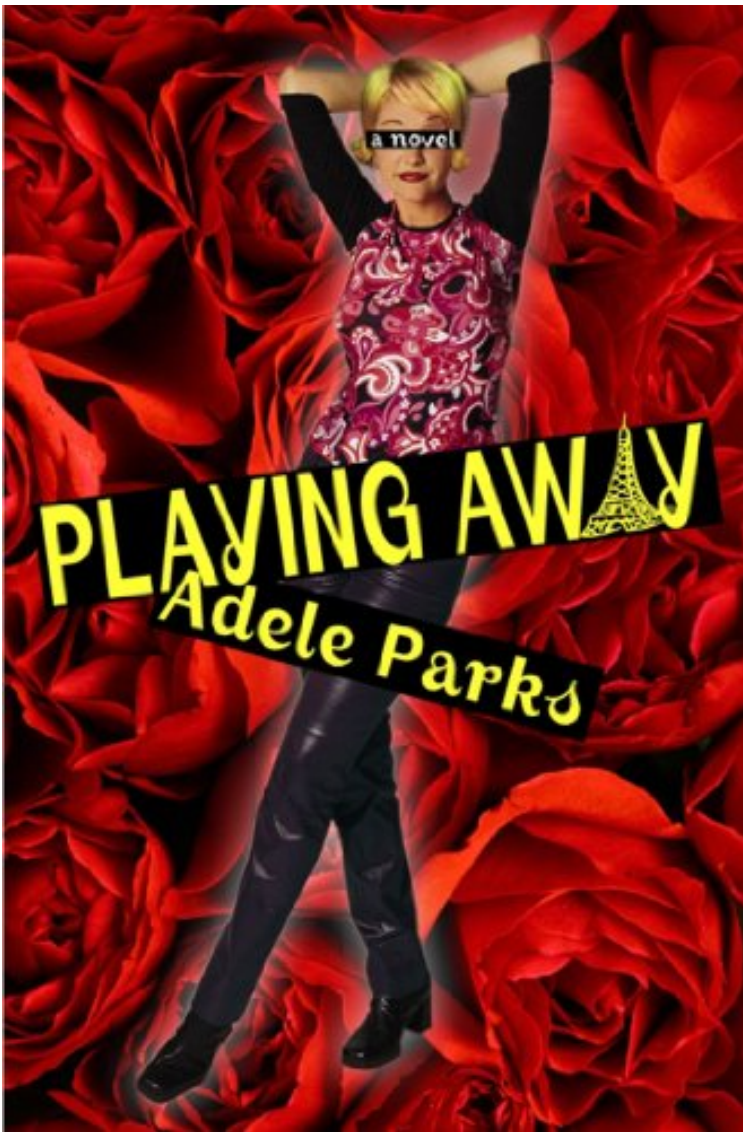


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# Playing Away (English Edition)



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt's sexy. It's roguish. It's hilarious. It's a sensational debut novel from London, a joyously comic take on modern marriage and its fallout. Single people may feel they have it rough...but wait until you see what happens when married folk fall in lust. Connie Green's life should be perfect. She has a hot career, her wonderful husband Luke, and a bunch of great girlfriends. But Connie has a big problem. She has just met overwhelmingly sexy John at a business conference. Her head and her heart said, "no way," but her traitorous body shrieked, "yes, YES!" Now Connie's deep into a tawdry affair, which is destroying her peace of mind and her grand plan for Happily Ever After. Maybe John is her destiny. After all, she's losing weight. It can't be a bad thing if she's losing weight. Can it? Connie longs to confide in her girlfriends. They've always discussed their sex lives before, preferably over cocktails. But this infidelity thing makes it a

trifle awkward. Rose would be horrified. For her, it's pretty clear-cut; nice girls don't have affairs. And Daisy is too busy being in love. Sam knows about John but she doesn't want to believe it. How could and why would Connie cheat on her lovely husband? Sam's working hard to ignore the fact that Connie's shagging John every chance she gets. Maybe Lucy would understand; she's bonking a married man herself. Connie just wishes Lucy would be a little less cynical about the whole thing. What Connie wants is...Well, Connie's not quite sure what she wants. And that's exactly the trouble. A novel for every woman juggling the untidy mix of work, romance, sex, and marriage, *Playing Away* shimmers with equal parts comic relief and penetrating insight. As Connie and her brave, silly, colorful friends search for answers along the precarious paths of love and lust, we glimpse more than a little bit of ourselves. With bold strokes both moving and outrageously funny, Adele Parks has crafted a stunningly revealing portrait of the lives of hip, urban women, poised at the cusp of a millennium.

Chapter One "Happy anniversary, darling." I struggle to open my eyes and sit up, as Luke carefully lays the breakfast tray on the bed. Pain au chocolat, fresh orange juice, coffee, cards and lilies. Anniversary fare. "Oh, thank you," I smile. My lazy, sexy, contented smile which I keep especially for wedding nights, anniversaries, birthdays, nights of seduction and other distinguished occasions. Since I married I've extended the usage to weekends, weekdays, sunny days, wet days, days with an r in the month and days without. I can't help it. I'm so happy. Delirious. I know it's a cliché, I know it's sick-making and I know single people or people in crappy marriages take an instant dislike to me. But it's just like that. He puts the tray on our bed and I clap my hands and shout, "How wonderful." We kiss, slowly, gently. "Thank you." "No, thank you for the best year of my life," smiles Luke. "No, thank you," I insist. I love this conversation, which can carry on indefinitely, both of us arguing over who's the most lucky to have married the other. I am. But this time, before we get too carried away, Luke jumps up. "Don't move," he instructs. As if. He dashes downstairs and returns with a bottle of Bollie and two champagne flutes. "De rigueur," he laughs. We open our cards, drink champagne and make love; the usual kind of things that couples celebrating their first wedding anniversary do. We keep asking each other, "Are you happy?" "Delirious. Are you happy?" "Never more so." This is another one of our favorite sketches. These words are so often repeated I answer without thinking. The truth of them is indisputable. We are wild about each other. I've never been happier, more content or more confident in my life. I had been fairly disdainful when my three younger sisters all rushed down the aisle before me. Although my mother and father had the opposite reaction. They were delighted and mollified; more so when my siblings settled in Sheffield, within a three-mile radius of our parental home. I had confounded my mother by insisting on "gallivanting off" to London, where, she advised me, "I could expect nothing but trouble." Therefore I labored under the knowledge that every year that ticked by, I further disappointed her. I wore the cloud of shame quite stylishly, mostly in cocktail bars and nightclubs. Although my mother thought I had terminal china stamped on my arse, top shelf city, it surprised my friends that I got engaged so young. That I got engaged at all. I was not blushing bride material. Before I met Luke I'd positioned myself as the absolute Cosmopolitan woman. I had always been an outrageous flirt and when flirting became frustrating I had hurried to be a good soldier of the sexual revolution. Like many women I was desperate to shake off the embarrassment of not knowing, and desperate to be known. I rushed and jostled and queue-jumped, then carelessly shrugged off my innocence. I left the image of one Madonna behind and took on the pop star version as a role model. No reserve. No trepidation. There wasn't a position in the Kama Sutra I didn't try (except the unappealing up-the-bum). On scores of occasions I indulged in a number of extraordinarily romantic and sexual liaisons. I thrived on the challenge. I lived for the hunt. I died for the kill. I was grateful that women had chained themselves to railings for me. I enjoyed being a "more than five less than ten girl." After all, they were all nice blokes, or gorgeous-looking, or I thought I loved them, or at least one of the three. I quickly became a "more than ten less than twenty girl." I was more often the ditcher than the ditchee. I'd done it all: one-night stands, long-term commitment, sleeping with men because everyone else wanted to, sleeping with a man because no one else wanted to, because they were fit, or cool, or captain of a sports team, because they were older than me, because they were younger, to help me get over a disastrous affair, to help them get over their last lay, because they wore their hair longer than anyone else, because they wore it shorter, because I was too tired to get a cab home and, on one occasion, because he did a clever trick with the wrapper of an amaretti biscuit. It was then that I stopped counting and began to wonder if shagging around was really what the suffragettes had had in mind. Even variety became boring. Then I met Luke. At a wedding. He was an usher and took the opportunity to flirt with me as he led me to my pew. He is over six feet with straight, floppy blond hair that simply demands fingers are run through it; he has this huge enveloping smile, and naturally

