

A Guide To Becoming Distinctly Average

Amy Elliott-Smith



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A Guide to Becoming Distinctly Average: 978-1-908910-66-0

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Printed for Crooked Cat by Createspace

First Green Line Edition, Crooked Cat Publishing Ltd. 2013

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About the Author

Amy began a career as a stand-up comic in her early twenties until anxiety and depression hit her like a shovel in the face, effectively halting her career.

A quivering wreck, confined to her room in fear of an irrational and sticky end, Amy began to write. This lifted the gloom a little and, slowly but surely, she became one of you 'normal' people, able to roam free in public once more.

Amy holds a degree in English Literature from Liverpool University, so should be treated with respect at all times. As part of her studies she lived in North Carolina for a year where she discovered the wonderful musings of David Sedaris.

Randomly enough, she competed in a yacht race across the Atlantic in 2006 and came 76th (out of 250). She hated every minute of it.

Amy worked at BBC Manchester for 2 years hosting and writing sketches for her radio show entitled I Should CoCo. She used to model for Vidal Sassoon (oo-er), has written for her local paper (not so oo-er) and has performed stand-up comedy across the UK.

A Guide To Becoming Distinctly Average

The Note

I wrote my suicide note today. It was shit.

I can't die and leave a shit suicide note behind. It has to be something epic, quixotic, a text that anticipative actors will clamber to perform at auditions for generations to come. Casting directors will weep silently.

'It is almost *too* powerful,' they'll say.

It should be so beautifully worded, so evocative and poignant that, regardless of the countless times they'd heard the piece, no matter how ineptly verbalised, life for the listener will come to a standstill as they reflect on the sheer exquisiteness and tragedy of it all.

From the poor bastard who discovers my cadaver to the vicar presiding over my funeral, the shadow of those words should linger, haunting their memories until the day they die. They will tell their children, who will tell their children, maybe with some embellishment, and I will become legend.

Literary critics across the globe will shake their fists in fury at angry skies proclaiming, 'Why? Why was this woman taken from us so soon? Damn you for snatching a luminous, brilliant (and clearly naturally gifted) writer from us before her potential could be discovered!'

Everyone will miss me then. Everyone will want a piece of me, then. But I'll be gone. Ha!

Then there's the issue of how to do the deed. I want to go elegantly, of course. I don't want to be discovered covered in chunks of semi-digested paracetamol and bile, possibly having

shat myself on account of all the retching. No, a little dignity if you please.

A list of pros and cons is called for to help decide the method of my untimely and exquisite demise.

Option 1 - Slit wrists:

Pros:

- Promising dramatic effect
- I don't have to clean up the mess
- Would die in about one minute if cut radial artery
- I know correct technique (cut deep from wrist to inner elbow, not across)

Cons:

- May be seen as a 'drama queen', especially if surrounded by petals as planned
- Messy
- Would die in about one minute, but that's a minute of pain
- I think I know the right technique but haven't attempted before. Could fail

Option 2 - Hanging:

Pros:

- If I get the drop right I'll die as soon as the rope tightens (neck break)
- Seen as 'male' suicide. May spark interesting debate regarding sexist stereotypes
- Quite high success rate

Cons:

- If I get the drop wrong I'll be flailing about for up to 30 mins. Very uncouth

- Not very glamorous/feminine
- Haven't got a beam to hang from

Option 3 - Jumping from height:

Pros:

- Possible press coverage if someone tries to talk me down
- Dramatic effect guaranteed
- Fairly certain to succeed if drop high enough

Cons:

- Time needed to research suitable locations
- Messy and lacks elegance
- May just break legs/neck. Possibility of becoming permanent vegetable

Option 4 - Gunshot to head:

Pros:

- Fair chance of a quick death

Cons:

- Don't have a gun

Hmmm, so many options and I haven't even touched upon carbon monoxide poisoning, overdosing, drowning, vehicular impact or electrocution, let alone the more imaginative seppuku (falling on one's sword), immolation (suicide by fire) or, the more contemporary and trendy, suicide by cop (provoking an armed officer into killing me).

