

Teens

Emily Mortimer

There is something both terrifying and acutely embarrassing about being an adolescent, but at the same time I live in constant dread of nobody noticing that I am no longer a child of six. Although growing up is generally a ghastly experience I often wonder what it would be like if it never happened - that always makes me feel better about the whole thing. It would be horrid to wake up one morning and suddenly find that you were a grown-up person without having felt it coming on. I suppose it would be like dying without getting old beforehand - with no feeling of sudden freedom to make your past ordeal seem worthwhile.

When you are my age it is hard to cope with the contradictions in yourself. Sometimes I feel that I am really quite clever and impressive, but just when I become intolerably pleased with myself I am thrown into a spasm of mal-coordination and seem to have the mental age of a three-year-old. I have been sent to two posh schools and been given one of the best educations available. I know a lot about things like the Russian Revolution and *Macbeth* and yet I have a cold sweat whenever I am asked to tell the time. Despite the thousands of pounds that have been spent on my brain, at the age of 14 I am still incapable of reading the hands of the clock. If this is not a symptom of complete stupidity (which is probably the case) then I suppose it must be adolescence.

I often long to be a sophisticated, smooth, interesting, intelligent and un-paranoid 14-year old. Whenever I begin to think that I might be becoming slightly less of a clot I always manage to prove myself wrong by falling off the bus, or locking myself in the downstairs loo, or beginning a joke and realising half way through that I've forgotten the end to it, or worse still, remembering how it goes, telling it and then realising that no one is listening.

I have always had a vague notion that I am basically a clumsy teenager, but there have been a few isolated incidents which have really driven this home. My Dad once took me, instead of Mum who had 'flu, to a posh lunch at which he was to make a speech. I have never been so scared in my life as when someone pointed me to the opposite side of the room from the Very Honoured Guests. I was left utterly Daddyless and confronted by a huge table of frighteningly intelligent looking faces.

I was feeling pleased with myself and quite a success throughout the first course, which was melon with a few of those vulgar red cherries heaped in the middle. I, of course, had no idea that you were meant to start from the outside and work inwards with all those rows of knives and forks, so I guessed and used a spoon. Everything was going so well until I was faced with a huge bowl of onion soup and found myself left with only a little butter knife with which to eat it. The myth had been dispelled and the true Emily was revealed to all and sundry.

The only time when my clumsiness really disappears is every evening just before I go to bed. I stand in front of my mirror pretending to be Brigitte Bardot and pout a lot. Only then does my adolescence dissolve away and I become a cool, sophisticated, sexy and, I suppose, totally unreal grown-up.

It is hard to know what to think about important things like politics and education and the bomb when you are 14. I reckon this is because I am influenced so much by what my Mum and Dad think and can never separate my opinions from theirs. There is something to be said loathing

your parents, in that you know exactly what to think about life because you simply believe wholeheartedly in everything that your Mum and Dad are against. Although I am often confused, about what I believe in, I do know that everyone should have the chance to be educated in the best possible way; that our country should do nothing at all that might in any way support the regime in South Africa; and that all the billions of pounds that are being spent on nuclear weapons would do so much more good if they were used to stop people dying in Ethiopia, or to pay the nurses. I sometimes find it difficult to understand people who are very right-wing, because I think they are selfish and I am often irritated by my friends who adore Mrs Thatcher, because I know they have been brainwashed by their stockbroking fathers and head-scarved mothers. I suppose it is narrow-minded of me to say that, because I know full well that there are lots of lovely, funny ladies who wear silk scarves displaying riding tack, and there are plenty of rough, aggressive and very smelly women who have boycotted South African sherry and gone to demonstrate at Greenham Common.

One of the good things about being my age is that you can have extravagant dreams about the future and no one can prove that they will never happen. I have convinced myself that I will become the most famous actress in the world, after having gained three As at A-level, won a scholarship to Oxford, had countless impassioned affairs with older men and got married in an immense white dress with a veil longer than the Princess of Wales's. It will not be until when, at the age of 16, I fall madly in love with a bus conductor from Cleethorpes and all those ambitions will be forgotten.