he was wearing tails. I instantly fell in lust. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I watched as he handed out song sheets, chatted to aunts and grannies, making them feel important and interesting. By the time Rose had cut the cake I was deeply in love. Luke. Luke had an altogether distinct seduction technique. A walking Time Out guide, Luke's fun to be with. Eternally unfazed and with an inability to do anything half-heartedly, he's one of those guys who will give anything a go: ceroc, body painting, mountain climbing, radio debates, canoeing, roller skating, greyhound racing. "Fancy a game of squash?" "I can't play squash," I'd replied, cursing my hand-to-eye-to-ball coordination, or rather, the magnificent lack of it. "I'll teach you." And he did. Because suddenly, when I was with him, I could do things that had previously seemed impossible. He approached everything with steady confidence and patience and although my approach was more haphazard and impatient, the confidence was infectious. We never went to pubs or sat in front of the TV, instead we did exciting, extraordinary, wondrous things on our dates. He always "just happened" to have tickets for the Comedy Club or opening nights for some obscure fringe performance, played out at venues with funny names like Onion Shed or Man in the Moon. We were always busy: swimming, windsurfing, visiting galleries or throwing dinner parties. We did everything together; he became my new best friend. My best, best friend. Pretty sharpish, I realized that he was the man I looked forward to looking back with. I felt a distinct release and relief. I was delighted to rediscover sex really could be game free, pain free, shame free. Within months of our meeting Luke offered me a beautiful diamond ring, which I confidently accepted. It was love. Loving Luke just made sense. I thought the speed was romantic; perversely, my mother thought it suspect and insisted on a three-year engagement to quell rumors of visits to Baby Gap. With Luke I feel shrouded and protected and decent. I've never been able to explain this to any of my friends, married or otherwise, drunken or sober. We discuss calorie intake, childhood experiences of shoplifting, the number of tampons you need for a heavy period and just about everything you can imagine. We loll around in bed for ages. I'm thrilled to be spending time with him. Recently, Luke has been working a regular fourteen-hour day because, despite being an ostensibly normal bloke, he likes his job. When he's not working we "do things around the house." The eternal battle with cracked walls, and a garden that insists on growing. Fringe theaters and windsurfing are luxuries we can no longer afford. Today's a holiday, so we talk. We talk about our past, remembering films we've watched together, places we've visited, rows we've roared through and reconciliations we've run to. We plan our future, which is unquestionably coruscating. I moan about my job at Looper Jackson, saying that I am bored. Luke reminds me that it pays well and that perhaps the upcoming merger will offer me new challenges. It is sweet of him to try to make me feel valued and worthwhile but I remain unconvinced. Loving his work as he does means that he has no comprehension. It's not his fault. Talking about my work depresses us both, so I change the subject. I tell him the washing machine is leaking and he responds with a funny story about the neighbors' cat peeing on our herb garden. Unreasonably, this story makes us laugh so much (it must be the champagne) that he can hardly finish it and I have to run to the loo. He won't let me, but holds me down until I'm forced to shout playful threats. We drift in and out of intensity as we are firmly embedded in intimacy. It's sunny. He covers my body with little butterfly kisses and I give him the king of all blow jobs, then we fall asleep. At 11 A.M. we wake up suddenly and act out that scene in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The one where Hugh Grant and his flatmate oversleep, then wake up and rush around shouting "Fuck!" Everyone in the cinema laughs at that. Not because the script is so witty but because it is so familiar. We've all done it. It's usually on the day that you have a job interview for the job of a lifetime, or when you've got a really hot date, or on the first day of the sale at Harvey Nichols, or when you are expecting fifty friends for a buffet lunch and champagne, in less than two hours. We dash in and out of the shower, up and down the stairs, in and out of the freezer, up and down the garden. We clean, dress, saut, spice and set up deck chairs and umbrellas. We tidy magazines and strategically place nibbles. We arrange a hundred silver helium-filled balloons, we stack up film for the camera, polish flutes and dress in our Armani. We shout fuck a lot, too. Caterers have prepared and delivered the food; all we have to do is take off the plastic wrap. I like to feel I've made an effort. It looks fantastic, set out on our big wooden table (an investment -- both coming from large families we plan to have at least four kids). I look at the food with a mix of pride and amazement. Zucca gialla intere al forno con pomodori secchi (roasted peppers stuffed with sun-dried tomatoes), zucchini carpaccio (skinny bits of zucchini), insalata prosciutto e fichi (ham and figs -- you wouldn't have eaten it if your mum had put it in your sandwiches at school), then a whole load of pasta and polenta salads, a stack of vegetables that no one ever knows the name of, and piles of fresh summer berries (color coordinated). It looks just like something out of the BlueBird hyper-trendy supermarket on the King's Road, but that isn't so surprising