Come back to the method later, I decide. Stick to perfecting the suicide note for now.

I revise my feeble effort. It is doubtful whether this tear-smudged, ink-cobwebbed torn paper would stir the reverence in people's hearts as I had envisaged. Full of clichés like 'I'm

sorry I'm leaving you like this' and 'I can't go on'. It's simply not the stuff of veneration I had contemplated. It is distinctly average.

I imagine my mother reading it, shaking her head and tutting as her eyes scan the page.

'The best education money could buy, yet she can't even place her commas correctly,' she'd say.

And she'd be right. I should have listened with more diligence during English lessons.

Oh, the embarrassment of not being able to pen an emotive suicide note. Virginia Woolf wouldn't have suffered such a trivial problem. No, I bet she sailed through her sayonara without even thinking, lucky bitch.

Though I am suicidal, I am a highly functional suicidal. Days continue selfishly without a thought for my mental health. They crawl on their bellies like bloated slugs straining to reach salt cellars, while a sneering audience bays for their extermination. If only they could move faster.

For the past five years I have arrived home, put my house keys on their hook, turned on the table lamp and then let out a scream, hoping to quell the sheer hatred I have for life. This lasts for around five seconds then I put the kettle on and go about my business like everyone else.

More recently, I have begun this routine a little earlier in the day. That is, when I wake up, I'm so frustrated that I failed to die in my sleep that I scream. Sometimes I do both and imagine that, given time, I will end up a crazed banshee, screaming from dawn till dusk.

During my early years, I imagined a very different outcome for later life. As children, we're force-fed tales of love and romance, that a great life awaits us full of happiness and sunny days, without mention of taxes or migraines. I've failed the little girl who was so excited for her future, believing that eventually things would be wonderful. All she had to do was grow up. But then the poor little cow grew up to be me.

I could have been so much more. I could have been a successful actress, politician or stand-up comic. I should be happily and smugly married by now to either Kayvan Novak or Jon Richardson (depending on who was victorious in a highly publicised, Victorianaesque duel for my heart) and popping out his babies, residing in a comfortable corner mews house situated in the fashionable Bloomsbury district. But in severe, eye-burning, floodlit bastard-reality I'm not successful or anywhere close to being in a happy relationship; instead, I'm alone and living in a two-up two-down concrete box in the rougher part of a rough Cheshire town.

Reminiscing, I suppose my life has not been a bad one really. I had an abusive, alcoholic mother and an absent father, but my story is not dissimilar from those being blubbed over and self-indulgently reiterated behind closed doors of therapy sessions the world over. Self-pity is a pastime relished by the middle classes. We revel in its ability to relieve our responsibility from personal flaws and difficult situations.

As a child I didn't live in poverty and I wasn't starved. I was beaten and belittled but had a great education. It's swings and roundabouts, really. For every bad there was a good, my sister being a consistent provider of good. A sound and comforting presence, she was a shining, precious stone in the steaming manure pile of my childhood. After a sound thrashing from 'the adult', she would present cinnamon toast and warm milk to restore my soul. She'd dress me for school, help with homework and conceal any childish faux pas made on my part that would almost certainly lead to trouble. Just two years my senior and forced to grow up before her time, she was truly a 'lost child', but a natural caregiver.

Eventually, there came a time when cinnamon toast would not suffice. Since the beginning of maturity, familiar feelings, accrued after a juvenile physical beating, reappear in my life, anytime and anywhere, no beating required. Whether sitting on a bus or sitting in a park, waves of hopelessness and fear

sweep across me from nowhere and for no apparent reason. I have tried all I can think of to beat back my particularly vicious breed of persistent, snarling ‘black dog’.

In my early twenties, under doctor’s orders, I embarked on therapy. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Transactional Analysis Therapy, group therapy, drama therapy, art therapy, dance therapy, fucking hitting-a-pillow-with-a-baseball-bat fucking therapy – I’ve done it all and still I feel useless and lower than a sausage dog’s belly.