It has been very hard to write about what it's like to be 14, because, in the end, I suspect it isn't much different from being five or 38 - life often seems hard and occasionally seems wonderful. I just long for the days when I can go to bed and pray for something more worthwhile no blackheads and the ability to stop myself blushing.

20s

Philip Kerrigan

Three years ago, I was working 12-hour shifts in a burger restaurant, living in a bedsit with a bass guitarist on the floor above and a railway line below, and scribbling stories in whatever spare time I could grab. I'd left college vowing to be published by the age of 25, or give up. There were only two years to go. I was worried.

Then I wrote a book call *Dead Ground*. It got me an agent and a publisher. It was well-reviewed; a thriller with a little something extra. It came out in America, Japan and Norway. Soon it'll be in paperback, then a film with a screenplay by me. I'm 27 and lucky to be making a living from work I love to do. It may not last, but for the moment it's a perfect end to the story. Except, of course, that it's the beginning.

As if to underline this, I met a bunch of college friends for the first time in years, and it occurred to me that we're all discovering a previously undiscovered "difficult age". You might still believe that it was adolescence, but it wasn't. Twenty-seven is *the* difficult age. Because you're halfway. Halfway between the idealism of youth and the cynicism of middle age. Halfway along in establishing yourself in whatever career you chose. Halfway from the innocent confidence of ignorance to the knowledgeable self-possession of achievement. We're also the gap on the marketing man's wall chart; too young for Dunn and Co, too old for Top Shop. Aware that we'll never be young again, but not ready to think about getting old.

Instead, we concern ourselves with the immediate. For me, it's a constant sense of dissatisfaction. On one hand I'm impressed with what I've achieved - "Look everybody: two novels, some radio plays, a screenplay that *might* get made into a film". On the other, I know how high my sights are, how little I've done compared to Shakespeare or Thomas Mann, or Harold Robbins. Being told that you have to grow into that kind of achievement is no use. You're dogged by the question: "What if I'm run over by a truck tomorrow? Only two novels, only one lousy screenplay. What about posterity, what about the Nobel Prize?" My Major fear - aside from Aids, nuclear war and pollution - is of having first-rate ambition allied to third-rate talent. And what about marriage, children, all the travelling you want to do? How can you fit them all in?

Looking at others, I noticed that their jagged edges are being torn away. It's happening to me, too. We haven't been completely smoothed off yet; but we've begun to suspect that nothing we do is going to make a difference, nothing will actually change.

We've become cynical optimists, trained through apathy or disdain, to accept that second-rate minds will continue to mouth political doublespeak on the television as they guide our world on to further disasters. We tell ourselves that we're too busy to step in and do something about it. Maybe we are. While Bob Geldof fed the world, I was having a hard time feeding myself. But it still worries me that the wrong sort of people go into politics and that we continue to elect them.

When I was 16, I thought my character was fully formed and I didn't allow myself to mature any more than I could help for the next 10 years. It was probably the only way a poor boy with no literary connections could get to be a published novelist. I *had* to hang on to the selfishness and arrogance of adolescence merely to keep believing that I could do it. I think I knew my faults all along, but it's only recently that I've had the courage or the leisure to start doing something about

them.

One thing I like about getting older is the fact that the mountainous highs and the swooping depressions of late adolescence have levelled out. I also like the fact that I have finally learned to make decisions outside of work occasionally. I *don't* like the fact that there is less hair on my head than three years ago (but being six-foot-six, no one can see it yet unless they're leaning out of an upstairs window). I still feel uncomfortable in adult company, as if I were a child, but kids look on me as an adult, so it must be true. I've also lost the sense of being eternal that I had as a kid. My tastes in art, literature and music haven't changed radically. They just continue to broaden and deepen as I find out more.

Growing up, if you're lucky, seems to be about looking further around and understanding more of what you see. My face - never a picture of gilded youth - isn't quite as fresh as it was, I can't booze all night any more without feeling terrible next day. But these are small fees in exchange for the growing sense of getting somewhere, and of that somewhere being worth the trouble when you arrive.