because the caterers are from the BlueBird hyper-trendy supermarket on the King's Road. Frenzied activity is such fun, and I run around with my camera taking arty photos of food through champagne flutes, and food reflected on helium-filled balloons, and champagne flutes reflected on helium-filled balloons, and helium-filled balloons reflected on champagne flutes. Luke, rather more practically, remembers that we have four crates of champagne to chill and so while I am doing a good impression of Lichfield, he fills the bath with ice and about twenty bottles of fizz. As the food comes out of our huge, canyon-sized fridge the rest of the champagne goes in. Finally at five to one we congratulate ourselves on our indisputable hospitality, style and general success. At five past one I check that the invite definitely says 26 July. No one has arrived. At seven minutes past one I check and re-check the doorbell. By ten past, I snap, "Nobody is going to turn up." Luke pours me a drink. "People don't enjoy our parties," I add. He hands me the drink and rubs my shoulders as I ask, "Do you think that we have a reputation for meanness?" He kisses the top of my head as I bitterly mutter, "It was stupid to think that anyone would give up a Sunday to celebrate our anniversary." At eleven minutes past one I start to rewrap the zucca gialla intere al forno con pomodori secchi and I console myself that we won't have to visit Sainsbury's for a month. The bell rings. Luke stands up to answer the door. He smiles at me and resists saying anything stupid like "I told you so," or "Patience is a virtue," as I am forever being reminded. He knows that my retort would be: that above all virtues, patience is the most overrated. Our friends begin to arrive, literally pouring through the door. All of them say nice things about the house, the food, me. All of them look marvelous and are carrying even more booze. Luke and I have great friends. Really brilliant. They are all successful, healthy, intelligent, fun, good-looking and nice-natured. Sure, why wouldn't you be nice-natured if you are successful, healthy, intelligent, fun and good-looking? However, none of them are all of these things, all of the time. Without exception, at one point or another, our friends have had their moments. They have failed at things: relationships, exams, jobs. They have been ill but (touch wood) nothing too awful: flu, and dodgy knees brought on by overtraining for the London marathon, are about the sum of it. There are times when each of them can be really dense, dull, irritating or spotty, just like Luke and me. But generally they are extremely fit, bright and beautiful. But then I'm biased, because they are my friends. So when they all arrive with their young, tanned, hopeful faces, absolutely gunning for an afternoon of hilarity and frivolity, I can't help but feel very proud. Proud of Luke, proud of our life, proud of our friends, and proud of myself. Names to love and hate. Because life's like that -- try as we might, and we all try to varying degrees, we can't like everyone. Wouldn't life be simple if we could? And a bit dull. Luke, lovely, wonderful, kind, generous, clever Luke. Lucy and Daisy have been my friends since university. Rose, Daisy's sister, has come, too, with her husband, Peter. It was at Rose and Peter's wedding that Luke and I first met. And Sam, my closest friend at work. Lucy is skinny (size two), tall, with clear skin, huge green eyes and long, straight, natural (ish) blond hair that swings down her back. She is by anyone's estimation a great beauty, a stunning-looking woman; small ass, large breasts, tiny waist and rib cage. It is not possible to say she is unaware of her looks. She would have to be deaf, dumb and blind, living in solitary confinement, not to have noticed that she is absolutely modelesque. To her credit, she doesn't rely on her stunning looks to get along in life and yet she does get along in life. She trades derivatives (whatever that is -- it's long past the time when I can politely ask), earning a ridiculously large amount of money and respect in the City. Not easy with her attributes. Both men and women assume that stunning women must be stupid. Both sexes want to believe this for different reasons. Men, because such affirmations of stereotypes save them from uncomfortable thoughts. Women because really, there has to be a God. Lucy finds it hard to make friends. Men always say they want to know her more when what they mean is that they want to know more of her. Women find her too much competition. Lucy doesn't worry about this. It would be churlish to worry about being beautiful, clever, successful and rich. Instead she has adjusted to being alone. She likes it. To an extent. Lucy comforts herself with the thought that few people are as interesting as her anyway. It isn't as if she is ever without company. There is always someone who wants to be her best friend, even if it's only long enough to find out if she diets or works out (moderately and moderately). There's always some man who wants to take her for dinner and invariably he is obscenely wealthy, with film-star looks and a lifetime membership in MENSA. The only thing is, it is never the same friend wanting to talk about her diets or the same man wanting to fatten her up. As a result Lucy has developed a brittle, impenetrable aloofness. This is her defense but the appearance is all attack. Most people find her impossibly intimidating. I guess they're right. I guess they are jealous. I guess they are a bit right and a bit jealous. She says I am her first, best, possibly only real friend. And I don't think she says that to absolutely everyone. We met a lifetime ago, on our first day at university. Lucy's father parked their Daimler at exactly the same moment as my dad

parked our Citron in the hall of residence car park. I was a nauseating mass of energy, exuberance and optimism. I saw Lucy straight away and I also saw her give me a quick once-over. It was with a swift and practiced eye that Lucy mentally noted: Connie (that's me) size four, small boobs, 5 feet 4, good figure but not a sensation; long blond hair but (unlike Lucy's) mine is a mass of mad ringlets and curls, not silver blond but natural streaks of numerous golden hues (magazine ad-land bollocks), odd-looking streaks of yellow (accurate summation by the jury). I hate it, everyone else loves it. Later Lucy told me that she thought my face was stunning and that was what had caught her eye. She describes it as the face of a cherub, but a cherub with a filthy, wicked, exciting secret. I find this description a bit embarrassing but definitely flattering. Moving on. Daisy and I also met at university. We were both waiting to register for our supplementary subjects. I watched Daisy patiently and nervously queuing, carefully avoiding the eyes of the other students. I, on the other hand, chatted and smiled at absolutely everyone, desperate to ingratiate myself with anyone who'd give me a chance. I thought she was cool, calm and aloof. As Daisy turned the final corner of the queue and was about to pass through the door that signified the possibility of registering and being released to the Uni Bar, I rather too loudly called out to her. My voice cut through several other conversations, leading to an excruciating silence. Everyone seemed to be waiting for me to talk. "What sup subject are you signing for?" It was very "university" to develop an "in" language. Sup for supplementary, Uni for university. Junior Common Room became JC. I was fluent by day two. I'm not good at languages but I do understand the importance of assimilating with the natives. Never carry a map, never ask for directions and never trust a driver wearing a hat. I thought that Daisy looked really interesting and intelligent. She looked just like the kind of person I'd hoped I'd meet at university -- all serious and worthy and challenging. She also looked astounded that I had called out to her in such an abrupt way. She later told me that her astonishment came, not from my calling out, but from me calling to her. She hadn't wanted to answer me, in case I was talking to someone else. We were all so lacking. Lacking in confidence, lacking in trust and lacking in reality. Youth really is wasted on the young. They are too poor, emotionally and financially, to enjoy it. I can say that now because I'm thirty, an age of confidence. Except when it comes to throwing parties. I'm assured, but not invincible. Daisy had fumbled for an engaging or witty reply. Stumped, she settled for factual and told me she had chosen Classics, then she disappeared around the corner. Later, sitting in the student bar, on orange Formica chairs, I discovered that Daisy had loads of worthy reasons for her choice. She had some knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology and found it fascinating. She hoped that the classical references in English Literature (her main subject) would become clearer if she had a deeper understanding of the divas and Diomedeses. I chose it because she did. We subsequently shared lecture notes, secrets, tensions, successes, the usual thrills and spills of university life. We grew closer day by day. While I widened my circle of friends to an extraordinary array (some spectacular and difficult, some shallow but easygoing), Daisy limited herself to a few soul mates. Out of all my friends, Daisy considers herself my most true and dull. Lucy considers herself my most true and sensational. I guess they are both half right. Daisy is 5 feet 10 and back then believed herself to be oversized and ungainly. She battled simultaneously with her weight and her self-esteem, one rose proportionally as the other decreased. She was ashamed of her glasses, her red hair, her MS clothes and her spots. She perceived herself to be a fairly bright, but very plain girl. It amazed Daisy that everyone else seemed so very unaware of these shortcomings. She has beautiful eyes, quick wit, fair nature, unparalleled honesty and sensitivity. Try as I might, I could not see the drawbacks that Daisy insisted on periodically presenting. "My hair is so wiry and unmanageable." "It's just like mine but red." We stared at one another, aware of the enormous implication of the disparity. I ventured as comfort: "Pre-Raphaelite muses all had hair like yours." Over the years Daisy has eventually been reassured that if I can see these good bits and Lucy can too, then perhaps, just perhaps, they really are there. Just before we all gave up and went home, convinced that Daisy would never like herself, she seemed to get the hang of it. She's swapped her glasses for contacts and as she relaxed her skin was less prone to stress-induced breakouts. Her hair remained curly and red. Rose, Daisy's sister, is three years older than Daisy which makes her thirty-two, nearly thirty-three. I first met Rose when she visited Daisy at Uni. She was twenty-one but seemed about thirty-two, even then, when thirty-two was ancient; Rose now seems about fifty-two. It's not that she looks especially old. She looks perfectly fine. She looks perfectly thirty-two, or perhaps what you imagine thirty-two is when you are eighteen. She is a comfortable size ten. She also has red hair but it's darker than Daisy's. She has the same lovely eyes and smile. She wears leggings and comfy jumpers, the same ones that she wore in the '80s when she visited Daisy. She gardens. She sews, too. She makes her own jam. Not only does she have time but more peculiarly she has the inclination. Rose is