I concluded that my only escape from sadness would surely have to be my demise. That looming realisation used to hang heavy in the air, like bitter smog circling and eventually concealing me. However, instead of fear these days, I am grateful for the sliver of control that determining the nature and time of my death has brought to my thoughts, a purpose I crave. I’m sticking a finger up to the Grim Reaper as he extends a bony one in my direction.

You can stick it up your arse, you anorexic bell-end. I’m going my own way with all the pathetic hatred I can muster. Ironically, that thought makes me feel slightly better.

But first I have tales to tell, with funny bits and sad bits, friends and loved ones, and a smattering of tossers that impeded my cantankerous life’s journey along its miserable path. However, despite what you may think thus far, this won’t be a self-loathing, self-indulgent, angry or dark tale. Depression has helped shape some of the funniest, most highly regarded and esteemed figures in the world. I’m not suggesting I’m one of them, you understand, merely that I’m in good company.

Dogs And Dogs And Randy

Once, I got down on my knees and prayed.

“God,” I said, “seeing as I had a fairly crappy childhood, do you think you could give me a break now I’m an adult?” I didn’t get a reply, but I’m assuming the answer was ‘No’, possibly with a middle finger extended, if the impaired judgment I displayed upon entering into my particular line of work was anything to go by.

I became a dog groomer and I fucking hated it. How many privately educated dog groomers are there? I would wager heavily that I’m the only one.

Tag nuts are prolific in the profession, a daily occurrence to be tackled bum-on. You know, as a groomer, that when you dare to lift a dog’s tail, ninety per cent of the time there will be weeks’ worth of crusted excrement lurking underneath, waiting to greet you like a rapist down a dark alley.

The owners claim to know nothing of this hidden delight, and I believe them. It’s not a place the average dog-owner dares investigate. To owners, their pet is a cute ball of fluff that cuddles up next to them, looking lovingly into their eyes while furry bellies are tickled on the sofa during Midsomer Murders. Most are blissfully unaware, as their dogs lie in pure contentment, that there is a hammock of matted fur beneath that happily wagging tail capturing the fruits of Winalot meals gone by. Day after day, in salons across the country, knowing dogs clench their anuses tightly closed as they feel the groomers lift their tails to reveal the horror that lurks beneath.

Then the inevitable teeth flashing, growling and wrestling into submission, while fur flies and the clipper blade jams up with a substance similar to the consistency of stale chocolate spread. If only it could smell as good.

Dogs are not particularly jazzed by the feeling of buzzing clippers on their arse, and I don't blame them. They get a certain look in their eyes, as if seeming to shout 'Why? Why would you do this to me?' I feel like asking their owners the same thing, but of myself.

Someone once commented that I was a glorified hairdresser. I object. Hairdressers don't have to shave arseholes. Not literally, anyway.

Initially, I thought that working with dogs would be therapeutic. I had an empty garage and a vision of being surrounded by well-behaved dogs in a custom-built doggie salon. The idea of working from home was great – working the hours I decide, working with animals I love. Actually, it was not great, because what I hadn't taken into account was the fact that not all these animals were going to be like my dogs – calm, loving, and well behaved. I vastly overestimated my love of dogs, which I think mainly extends to my own. I also vastly underestimated how many hairy bumholes I'd have to shave to make a living.

The majority of dogs I have to deal with are a pain. They snap, bark, wriggle off the table, jump out of the bath and piss up my curtains. There is no reasoning with them. There's no point in saying, 'I'm doing this for your own good.' Their vengeful mission will not be complete until their teeth are latched onto my arm as if they are champing on a juicy loin of lamb straight from the oven, the look of Hades glinting in their eyes.

And as for the owners... well, although most are OK, some are a law unto themselves. This is where we embark on the story of a particular snaggle-toothed, pork-ball of a dog called Randy.