As for achieving something on the Geldof scale, it occurs to me that he had to make it as a rock star before he could get the public's attention for *Live Aid*. If I ever do become famous, expect a collection envelope from *Write Aid*.

30s

Victoria Wood

I get up. I'm 33½ My pyjamas are so old they have Rag Tag and Bobtail on them. I look in the mirror and what do I see? Yes, I still have a schoolgirl complexion greasy skin, acne and blue lips from sucking a Biro. I also have bags under my eyes and wrinkles. The overcrowding on my face is now so bad my nose has applied for a council flat. I have irrigation grooves running down to the corners of my mouth. They will prove very useful if I ever decide to grow rice on my top lip.

I am being too hard on myself, you cry. On second thoughts, I'll cry, I'm the one with the facial drainage system. They are but laughter lines, you say to me. Ho, ho. If I'd known laughter was going to ruin my looks in this fashion I'd never have watched *Howard's Way*.

I'm definitely getting hairier as the years go by. All my friends are. They said age would bring poise and confidence. They never said a blind thing about body hair so rampant it could be advertised in a hardy plant catalogue as suitable for rapid camouflage of an unsightly oil tank or air raid shelter.

I get dressed. I choose an outfit with skill and originality, every item perfectly matched and displaying a sense of taste both flawless and jaunty. This is cobbles. If everything is the same colour this is only because of a washing accident involving a Chelsea Girl sweatshirt. Well, I'm sorry, but I don't understand the symbols. Little hands dangling in the water, what does that mean? Don't dangle your hands in the water? Do dangle them in the water? How will I get the door of the washing machine shut? And what's that triangle? Don't forget to iron them, you might get run over? Don't fold them into a triangle? If you do get run over, fold them into a triangle and place it behind the vehicle concerned as a warning to other road users?

I have my breakfast. Multi vitamins, skimmed milk, muesli and herb tea. Am I radiant and bursting with vitality? Am I bog-roll. I am in a filthy mood because all tastes so dreary and the vitamins are so huge they stick out of the sides of my neck like Plug in that comic.

I leave the house. I am 33, I am a sophisticated businesswoman, I have a briefcase. It contains a multi-million pound contract, a *Bunty* and a packet of Rolos. (A late result - Vitamins nil - Rolos three). I travel to the airport, independent yet still very feminine and well able to deal with any unsolicited sexual harassment or verbal abuse. I don't get any.

I browse around the airport bookshop. There are 894 novels on sale, all about 33-year-old lady tycoons who run huge business empires, play the viola and still have time to lick Mötet and Chandon from the orifices of exquisitely formed Abyssinian war correspondents. Huh. Just try it. Champagne corks are lethal in the hands of the uninitiated and believe me, there is nothing erotic about licking it off the curtains. That's the only time they do touch alcohol, these mogulettes, when they're sipping it from an Abyssinian nutty cluster. Fired by their example I order a Perrier water. At the last minute I weaken and drop a couple of Rolos in it.

I sit on the airport bus. I am an experienced traveller, assertive and independent. The bus stops at a terminal, I don't know which terminal it is and I don't like to ask. A businessman sitting opposite stares hard at me, obviously bowled over by that unbeatable combination of maturity and youthful exuberance common to us 33-year-olds. I brace myself for his opening gambit. Here it comes. "Are you Pam Ayres?" I beat him about the polyester. No, I am not Pam Ayres. Neither am

I Shirley Williams, Simon Dee or Dixon of Dock Green.

On the plane I am organised and efficient. I have ordered a vegetarian meal. I am given a lot of salami and an artichoke. In a relaxed and assured manner, I point out the error to the air hostess. She doesn't hear me. This is partly because she is down at the other end of the plane, and partly because I haven't said anything. I end up making a hearty meal of the artichoke and a handi-wipe towelette.

I read my magazine. It has a run down of what we may expect decade by decade. Teens - puberty and shoplifting . . . Twenties - experiment with eye shadow and buy a Renault Five . . . Here we are - The Thirties "You will find you are now at the height of your sexual powers; passionate, sensual and capable of experiencing true erotic ecstasy. You may also find You need extra moisturisers." I had noticed about the moisturiser.