married to Peter. When Rose first brought Peter to meet Daisy, Lucy and I hung out of the hall of residence bedroom window, ruthlessly elbowing one another aside to get the best view. It was worth it. Peter is tall, athletic and handsome. Later we discovered he is also clever and charming. Lucy would not admit Rose had secured a catch, instead she mumbled that he "wasn't ugly," which Daisy and I knew to be high praise from Lucy. They have twin baby boys, Sebastian and Henry, who are just adorable. They seem happy and sorted and it's nice having them to our parties, because Luke likes Peter, everyone likes the boys and Rose helps with the washing-up. Finally there is Sam. Not finally in the sense that I have no more friends. This is not a finite list of people I know and love. Although, thinking about it, I guess four really close friends is quite a lot. Really close. Bridesmaid material. Although, hell, what a combination -- every shape and size in baby blue imaginable. I didn't consider this, even when I was linking my first name with his surname, but now I always advise the newly affianced to take a long hard look at their best friends and try to imagine what can possibly be bought in rose-petal pink that will make Sue look a foot taller, Jane look leggy and reduce Karen's waistline. I've known Sam for just over two years. We work together. She is hilarious. She looks like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, but it's been melted on every part of her anatomy, once when she'd had a few. Sam is simply lovely. She is kind and forgiving and sympathetic and generous and she mixes it all up with being fun. Sam is the type of person who likes spring mornings and autumn evenings. But, for that matter, she likes autumn mornings and spring evenings, too, and all the bits in between. She is thirty-three, which surprises everyone, including herself. If Sam had to describe herself she would forget to tell you that she has literally dozens of really cool, committed friends that she's earned through her unflinching loyalty. She would omit to tell you that she has the most stunning brown eyes, big velvet splashes (that's not very poetic, but believe me, they are fantastic). She would also omit to tell you that she can reduce people to tears and incontinence pads with her funny antics. She would say, "Hello, I'm Sam Martin, I'm thirty-three and I'm single." Because she is ridiculously honest, she might add "and it bothers me." Because she's a little bit obsessed about the situation, she might go further and add "a lot." Or she might just ask you to draw up a chair while she, in detail, documents love affairs and disasters from A to Z, or from age fifteen to thirty-three. Sam has been trying for over half her life to get married. It amazes me that women like her still exist. Women that are beautiful, popular, ambitious, stylish and still alone. But there are lots of them, hundreds of them, offices are full of them, armies of them, here in the metropolis of London. They walk around with everyone else; with people who are married, people who are single and like it, people who never give their marital/romantic status a thought (I'm not convinced that there are an awful lot of these, but I have heard that there have been reported sightings). Women like Sam are identifiable because they wear that distinguishing look that is so late '90s, the look that asks, "So where did I go wrong? Why was it so easy for my mother and so bloody hard for me?" They are always sniffing under their own armpits and breathing on to the backs of their hands, but they can't attribute their loneliness to stray body odor because these women don't smell. These women are gorgeous. I mean, I'd marry Sam and be proud. I'm not a lesbian. But if I was, and Sam was, and marriage between two consenting adults of the same sex were possible, then I would marry Sam. It beats the hell out of me. The party is going off brilliantly. There's loads to drink and eat, all our beautiful friends are having a fabulous time. People are dancing, or at least bouncing up and down doing star jumps, gesticulating madly. My female friends are lusting after chocolate profiteroles and my male friends are leering down the tops of my female friends. Due to the abundance of champagne we start doing the Macarena, but not the Birdie Song, which is only performed if we have whiskey chasers. It's an outstanding party, people are drinking from the bottle, others are feeding each other zucchini carpaccio, although invariably the people feeding each other are not the people who ought to be feeding each other. There are people inhaling helium from the balloons, bent double with hilarity at, "Hello, I'm Minnie Mouse." It's all here, at our party: the surprised, the delighted, the riotous, the earnest, the cheeky, the flirtatious, the skeptical, the elated, the ludicrous. I measure the success by the number of people who are drunk and trying to look sober. The only people that actually look drunk are the unlucky ones that are driving and who are, in fact, stone-cold sober. It's a tribal thing. I can't explain it but I catch it all on film. I watch Luke as he threads among the guests; filling their glasses, laughing at their jokes and listening to stories about their disappointments in love. People tell Luke things, they trust him. Everybody likes him and he likes everybody. Which is largely wonderful but does have two small drawbacks. One, he will not gossip. My telephone bills to Lucy are enormous. She is on my BT friends and family list, we often qualify for 20 percent volume discounts. Two, I sometimes wonder if only really nice people would like me and only extremely exceptional men could fall in love with me. But these lapses in confidence are immediately