Randy was a Shih Tzu, and his owner was Maria. As she had a son in his mid-thirties, I guessed Maria must have been at least fifty. But, thanks to the skilful hand of a cosmetic surgeon, not to mention a small fortune, she had been stretched and stitched to appear a lot younger. Petite, with shoulder-length, perfectly straight and frizz-free red hair, she was a wealthy divorcee, a lady who lunches. I later learnt she'd been left a substantial inheritance by her father.

Maria drove a top of the range Audi and always carried a fabulous handbag from her personal collection of impossible-to-pronounce European designers. The type so exclusive we mere mortals would never have heard of.

Maria first darkened my doorstep on a windy September afternoon, autumn leaves blowing around her flaming hair like a tornado. When I opened the door she let herself in without a word. Trailing behind her waddled lardy Randy, huffing and puffing as though he'd just completed a circuit at Wimbledon Dog Stadium. He had, in fact, only walked twenty yards from the car.

A beautiful, black woollen coat hugged Maria's frame beautifully. Mid-heeled, soft leather boots protected her tiny feet, and a scarf, so delicate it could have been woven from gossamer, nuzzled her neck. Her luxurious scent was potent but not offensive. Freesia, rose, iris and sandalwood notes danced in her wake; they bloomed within my nostrils as I drifted away to a sleepy, secluded French meadow on a balmy summer's day.

Standing in my kitchen in silence, I waited for Maria to speak, while she waited for me to speak. I looked at Maria, Maria looked at me. I looked at Randy, Randy looked at a sandwich on the counter top. I went to stroke him; he growled then cocked his leg to piss up my fridge. My top lip curled. Maria laughed and bent down to pat his head.

"Oh Randy, you're such a naughty monkey." Looking at me, she added, "He does that all the time." *What, growls at*

people or pisses up fridges? Later, I'd discover it was both, actually. Ask a silly question. And it wasn't just reserved for fridges. No, Randy enjoyed relieving himself upon many things, be they sofas, table legs, radiators or, most memorably, my pillow.

Maria had a cottony, breathy speaking voice cultivated, I assume, to create the illusion she was always one with Zen and wanted the world to know it. I have always been suspicious of softly-spoken people: surely nobody is *that* calm, ever. Inside their tranquil crevice, mute to our ears, I imagine rasping, infuriated goblins pulling at vocal chords, desperate for the agony of an anger suppressed for half a lifetime to be heard.

A possible girlhood spent in Lancashire stamped itself on Maria's pronunciation of the letter 'L', which curled them distinctly, but the accent was diluted heavily by years of elocution tutoring as though it were a mark of shame that must be disguised. She sounded false, like the Queen would if she were attempting to pull off crap northern accent.

"I'm Maria, and this is Randy." Soft, leather-clad gloved hands slid a pair of Linda Farrow Luxe (*who?*) sunglasses daintily from her surgically-enhanced nose. Sunglasses. Such an unnecessary accessory to sport at 4.00pm on an English autumn afternoon.

I wondered how I looked from her perspective. This most feminine of ladies, wrapped in fine threads, now scanned me in the dim kitchen light. I felt self-conscious, embarrassed that I had not been afforded the lifestyle she enjoyed. I was suddenly acutely aware of my recently acquired bobbed hairdo. I had entered the salon requesting the style of Victoria Beckham but left echoing the style of Oliver Cromwell. Natural waves caused my dark hair to kink and straggle about my ears as if a persistent, ghostly breeze blew at it.

My clothes draped my frame with as much elegance as a potato sack. Torn jeans, a groomer's smock in shocking pink adorned with tufts from a hundred mutts, and plastic shoes

bearing the scars of run-ins with a thousand dog teeth, making my feet clammy.

Hopeful to create an illusion of nonchalance, and to compensate for my attire, I pulled my shoulders back and lifted my chin.

Maria motioned towards Randy, who had slumped against the wall panting, breath rattling in his throat. The dog was so fat it looked as though Maria had covered a barrel with cream-coloured fur, attached a lead to it and tried to pass it off as a dog. Had he not hauled himself into the house on his four bowed stumps, I would have thought he was a furry keg glued and fastened together by a child.

