

In times of the most catastrophic of catastrophes, the only place one can start is with the known knowns.

But what is known?

Start from scratch, Candice.

1. I'm not a girl. I Am Woman.

2. I'm over the age of eighteen, permitted to vote thanks to the efforts of the suffragettes, well past the years of growing tall and the perils of puberty and ready to pay full fare should I need to take public transport.

3. I'm not a virgin. I've had my heart broken more than once.

4. I live in my own flat with the lease in my own name.

5. I hold down a good job gained after years of slogging away at school and university.

6. I'm not reliant on a man for my future or fortune. I don't go by Miss. I'm not in the least bit interested in getting married. I don't even want to think about pregnancy or child rearing or choosing schools or being somebody's housewife.

I do want it. Someday. Just not now. Except the housewife bit. Is there an agency where you can hire a housewife so you can have all the good bits of marriage and none of the bad?

I digress.

7. I'm happy. I'm healthy. I'm well liked.

I'm a little egocentric, wouldn't you say?

If that was all there was this story wouldn't be very long. You'd think: *That was boring. Inane. Pointless. And not worth the effort I've put in to start it.*

Which brings me to the story of my life and where I am at this moment. All those things - boring, pointless, inane and not worth the effort I've put in to start it - unfortunately describe my current situation.

I think back on all the chances that had to happen for me to be here - all the lucky escapes, the miracles, the meetings, the opportunities, the full-term pregnancies that delivered generation after generation so I could exist, typing into my computer keyboard, the technology that was invented, the food industry, the health industry, the laws for equal rights and ... well, paper and ink, and education, all of the absurd, implausible, improbable events that brought me to this point - obviously they'd be for nothing if I'm not going to take my life out for a spin.

Which is not what I've been doing. Step after step, pace after pace, plod after plod with no thought for where I'm heading. I have a job, a flat and a boyfriend ... Whoops, I haven't mentioned him, have I? And he'd pull out his Sad Face if he knew.

My boyfriend of two months (let's call him Gene for privacy's sake, although his real name is Godfrey Channing) is a sweet guy. He has a kind demeanour and a well-paying job and a loyalty unsurpassed by my other boyfriends. I'm hoping he's not The One. Because I'm not ready for The One. I want to experience. I want to know myself and the world, I want to revel in the wonder of being here.



I know what you're thinking. *You should've thought about that before you got yourself a job where they're counting on you, before you took a lease out on your flat and, worst of all, you should've thought of this before you got into a relationship.*

My defence is I didn't. I only know this now because yesterday, during a personal development day at work, the facilitator gave us a personality test.

Which, unfortunately, I failed.

I'm apparently rule-driven rather than creative. A wallflower rather than the life of the party. Brain instead of heart. Reality not ambition. In other words, an introverted, rule-driven pragmatist who lacks emotional dexterity.

I have something important to say here, so listen up.

THIS IS NOT ME!

Anyone who's ever spent time with me knows this isn't a valid description. And now it's plainly apparent I've well and truly misplaced myself.

Last night Gene worked a shift so I was home alone, pacing like a ghost, forgetting to eat dinner, seeking sense in my Self.

Today I need to get back in touch with my emotions. My gut needs to tell me more than just Time to eat. I need to break some rules. Be that lively, vivacious, spirited being of my youth.

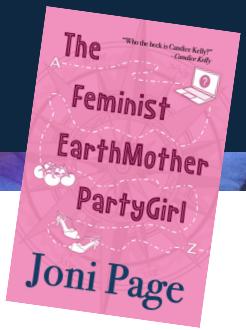
Let's face it: school goes on for an interminably long time then is over in an instant. Now my twenties are about to do the same.

There's a Me out there somewhere and I need to find her, to break free from the well-worn road, to strike out anew.

To Liberation!

I'm going to follow my inner voice!

Damn it, there's the doorbell.



Gene wants to move in.

“Sure. That would be great,” I tell him. “I need to sublet my flat while I go in search of The Truth.”

He looks at me in that uncomprehending way he has as he stands at my front doorstep. He’s got a dazzlingly handsome face but not a lot goes on under his trendy blonde haircut.

“Sublet? What? Uh, I don’t get it?”

I smile. “I’m going on a journey.” My heart lifts with every word.

His pretty blue eyes reflect the sky. “You’re going on a holiday? I’ll come, too? Sounds like fun?”

As always, he’s unsure of himself. Dear Gene. He’s sweet and compliant and a head turner. Kind of a Trophy Boyfriend. Yep, you’re right: it’s a world gone mad. *She’s talking about him like men used to talk about women, dating him because he looks good without any intention of committing.*

Ah, my first Truth. Women, having complained mightily that our marketability as a partner was based on looks and whether we’d support our men without making a fuss about our own lives, are now free to do the same thing to men. And although I’m glad the score is even, Chaos Theory has romped straight in. Change one little thing and the whole system goes belly-up.

Maybe I wouldn’t be so flustered about the passage of my life if I was married and spending my days proudly keeping my house clean and teaching my daughters how to cook. Maybe I wouldn’t be so freedom-fixated if my life depended on finding someone to marry me so I wouldn’t end up begging or selling my goodies on street corners. Feminism has brought with it freedom, but such liberation has called our lives into question. Now we have a choice: career or motherhood, or career and motherhood. I wonder if things are easier or a whole lot more complex.

Gene is waiting for an answer, his brow furrowing and creasing and bending askew.

“Not a holiday. A journey,” I repeat. “Still planning it. I’ll get back to you.” I step back to close the door.

He holds it open. “Can I come in?” He blinks, his long lashes pathetically attempting to wipe the confusion from his brain.

I push it again. “I’m busy.”

He peers past me, holds it open firmly. “Do you have a-a-a visitor?” His lip begins to wobble.

Damn it. He thinks I’m cheating. “Just busy.”

“Are you okay?”

Still with the questions. Wasn’t I the one who was asking them? What were they again? They flash their grubby hands across my brain and I see instantly only an introvert would push a lover out the door.

Gene leaves half an hour later, satisfied I’m not having an affair, and in other ways, too. On his way out, he’s turned his clinical attention to hygiene, and the remnants of our conjugation now lie imprisoned in latex in the bin, where they belong.

I lay in bed alone, thinking about life, my knickers elsewhere, the skirt of my dress upturned against my chest. Boyfriend satisfaction level: well, he’s cute, like I said. And out to prove a point today. A tick on my Physical Union Self-Satisfaction Indicator. I have a job I love, a roof over my head, a supportive family, fabulous friends.



And an aching desire to find the truth about Who I Am.

I revise the scant things I remember about Chaos Theory. I started out studying Science to save us from a climate crunch with my amazing physics, but wound up merging into English Lit because, as my mother says, *Words can be powerful*. Now it seems this wasn't me Following My Heart as I claimed, but instead veering crazily from one road to another. Chaos Theory in applied form.

Again, I digress.

I close my eyes and think of the many paths before me. When I choose one it will change me, which will decide my next path, which will change me again and decide my next path, and so on and so on catapulting me through a giant feedback system into eternity or as close to it as I can humanly get.

Which sounds like a recipe for getting completely lost. In other words, where I am now.

Time to think logically. If I call the present A and my future Z, how many Zs are there? And which Z do I want? And how can I get there, when making a decision may shoot me down entirely the wrong path?

Again, like where I am now.

Perhaps I need a Z Register. Yes! First, I need to consider all my Zs! I jump out of bed and hunt absentmindedly for my knickers while my brain races across the likely outcomes of my life.

Oh, knickers be damned, I need to get this down on paper. Get back to you later.