repaired when again I think of Lucy. "Are you dancing?" I grin, hopefully, at Luke. "Are you asking?" He laughs. I'm always asking, I love dancing. I'm good at it. I adore the sheer indulgence of it. Flailing my arms and legs, shaking my head, letting it out, letting go. Mostly I ignore the actual melody and beat but happily this doesn't seem to matter. My enthusiasm more than compensates. Luke is also a good dancer. His style is quite different. He carefully learns steps and routines. He's cautious and measured. I always leave the dance floor with a clammy stomach, hair sticking to the back of my neck, blistered feet, smudged makeup and exhausted, aching limbs. Luke rarely sweats. We used to club together a lot when we first met. "So?" I ask again as I begin to move toward the rug, the area naturally carved out to act as a dance floor. But Luke doesn't follow me. He's probably spotted an empty glass that needs refilling or noticed that the char-grilled peppers with anchovy and capers are being neglected. Luke is a far better host than I'll ever be. I don't look after people at my parties. More often than not, it's all I can do to look after myself. My idea of being the perfect hostess is to supply an array of good food, copious amounts of champagne and attractive and absorbing people. I put these ingredients in a room and see what happens. I enjoy the chaos of watching people mix with one another. I would never dream of introducing Bill to Jo because they both have an interest in Alfred Hitchcock. I expect my friends to have the sense to introduce themselves to one another, to find the loo, and I'd be positively concerned if they didn't fill their own glasses. Luckily my laissez-faire attitude is in contrast to Luke's more traditional approach. He always makes sure that there are clean towels and plenty of loo roll in the downstairs bathroom, he is skilled at guaranteeing that everyone leaves with the correct coat and partner. It's really Luke that ensures our parties are successful. So it is understandable that Luke can't take time out to dance with me. And mildly frustrating. I look around for some other poor victim and drag Peter to his feet. After Peter I dance with Daisy, Sam, Bob, Phil and Claire. I'm indiscriminate in my choice of partner, the important factor is that I get to spin and twirl so madly I have a head-rush. I sigh with relief as Luke and I wave good-bye to the last guests. Well, not quite the last, as Sam, Daisy, Lucy, Rose and Peter stay behind. But to us these friends are more like family than guests. I smile at Luke as he pours large brandies. He nods toward the garden, indicating that he and Peter are heading that way to smoke cigars and enjoy the balmy July night. I want him to stay and debrief the party, but he points out that we don't like people to smoke inside. We do have nice things and it would be awful to burn a hole in the antique French lace cushion covers or drop ash on the hand-tufted Moroccan rug. Anal retention, a thing that develops with age. Lucy joins the boys to smoke a cigarette. Not that it's unknown for her to smoke a cigar, we both did at university, but only for effect. Absolutely no pleasure involved at all. It was simply a pulling technique, a successful one. We've had in excess of a bottle and a half of champagne each, so it seems ludicrous to stop now. We start the postparty hunt for dregs. We find three half bottles. Champagne bottles are heavy and as there was so much to drink no one had to suffer the indignity of draining bottles, except us, now. Together this isn't tacky, it's sensible. Once our glasses are full we turn, with varying amounts of enthusiasm, to the issue of clearing up. "No leave it, really," I assure generously. "I'll do it in the morning." I only believe this because of the large quantities of alcohol I've drunk. "Let's sit down and gossip." The advantage of Luke being out of earshot is that I can indulge in a postmortem. Who said what? Who looked fab? Who'd been a victim? Who fancied who? Who ate too much? And, importantly, who threw up in my Tibetan hand-carved umbrella stand? Predictably, Sam and Daisy don't need to be persuaded, they literally drop what they are doing (mental note: two side plates to be replaced) and flop into our big leather armchairs. Rose, bless her, continues carefully to scrape discarded food and napkins into a huge black bin-liner. I pour everyone another large glass of champagne and then revert to loading the dishwasher. Haphazard as the execution of this operation proves to be, I know that I won't relax until at least one dishwasher load is whirling away. I blame my mother for that. Woozy, full up, a bit icky, we all feel great. "Put the wedding video on," says Sam. "No, you've all seen it." I venture a polite, unconvincing refusal. "But it's lovely." Sam knows the formula. "Go on, you're dying to," Lucy says as she comes in from the garden. She really isn't as good at playing my game. I don't need much persuading. Luke wanders through to refill the brandy glasses. He raises his eyebrows and shakes his head. He does this uninterested, tutting thing because it is demanded of men whenever their wedding video, or similar, is being shown ("or similar" equals looking at pictures of babies, even themselves as babies, recounting of first date or proposal, choosing underwear or valentine's cards). No one really believes that they are hard-hearted or uninterested. It's a big global conspiracy so that we can pretend that they are all tough with the monopoly on being cool and we can maintain exclusive film rights on slushy stuff. On the whole it works. So Luke wanders past the TV, eyes rolling, and I don't let on that I caught him watching it at 3 A.M. yesterday morning. "Ohhhh," the girls let

out in a Greek chorus and edge toward the TV cuddling cushions. Even Lucy softens. Sort of. "My hair looked really good like that." The video, indeed all wedding videos, have a peculiar effect on women. We have loads of basics in common: love of chocolate, love of alcohol, an encyclopedic knowledge of all high street clothes shops. We've all read everything Jane Austen ever wrote, and we all harbor unfeasibly high hopes for the world of romance. Sam and Daisy, who are both single, become different animals as soon as the video starts to play. Sam starts to cry. She cried when we were buying my dress, throughout the actual ceremony, when we sung hymns, when we cut the cake, when I threw my bouquet and when we left for our honeymoon. She cried so much throughout the whole process that my Gran thought she was one of Luke's exes. Gran thought it very peculiar (but typical of her lovely Connie) that I'd let one of his ex-girlfriends ("who was no better than she ought to be") participate in the ceremony. She'd have given Sam a thrashing for having the cheek to turn up. Poor Sam. Sam has seen my wedding video more often than The Wizard of Oz but she still starts crying as soon as the organ cranks up and I'm sure that isn't entirely to do with the awful playing. She cries quietly. Not a sad booing but through a big "it-will-happen-to-me-one-day" smile. She can smile, too, as I reckon she is also thinking And I won't make the mistake of carrying my bouquet too high so it obscures my neckline. Sam has really studied this video. Daisy's reaction is a lot more pensive and controlled. She's had a few boyfriends of course but she's never really lost her head and heart. She's really into "The One" syndrome. Daisy becomes pensive and says things like, "you know when you know," "you can't hurry love," "every teapot has a lid." As fond as we are of Daisy, this pseudo-soothing mumbo jumbo irritates us all. Rose and I are fully paid-up members of the camp which runs along the lines, "I knew, but he took some convincing," "you can hurry love, you can race at Schumacher speed if necessary," "but who the hell wants to marry a teapot?" Lucy's viewing pleasure is derived from a cynical knowledge that every wedding she attends is a lucky escape. She thanks God that she isn't the one trussed up like a Christmas pantomime fairy. Actually, she enjoyed my wedding and commented, "So few are really stylish. Convention and tradition actively work against common sense and good taste, but yours Connie (pause, for effect) was not an embarrassment." Luke and I had been pleased with this compliment. She likes watching our wedding video because she was my chief bridesmaid and therefore had quite a major role. Her comments are limited to how well she looks and the occasional beauty tip for the rest of us -- "In retrospect, would you have chosen those shoes?" However, she was great fun on the day. She tipped up at my house at the crack of dawn and bossed and directed the hairdressers, the makeup artists, the florist, the chauffeur and the other bridesmaids, with such equanimity that my day was entirely hassle free, a real delight. She did all this directing and bossing and stuff while dripping champagne intravenously into myself and my mother. She said this was to ensure I was drunk enough to go through with it, but I know she was kidding. So although Lucy sits playing super bitch, we all know that really this is only an act. She's not a super bitch. Rose watches the video with a more gentle, wise attitude. She's done it herself so has no reason to feel competitive or resentful, or pitying, or hopeful. She just comments on how happy we both look and she laughs a lot at Peter's Best Man speech. I watch the video feeling immensely proud. It's like I'm watching someone else's life. It's just so perfect. It is a fact that five minutes after you're married your dress is old news, your haircut an embarrassment and your makeup like a poor set-design on Top of the Pops. They don't tell you that in the wedding magazines. They give you endless tips on October flowers, or when you should remove your veil, or exactly what a croque en bouche is! Which is hardly life and death. I have a certain amount of sympathy with the "How do I arrange the top table for my wedding, as both my father and stepfather will be attending?," less for "I'd like to have Irish folk dancers/bagpipes/Morris dancers -- do you know where I can find such people?" (surely the advice here should be "don't bother"). "Do you know where I can buy wedding shoes for size eight feet?" is also a call with which I can sympathize, but really, let's cut the crap and get to the Aristotelian problems of wedding-day debate. "How can I prevent my dress dating, so that I don't have to hide behind the settee on our fifth wedding anniversary when my husband gets the album out?"