The fur surrounding Randy's mouth was dirty brown, like a Fu Manchu beard fashioned from poo. To complete this stunning specimen, the muzzle was so short it looked like someone had taken a run up and smacked him squarely in the face with a pan.

A baby blue leather collar studded with jewels poked out between third chin and creamy chest wig. I later learnt this accessory adorning his décolletage was no mass-produced local pet shop purchase. No, it was a one-of-a-kind, bespoke £400 Swarovski crystal collar. Had I been privy to that information earlier, I would have driven him to a secluded spot, mugged him and left him in a lay-by claiming thieves had swiped him in the dead of night.

Maria explained that she wanted Randy bathed and fluff-dried weekly, fully clipped every month and to stay overnight with me on Saturdays. I agreed because I needed the money. It was the beginning of a hideous friendship between me, Randy and Maria.

As Maria left, Randy let out a throaty snort. A waft of meaty breath waggled the hairs of his Dirty Sanchez beard and he looked at me as though he would murder me in my bed.

After getting to know him and his various behavioural problems, I have to say the poor little bastard never stood a

chance with Maria as his owner. I was soon to discover she was bat-shit crazy.

During that initial meeting she handed me a note detailing styling instructions for Randy's first haircut. It read:

SHORT body, tail LIGHTLY trimmed with a blunt edge, SHORT ROUND face EXCEPT BEARD (leave as LONG as possible). LONG blunt-edged ears. LONG legs, pads SHORT. SHAVE around eyes to prevent discharge.

It appeared Maria suffered from capital letter Tourette's.

I did the cut as requested and he looked fucking awful, like a bearded owl with a pronounced underbite wearing furry chaps.

"Jesus Christ," I said, shaking my head at the spectacle. "As if you haven't got enough to contend with." Randy stared at me and blinked as if to say 'Kill me'. I went to stroke him, he bit me.

It soon transpired that Randy was not a tactile pooch; he did not delight in affection. On the rare occasion he chose to be petted, he would approach me. That was the rule and, if I dismissed this rule, he'd draw back his lips to reveal a menacing smile, the precursor to a nasty nip.

I have never known a dog so repulsed by touch. No matter the circumstance, Randy hated physical contact and anyone who dared offer it. For example, while attempting to negotiate the stairs one day, he trod on his long beard, lost his footing and tumbled downwards, hurtling into a filing cabinet at the bottom. I rushed to comfort him, he bit me.

Another time, a bone Randy was chewing became lodged down his throat. I heard him coughing and retching in a desperate effort to dislodge it. I swiftly prised open his jaws and pulled the slimy remains from his airway. Effectively, I had saved his life. However, after a sneeze, he bit me.

A small, fairly cute dog is an undisputed child-magnet.

Unfortunately, children were a demographic he especially despised. Which is why I was shocked, if not a little amused, to discover that every year, during the week leading up to Christmas, Maria would deliver cards to the neighbours pulling a wheeled, wooden sleigh with Randy enthroned upon it. Complete with knitted Christmas jumper, reindeer horns and sequined bow tie, Randy was quite the spectacle; hence, local children would bound with glee towards his seemingly jovial throne only to run, moments later, screaming from the scene.

The shame is that, under different ownership, he could have been a lovely little dog. After a while, he would deem to let me approach him and we formed a respectful bond. During Maria's many holidays I would take care of him and, from the moment she shut the door behind her to the moment she opened it again two weeks later, dog boot camp was in session. Strict meal times, healthy food, initial gentle walks developed into rigorous strolls in the local park. Randy was in his element. Unfortunately, upon Maria's return, she promptly reverted to feeding him fish and chips and ice cream for dessert.

No matter how many times I tried to tell her, or how many tactics I adopted, the message that Randy would die if she continued to feed him unsuitable foods and neglecting to exercise him fell on deaf ears. Randy got fatter and fatter, sadder and sadder, and angrier and angrier. It was quite heartbreaking to know I was powerlessly witnessing his demise.

