is answered by a man with a shaggy red mane like a lion. He embraces Derek and calls him by a name he used to go by, but Derek says "No, we are called Derek and Petunia now." The man just smiles, rolls a joint and gives Petunia and Derek each a bowl of hot two-minute noodles. Petunia decides she likes this man immensely. After waltzing for a few hours to Bob Marley and discussing the political situation in Sierra Leone, Petunia and Derek go to sleep on the dirty mattress in their new high-ceilinged room. Petunia feels abundantly happy.

26th July, 2003, 8:17am, Lambton Quay

Petunia was most relieved to notice that Derek had brought his school uniform along on their adventure as well and had woken her up at a time that suggested going to school was factored into the day's plans. Although Petunia could not stand the stiltedness of pure mathematics, she could easily get drunk off the sounds she made as she pounded Chopin out on the keys of the grand piano in the empty school hall and, after all, Petunia and Derek agreed, allure and art were nothing if they did not come from an educated mind.

11:15am

Despite her aloof air and attempts to go respectably unnoticed, it seemed the entire school knew in great detail that a girl who called herself Petunia had left home to live with her boyfriend in a squat on Kensington Street. Did

they know her? Yes of course, on intimate terms. Was it P? Yeah, they'd seen her smoking it at the railway station. Did she worship the devil? Absolutely, she'd broken into a church before. The beautiful girls with shiny lips gazed at her in awe. The girls who smoked cigarettes behind the gym invited her to hang out with them at lunchtime. Behind her sunglasses, Petunia Love was quietly triumphant. She had achieved high school cult-hero status, immortalised in a hall of fame with suicides, accidental pregnancies, hostesses of orgiastic parties and beautiful girls with even more beautiful brothers. She would be missed if not present at school reunions twenty years into the future, and would never again have to stand on a school bus. Petunia sealed her place in history in a bathroom-stall graffiti shrine by signing, in flourishing lipstick, her initials in the cubicle furthest from the door.

3:40pm, a cheap café on Cuba St

As she recounted the day's events to Derek, he gave her his shy and proud smile that started reluctantly but spread out from the upturning corners of his mouth, from his heart and into his eyes. They walked hand in hand out of the café, and the sky opened to let tiny shards of rain drop to the ground.

7:00pm

Consumatum est. It is finished. I have left. I curse my cumbersome rubbish bag and stomp my sunglasses under my boots while waiting for the lights to change. Hot tears mingle with the cold rain and settle as damp parasites on my eyelashes. The tall buildings, the edges of balconies with overflowing gutterings and the harsh headlights of passing cars all stare apathetically ahead. I am white against the grey but they don't see me. I throw myself onto a bus and wallow for the entire journey in a loathing kind of self-pity. My house, inside, is mauve and quiet. I prepare myself for an onslaught of parental anger.

However, I am merely greeted with sympathetic smiles and raised eyebrows. My mother orders us all pizza and gives me a towel to dry my hair. Somehow my distraught and disconsolate sobs have subsided. I am absolutely ravenous.

Later

My mother lets Derek the Pink into my bedroom with a questioning look in her eyes. He looks at me from under a terrified wince. He has bought me a new pair of sunglasses and a packet of musk-flavoured Lifesavers. "Peace offering?" he whispers. He bites his thumbnail and tries to will the tears to stay in his eyes. And then it is all right - the shouted words and hot tears and the anxious look of the red-maned lion man washed down a drain with a torrent of muddy water and a pair of broken sunglasses. Calm. Outside it still rains. He kisses me with devious treacle, a warmth that starts at my lips but makes my fingertips tingle. My bedroom door is open, I stop, what if my mother can hear us? My mother, who gave me her book of Patti Smith poetry and who wears a plain gold band on her finger. There is an artery that leads to her heart, I am not worried.

Derek the Pink pushes my hair back from my face and can see my eyes. He tells me he thinks that maybe he

loves me, so I respond that this must be a matter of sublime coincidence because I am fairly sure that maybe I love him too. He is philosophical; he says that in fact our adventure was our greatest triumph yet. We are educated and elusive, he says, we left and have learnt much. We lie on my bed, touching each other's faces; I look at his eyes, and they run warm through the sand. We put a piece of paper between us and make lists of what it is we know. He draws hearts that shine like diamonds and writes Bob Dylan lyrics. I draw what he is dreaming, but this is what I write:

I am Petunia Love, exponent of bourgeois pride. I know that freedom is not a place, a cigarette on the sly, or an unironed school shirt. I am freedom, a house with a high ceiling; I adore Chopin, glitter, and perhaps even mathematics when I understand. I am maybe in love, wild horses. I am an artist. I belong.