Another thought, "Do you have any salient tips on how to avoid my makeup causing the same embarrassment to me, as leg warmers surely must cause Olivia Newton John?" But the magazines don't have the answers to this kind of thing, so don't even waste time looking for them. The video is, by anyone's standards, the naffest thing about my wedding. I love it. I thought I wouldn't. I thought it would be intrusive (it was). I thought my friends would laugh (they did). I thought it would just be another thing to worry about (it was), but my mum argued that it was an essential part of the day and that I'd treasure it more than my dress (she probably said that I'd treasure it more than my husband, but I'm sanitizing her character for commercial gain). Anyway she was right. I love it. I'd always said I didn't want a big day. I wanted a few

very close friends, and something simple, cream and straight (to wear, rather than eat or marry). My nearest and dearest resisted an open belly-laugh. No one actually catcalled, "But you love being the center of attention. I can't imagine you letting this opportunity pass you by." No one actually hooted, "But you throw parties as frequently as the rest of us throw the duvet over the unmade bed." Instead, my mother brought home that month's copy of *Brides* and *Setting up Home*. Artful soul, my mum. I was fascinated. I was absorbed. I was hooked. I was a bride-to-be. There is absolutely nothing amazing about these magazines beyond the fact that normally sensible women, of roughly sound mind and body, not only buy them but frequently repeat the purchase. Moreover we take them seriously. They become important to us, they become our trusted guides, our loyal friends, our Bible. I clearly remember my mum handing the magazine over and it was a moment of pure distinct revelation. From that moment on there was no heroic talk of simple, cream and straight and a few close friends. Road to Damascus. I understood that more was more. The cover was so...hopeful, pink, smiley, pink, informative, pink. Even if it is not actually pink, even if the cover is actively blue, it feels pink. Dreamy, girlie, promising, innocent. Suddenly it mattered to me that I knew my, "Step by step to perfect hair and makeup," "How much a wedding really costs?" and "How to cope with divorced parents" (and mine are married). I wanted it! This magazine was my secret arsenal in the lifetime battle of the "Happily Ever After" because here it was in black and white, "be a princess for a day." All for 2.95. Sold to the lady on the left. To the lady on the right. And the one standing at the back. I devoted man-hours that amounted to weeks choosing a dress, flowers, cars, menus, shoes, headdresses. The groom had been the easy bit. More frightening yet I devoted man-hours that amounted to months practicing my wedding-day smile, my wedding-day walk, my wedding-day first dance, my wedding-day blush (I have never blushed in my life), my wedding-day thank you. I was well and truly ensconced in Fantasyland and I liked it there! The video brings me back down to earth. My star appearance in the video does not reveal a demure, mysterious princess in sepia tones. It showcases a noisy, bossy, funny, happy, Technicolor twenty-something bride, who is having a huge laugh with her noisy, bossy, funny, happy, Technicolor twenty-something friends. The video shows Peter pretending to Luke that he's lost the rings, it shows Daisy stop me just before I enter the church to straighten my veil. It catches our friend Rob with his fly open, Sam and Lucy squabbling over catching the bouquet (both failed, Daisy caught it). It shows Luke's younger brother boasting that he held "some bird's" hair back as she puked, my father tripping up as he staggers into the cab at the end of the night, and it catches my mum sighing fondly under her breath, "You've never come home sober from a wedding in the thirty-five years I've known you." Fondlyish. The romantic bits are nothing like the magazines, they are much more real. They are much more simple. Luke smiling at me. Me smiling at Luke. Luke and me holding hands. We watch the video, right the way through without hitting the fast-forward button. When it is over there isn't a dry eye in the house. Lucy's tears are tears of boredom. The next day is a long one. There's always more paperwork the Monday after a great weekend. My head hurts with a combination of lack of sleep, excess alcohol and the low after a weekend high. Five more days before the weekend, I sigh, bored. My work is not that bad. I don't always actively dislike it. But it is work. By definition. I'm here because they pay me. Winning the lottery would definitely change my life. Everyone is always impressed with the fact that I am a management consultant, but in reality my role is limited to plugging data into a computer system. As I become more senior I can look forward to deciding which data and how it should be plugged in. Ultimately, I will get to decide which computer system and whose it should be plugged into. It isn't challenging. It isn't creative. I feel terminally ungrateful and dull when I meet people at parties, who on finding out what I do for a living, shout excitably "Well that sounds fascinating" or "Marvelous firm to work for, how did you get into that then?" It seems so churlish to say, "No, really, it isn't fascinating at all, anyone could do it. I've had more fun watching washing dry." However, there are good things about my job. Sam, always on hand for a chat and a lunchtime sandwich, sits three desks along from me. We work in one of those open-plan hot-desk environments, which are as intrusive as they are ineffective. No one ever really "hot-desks." If a new girl arrives having read the hype and sits down at any old desk, she'll soon discover the error of her ways. The good thing about the open-plan office is that as a married woman I only have clean linen to launder and therefore don't mind a public dissection of my relationship. If Luke and I have sex at the weekend, the general opinion on the floor is that it's really great that he still fancies me after one year of marriage. Alternatively, if we haven't had sex no one is surprised or suspicious, we have after all been together years, so we're past that stage where you overdepend on the physical. I am the only married person in my department, so the open-plan arrangement allows me the chance to gratuitously enjoy other people's liaisons, successful or otherwise. My department called

"Accommodation Management" is a new-fangled idea. The firm's heritage is in technology.

"Accommodation Management" is all to do with helping the little people adapt to change when the big people thrust it upon them. As it's a "people job" it is predictably, predominantly a female department. The firm is predominantly male, which means that someone on my team is always snogging someone in another team, which is strictly prohibited and therefore utterly compelling. Besides this in-house entertainment, the other advantages of my job are that we are based in the center of Soho, which is brilliant for drunken nights on the town and handy for the gym (ha) and there is a really nice Pr#234t Manger next door but one. It is a slow morning. I've played three unsuccessful rounds of electronic solitaire, taken two personal calls and sent six personal e-mails. To avoid the charge of complete abuse of my employer's trust, I do a bit of filing, take one business call, make one business call and I send three business e-mails. I also catch someone in my team pretending to take dictation but really listening to the Now 310 album on her headset. I quickly find her something equally pointless and numbing to do, by way of teaching her a lesson. Even with this amount of activity I am fed up and watch the clock drag its hands around to 12:30. On the dot, Sue pops her head around my cube. "Fancy a quick one?" Debate ensues. Monday choices are: visit the gym for a quick thirty-minute bums and tums punishment class or go for a cool glass of Chardonnay in the bar next door. Calories on or off. Fat on or off. Not so tough a decision. I grab my purse and kick my gym bag just a little bit further under my desk. I am a big advocate of "out of sight out of mind." Wine it is. Then the phone rings. It's Daisy. I gesture wildly to Sue and my other workmates, who have congregated around my desk, mouthing at them to Get a round in, I'll pay. They trudge off sulkily, sure that I've somehow tricked them. That I'd planned the phone call and that I'll now slip off to the gym, having persuaded them to consume more calories. God if I was as bright as that I'd be working for MI5, not this shower. They leave with resentful looks. "It's me," says Daisy. "Hi, me, what's up?" "Just rang to say thank you for the party, it was brilliant fun." "Yup, quite successful I thought. However, I'm paying for it." "Oh, was it expensive? I suppose it was, all that champagne and caterers and everything. Would you like a contribution?" "I don't mean that type of paying, I mean with my hangover." "Oh, of course. I can't very well contribute to that, can I?" "Are you all right, Daisy?" Is she still drunk? If so I'm a really irresponsible friend. Daisy is a schoolteacher and I shouldn't be encouraging her in this excessive debauchery. I'm perturbed because Daisy is normally so bright and this conversation is labored. Also there is only one telephone that she has access to, which is in the staff room and is treated with the height of respect, a mix between the Tardis and the Bat Phone. For emergency use only. There are no calls to Daisy asking her what color nail varnish she is planning to wear with her open-toed shoes that night. I often indulge in these calls with our other friends. Come to think of it Daisy was acting a bit weird yesterday, too, all sort of spaced out. "You're not ill are you?" I ask, concerned. "Hmmm?" Vague. "Ill, you know." Anxious. "I need help." Unspecific. "What is it? Are you in trouble?" Deeply worried. There is no real reason for me to assume that Daisy is in trouble. She doesn't have a dark side, no criminal record. She was once late paying her television license because she was on holiday. She was a wreck, I thought we'd have to fly home. No drug abuse. No bigamy. No husband at all. Is she going to announce that she's a lesbian? You know Luke's friend Simon -- "Oh, so it's the usual, some bloke. Momentarily I'm disappointed. I mean there's not much kudos in a friend having a fling with your husband's friend, is there? It's commonplace. I settle down and try to concentrate on what Daisy is saying to me. "Yep?" "What's he like?" "What do you mean what's he like? You met him yesterday. He's about five feet eleven, brown hair, brown eyes, trendy." "Noooo," she interrupts, now she's thinking I'm sick. "I mean what's he like!" I have, of course, immediately caught on to exactly what she is asking but think it's funny to wind her up -- what are friends for? "Oh, I understand. What does he like? Well I don't know him that well, not all his tastes and everything, but I understand that he's partial to the odd Budvar and more strangely, scotch eggs." "Connie!" Sense of humor failure from Daisy. I cave in. "OK. He's great. Really good bloke. Luke has worked on a couple of projects with him and speaks really highly of him. He is single, as far as I know. He's honest, a laugh, reliable, clever." "Oh, he's gay." Resigned. "No, no he's not." Reassuring. "So what's the catch?" Suspicious. "You know what? I don't think there is one. Surprising as it may sound. He's been working abroad and so hasn't wanted to get tied -- settled (quick change of word choice) -- but I understand he's back in London permanently now, and up for it." "Up for it?" Daisy's old insecurities are never far from the surface. "What does that mean, is he shagging around?" "Daisy," I say becoming exasperated, "I don't know. I don't usually get my guests to complete a questionnaire on moral criteria and recent sexual behavior before they attend our parties. If I did that, who would I see?" Daisy giggles at this and relaxes for the first time in the call. "I'm sorry, Connie. It's just that he asked me out." "That's good, isn't it?" Nothing I like more