How best to describe Maria?

If she and Narcissus were standing side by side in front of a mirror, and Maria was asked who she thought was the better looking, instead of choosing the most beautiful of all the Greek Gods, she would see next to her a flatulent, pox-ridden tramp with bongo-eyes, a finger up his nose and his willy hanging out.

She once tried on a beret in a shop and, after a good ten minutes spent admiring herself in the mirror, remarked, "I look like a beautiful spy, don't you agree?" It was a rhetorical question. I didn't answer, as it was of no consequence; she was far too involved pouting and fluttering her eyelids at her own reflection to listen.

This was a woman who thought it acceptable behaviour to slash the tyres of anyone who parked in her road without permission, and hired diggers to dump rubbish that had been fly-tipped in the area to re-dump it back onto the assumed offender's driveway. You've got to admire her balls, but she lacked empathy and any shred of morality. To put it bluntly, Maria was a selfish and fairly horrible person.

One pleasant spring morning she arrived, unannounced, to collect Randy. She was ranting and raving about her gardener, who had cut back her lilac too far, and a neighbour who hadn't taken their bins in from the street following the previous day's collection. This is what passed as a bad day in Maria's world.

I tried to sympathise by making all the right noises during her unnecessarily dramatic account.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Still, things could be worse," I remarked, trying to lighten the mood.

Taken aback that I didn't share her exasperation she spat, "Yes, I suppose I could own an outfit like that."

I looked down. What was wrong with it? "It's just jeans and a black top," I said.

She sighed, "Not everyone can pull off the lesbian look, I suppose."

Had I not needed every penny she paid me, I would have kicked her out on her arse with so much force she'd have hit the ground like a bag of spanners. Then, before she could get up, Randy would be launched on top of her. I'd smirk, leaving her to be crushed, almost certainly to death, by his mighty girth. Her cries for help would go unanswered.

Instead, I took a deep breath, smiled and asked, "Same

time next week?" Maria, stony-faced, replied 'Yes' and swept out of the room. Randy dragged himself behind her, glancing briefly back at me with sympathetic eyes.

One evening, after two months of looking after Randy on a regular basis (not just the Saturdays, as originally requested, as Randy was now staying with me four nights a week), Maria told me she was too busy to pick him up so I agreed to take him home. This had now become a regular occurrence.

As my modest, ten-year-old car (aka the Shitmobile) choked and spluttered up to their picturesque Mid-Cheshire cottage in the light evening drizzle, Maria crept from behind a Rhododendron bush and gestured for me to approach. I exited the car, frowning, and made my way across the dewy front garden towards her, leaving Randy on the passenger seat. Halfway, I glanced back to the car. Randy, sensing he was alone, had awoken; his face was pressed up against the window, slick black nostrils flared, stagnant breath steaming up the glass. The ensuing condensation caught his eyebrows, plastering them to the wet pane. He strained his short neck in an effort to see what was happening and, realising whatever it was didn't involve food, his legs buckled under the strain. He collapsed out of view with an audible 'humpf'.

Arriving at Maria, I felt discomfort. Walking across the garden, my canvas trainers had soaked up the rain, dampening my socks. My feet began to get cold. An execrable smell wafted around my proximity and I realised a spiteful guardian angel had fixed it for me to tread in a massive turd along the way. *Cheers for that*, I thought as I wiped my shoe along the ground, brown poo clumps streaking the grass.

Maria surveyed the horizon, her pale eyes darting like an anxious bird. She waved her hand for me to lean in closer. Doing so, I could smell stale cooking and lavender lingering within the red hair balanced precariously atop her head in a messy bun.

"Over there," she whispered, pointing a lean, perfectly

manicured finger across the narrow lane in the direction of a battered white Ford transit van, patches of rust bedecking every panel. I looked down at my own hands. Sausagey, swollen, wrinkled fingers adorned with dog-tooth inflicted scabs. They looked like nibbled chicken drummers.

It was then I noticed a screwdriver poking from the corner of Maria's coat pocket. No doubt the van's tyres would soon fall victim to a vicious, frenzied and entirely unprovoked stabbing.

"They've been parked there since six," whispered Maria.

"So?" I asked.

"Do you think they're gypsies?" she asked. "Or do you think they're just poor?" Taken aback by her ignorant remark, I chuckled. What a comment!

Maria looked at me sharply. I cleared my throat and replied. "Well, I'm not an expert on the vehicular choice of gypsies or the poor so, I don't know."

She then looked from me to the Shitmobile and, for a moment, I noticed confusion trying to etch itself on her heavily botoxed brow before her gaze returned to the van. It was then that it dawned on me. *She thinks I'm... poor!*

Bewildered, a thousand questions whizzed through my head. Am I poor? I pay my bills on time and sometimes treat myself to a product from Tesco's Finest range. Surely that's middle class? But if I'm poor, does that essentially make me working class? Is that racist, or classist? Is that even a word? I always thought I was middle class, but is that also how working-class people see themselves? Oh my God, my whole existence is being called into question because of an involuntary, microexpression hinted in this snobby bitch's face.

Where's Plato now that I need to discuss his tripartite theory of soul (which, in a split second, I argue, is a statement most working-class folk wouldn't ponder)? No wonder my mother isn't keen on me. I'm potentially and unknowingly working class!

Or, am I middle class by association? Do class systems operate that way? I was privately educated, grew up in a million pound house, own my own car (Shitmobile), house (mortgaged), and business (don't get me started), all traits of the middle classes.

Referring to Marxist definitions, I sell my labour power for wages but I also own the means of production, which lands me in a philosophical grey area. It is somewhere I do not want to be positioned whilst in an egotist's garden, imminently to become witness to crimes committed on a suspect van, with wet feet on a Sunday evening, craving the opportunity to get back in time for the series finale of Sherlock on BBC One.

On the other hand, why does the thought of belonging to the working classes repel me?

I have huge admiration for a number of working-class women, including:

- Annie Kenney – Suffragette
- Brenda Dean – politician and trade unionist
- Marie Lloyd – music hall performer
- Violette Szabo – World War II secret agent
- J K Rowling – author
- Carol Ann Duffy – Poet Laureate
- Vivienne Westwood – fashion designer
- Dorothy Lawrence – reporter who disguised herself as a male soldier in order to recount life on the front line during World War I
- Betty Boothroyd – politician and former Speaker of the House of Commons

Why do I balk at the thought of sharing their rank? Why are people's perceptions of me important? Being working class, whether I am or not, does not involve following stereotypes invented and embellished by the middle and upper classes over generations. Tabloid subscribers, for instance, who show a

moral laxity, vote BNP and eat pies for every meal; these are exaggerated assumptions designed to score power points. I shake myself to my senses. I am me, regardless of my social standing within society.

That said, Maria was still a cheeky cow.

Unexpectedly flung into an existential crisis, I lost interest in the saga of the van and trudged back to my car, feet squelching, a vague stench of dog shit still lingering. I released Randy, who heaved his weight from the passenger seat, hit the ground with a dull thud and plodded towards his owner across the grass.

Distracted and biding her time to vandalise the vehicle, Maria waved in my direction and I waved back. Climbing into the Shitmobile, I hear her inform Randy he is having cottage pie for supper 'with extra mash'.

Almost a year later, Randy would be dead.

I received the news via a phone call from Maria. Sobbing uncontrollably, she informed me that her son had found Randy collapsed on a nearby riverbank, the remains of a half-eaten toad at his lifeless paws. A suspected allergic reaction to sampling the exotic delights of toad had resulted in a seizure, killing Randy almost instantly.

I sent a bouquet of lilies and a sympathy card to his bitch of an owner, but never saw or heard from Maria again.

Saying a little prayer, I asked that my grouchy canine friend may rest in peace and run in fields of green, a personal catering van following close behind.