than being responsible for the pairing of a couple of friends. Even though, strictly speaking, I hadn't specifically brought them together and I hadn't actually noticed that they were getting along. But thinking about it now, it's obvious. It's great, they are a perfect couple. "Yes, it is good. It's marvelous. It's bloody marvelous. I think he's wonderful. He's so clever and funny and interested and interesting. Oh, Connie, thanks for saying that he is single. Thanks for saying that he's honest, a laugh, reliable, clever. Thanks for having the party." She's gushing. I wait for her to thank me for getting married so that I could have an anniversary or thank someone for inventing scotch eggs so that Simon was able to grow into such a wonderful specimen. She swings back to her world-weary self. "Up for it? Is he a tart?" "Oh, what an age we live in." "No, really, I think he is genuinely a decent person. When I said 'up for it' I meant that he was keen to find someone special. Up for commitment." "Understandably, Daisy doesn't buy this immediately. I mean she is a single girl living in London at the close of the twentieth century." "I hope you're right." Tentative. "So how can I help?" I try to move her on. "I was ringing to ask what I should wear." "Good solid ground this. The battle cry for centuries of women all over the earth -- "But what should I wear?" We like this one -- Sam, Daisy, Lucy, Rose and I. We've grown up with this one. And although we can rarely answer the question for ourselves we can always advise each other. Telephone companies are very grateful. A small fortune has been invested on a regular and frequent basis as we solicit advice. "When are you seeing him?" "Tonight." "Keen. Where are you meeting?" "I'm coming into town as soon as he has finished work. Meeting him at a bar near his office." "Well, won't you have to wear what you've got on?" "Err, yes, I suppose." The hesitation in her voice fills in the background for me. I imagine her scanning the wardrobe that she has hauled into work. She'll have carried everything she owns, except her Laura Ashley dress which she bought for the twins' christening. Now she is gazing at the enormous array of clothes, thinking that nothing is suitable except the Laura Ashley. "Where are you ringing from?" "The staff room," says an urgent whisper. "Not from the phone?" "Yes." "But it's against the rules?" "Yes." "And you've brought spare clothes with you?" "Yes." It is the staff break. I imagine the other teachers weaving in and out of Kooka and French Connection, as they make their instant coffee, open their tinfoil-wrapped sandwiches and squabble over custard creams and the best seat. The older men on the staff will be tutting dismissively at Daisy, who by introducing her wardrobe to the staff room, is fulfilling every deep-seated stereotype they have of the young girls on the staff. The women will be divided; casting grim, jealous scowls or excited, conspiratorial grins. They have the sum of her. I know this is occurring as Daisy often amuses us with stories of the staff-room Parliament. "They'll know you are hoping for a lay. Where are the clothes now? Are they hung up? If they get creased they'll be no good to anyone." "I've hung them all round the staff room." I giggle. Pleased that I've got the scene so spot on. Misjudgment. Daisy snaps. "Stop laughing and stop being motherly, Help me, what should I wear?" She's got this bad. "Sorry, really sorry." Even I know I didn't sound it. I try to concentrate. I know this is important to her. It's just been a while for me. I guess I've forgotten just how important. "Well, not your Little Black Dress, you don't want to look vampy." "Agreed." "We all have one. It may not be little, it may not be black, it doesn't necessarily even have to be a dress but we all have one. That cert. garment. That hundred percent seduction approved, come-fuck-me outfit. Mine is a sheer black trouser suit, Daisy's is a classic LBD, Sam's is a long black dress with thigh-high split. Lucy's is just about every garment she owns. Come to think of it, I'm not sure if Rose does have a LBD equivalent. I make a mental note to ask her next time I see her. The seduction cert. is as easily identifiable as a teetotaler on St. Patrick's day, and for this reason Daisy and I agree that it is unsuitable for a first date. OBVIOUSLY." "What are you doing?" "Supper." "Supper...very clever, not quite as formal as dinner but more investment than a drink. Sounds promising. You don't want to look as though you've tried too hard but you do want to look as though you are always immaculately turned out and bang up to vogue." "Exactly," says Daisy who no doubt is looking at her paint-stained jeans and Sloppy Jo T-shirt, painfully aware of how far away that description is to her current sartorial state. "Blue Jigsaw trousers, cotton V neck from Next?" "Too school uniform, I've tried it." "Silky black French Connection trousers, cream, slash-neck jumper?" "Which trousers? Silky?" "You know the ones Lucy persuaded you to buy. Not so much silky as with a sheen...they make you look very leggy." "Do they?" And so it goes on, until the girls from my office return from their quick one (two or three, by the look of it). They look relieved to see that I am still attached to the telephone and haven't had the opportunity to sneak to the gym. We are debating round versus V neck when Sam swings by my desk and drops off a cheese sandwich. The love. "What is wrong with you?" I ask Daisy, exasperated because my idea of white, linen trousers and black crop-top had been rejected as "too juvenile." "It's not juvenile, it's very 'All Saints.'" "Exactly, and I'm closer to the age of the Archangel Gabriel. I don't know. I like him. I've got a good feeling about him. Shit,

that's the bell. I've got to go to class. Give it some more thought and call me if you come up with the answer." "On the emergency phone?" "Yes, it is an emergency. See ya." "Bye." I put the phone down. "Who was it?" asks Sam. "Daisy. She's in love." "Nooooooo." Sam's eyes widen. "Who, who, who? Tell." "Simon, from my party yesterday." "He was cute." "Was he? I never notice now I have Luke." "I am so pleased for her," says Sam. Then her smile crumbles, "When will I meet someone?" Christ. Obligatory debriefing takes place on Wednesday evening in All Bar One Covent Garden. Sam and I arrive first, after another hectic day sending rude e-mails. Rose is next, excited to be out for the night, then Daisy (tonight's special guest) and finally, Lucy, who is, as ever, fashionably late. "Did you shag?" greets Lucy. Fair, I think. Succinct, to the point. The others scowl at her. Unperturbed, Lucy pushes her way on to the wooden bench which is like glass it has been so worn by denim-clad bums. She lights a cigarette and shrugs. "Oh, spare me the prudery, gals, you are all dying to know. Why else would Rose have got a baby-sitter? I rush away from work and you two" -- she casually waves her hand in the direction of Sam and me -- "canceled your chummy client dinners, or whatever it is you get up to?" She has a point. This is exciting stuff. Daisy has met someone ELIGIBLE. "I didn't shag." "But you wanted to, didn't you?" Sam sounds alarmed. Perhaps she thinks Daisy is gay, too. Or more likely she is obsessively comparing her reactions and actions to other people's. Her incessant search for the right response. "Well, yes, obviously. But I stopped myself." "Very wise," Rose and I chorus. Neither of us believe her. "It was a lovely evening though." "Go on," we urge, pouring generous glasses of Chablis to loosen her tongue. "We out-sat, out-talked and out-drunk everyone else at the restaurant. The waiters had long since stacked the chairs on to the tables and swept the floor around us before we even thought of leaving. They were huddled in a tired, hostile group near the bar intermittently tutting at us, continually glancing at their watches. It took us ages to realize that they wanted to be rid of us. We were just chatting and laughing and time flew by. Realizing how unwelcome we were we apologetically left an overgenerous tip and hurried out of the door." "You are so soft," Lucy leaps in with her dollop of disapproval. She never over- or undertips. She is never embarrassed or bullied by the waiter who hovers inappropriately after appalling service. She never stumbles out of a hotel rummaging in her purse. She seems to have an endless supply of "just the correct amount." The rest of us always wildly overtip or stubbornly refuse to leave anything at all. Both systems leave an overwhelming sense of social failure. "Shush, Lucy," we silence her. "A few quid here or there isn't the point now, is it? We want her to get to the tongues bit." Lucy huffily sits back, but at least she stops going on about fifteen and seventeen and a half percent and stuff. "He was so sweet. He held my hand in public." We nod our approval. This usually means that they are officially single. "We had a sort of half-plan to catch a cab so we started heading up Piccadilly. The streets were heaving with tourists and locals spilling out of pubs and bars. We both kept commenting to each other how happy and fit everyone looked." Rose asks, "So you thought everyone looked tanned and well dressed and content?" "Yes." Daisy pounces on the idea enthusiastically. The rest of us exchange glances. "Tell me," asks Sam, "would it be fair to say that although you and Simon both agreed that everyone looked happy, fit, tanned, well dressed and content et cetera none of them were glowing quite as much as the two of you?" "Yes. That's just it!" laughs Daisy, "do you think it is strange?" "No. I think it is the alcohol," says Lucy. "Soon we were at Regent's Park. He suggested taking a shortcut." "That sounds a bit dodgy," comments Rose, looking perturbed. "Thank God. I was beginning to think we'd never get to the action," I add. "Well, he must have been worried that I'd think he was dodgy 'cos he started going on about how safe it was and assuring me that he often takes this shortcut in summer. He said that at this time of night they would have just wrapped up A Midsummer Night's Dream." We look at her quizzically. "You know Shakespeare." We look at her insulted. She rushes on justifying her lust. "Anyway, I decided that as Simon is a friend of yours, Connie, it was unlikely that he was trying anything really odd and that, as we couldn't see an available cab anywhere, the shortcut did make sense. It could have been the two bottles of white wine that we'd drunk, or the surreal situation of walking through a London park, inhabited by imps and fairies, but it was so romantic." "We're impressed. Impressed and pleased. For all our piss-taking we adore each other. A romantic story is always good, but one with our best friends in the starring role is brill. We each relate this to our own "romantic" experiences. "Let's get this very clear," I say, "romantic with a capital R, I take it? Not the romantic felt in countless hot and sticky bars, with countless drop-dead-gorgeous men, feeding predictable but indistinguishable lines slash lies?" "No, better than that." Daisy shakes her head shyly. "Not the romantic where you close your eyes willing them to get your name right so you can believe that you are different and important?" asks Sam. "Not that," smiles Daisy, self-satisfied. "Not the romantic of a summer holiday fling? Deeply intense by its very brevity," Lucy throws in. "No." She confidently shakes her head. "Was it the

romantic that is sort of breathtaking, rather peculiar, real romantic?" asks Rose fondly. Daisy nods. We're mesmerized and silently down our wine. Lucy goes to the bar for another bottle. When she comes back we are all still sitting quietly respecting Daisy's really romantic story. "Go on," says Lucy, grudgingly. "Well, we'd been getting on so well in the restaurant but I seemed to have used up all my quota of witty and entertaining things. He squeezed my hand. It was sticky and I was embarrassed so I said, 'It's a really hot night.'" We stare at her, amazed and disappointed, how could she have resorted to something so perfunctory?

The weather, for God's sake. We don't say this, we don't have to. "I don't know why I said something so inane. I was disgusted with myself, disbelieving that I could be so dull." "Oh, I don't know," says Lucy. I'm not sure she's being kind. I also hope Daisy's story is going to get a little bit more exciting, I have a pension to draw when I'm sixty. "To compensate for my unimaginative conversation starter..." Daisy hesitates and waits for one of us to correct her. Sam does. "Non-starter, more like." "I don't think that this is what Daisy was looking for. She hurries on, aware she is losing her audience." "I blurted out that as we were so hot we could paddle in the pond." Daisy looks aghast just recounting the story. We all sympathize. He'll now think that she is some sort of hippie, at-one-with-the-earth type. She's lost him. "He said that was amazing as he was going to suggest the same thing but thought that I'd think he was mad or that I'd be scared of getting arrested. Isn't that staggering?" "Yes, we're astounded." "Well, weren't you scared of getting arrested?" asks Rose. "Or that he was a new age traveler in disguise?" asks Sam. Daisy smiles benignly. "No. I just tugged at the laces

of my shoes and we both waded in, barefooted with trousers rolled up to our knees. We had sex in the fountain." We each take another gulp of wine. It appears that Daisy has found her teapot. Copyright 2000 by Adele Parks-Smith. Revue de presse Publishers Weekly Playing Away is a very edgy book. It's also wickedly funny and very sexy. Elle Compulsively addictive! Daily Mail (U.K.) A modern fairy tale in the classic sense of the word: a story of wanting what you can't have, filled with perils and beasts... The Belles and Beaux of Romance Sometimes shocking, hilariously funny, and true to life.... Perfect for 'nineties who are caught in the grip of love, marriage, relationships and powerful sex.... Very thought-provoking. Marie Claire A light comic novel... This month's Pick of the Paperbacks (April 2000). The Times (U.K.) Plenty to entertain yet the overtly girly stuff conceals a much more serious agenda. Kirkus s An affecting first novel successfully combines a cheeky first-person narrative with a serious look at the consequences of adultery.... A balanced exploration of the rules of marriage.