The A-Z of Us

Jim Keeble

THE BEGINNING

Gemma had never really travelled. Spain, Greece, Dublin once for a hen weekend - the usual holiday destinations that seemed so dull now that you could fly anywhere on earth for the price of a coffee table. The other junior architects laughed at her because she hadn't even been to New York.

‘You haven't lived,' they declared, chuckling.

She countered by boasting that her best friend Ian was a travel writer, he'd been everywhere, including places even these geeky architects with their Hoxton fins and latest Levi's had never heard of, like Kyrgyzstan, Kiribati and the Aleutian Islands. But he was no happier for it.

‘Your best friend's a bloke?' The architects smirked. 'Is he gay?'

'I don't think so,' she replied, testily. 'He's been going out with my sister for the last eight months!'

'Kinky,' they said.

'Piss off, idiots,' she retorted, and hurried to the toilets to worry, as usual, about her inability to come up with instant, impressive put-downs.

Gemma was afraid of travel. The word itself sounded like 'travail' — 'a painful or laborious effort'. She'd looked it up once in a dictionary. It came from the Latin 'tripalium', a Roman instrument of torture. Which raised the question: 'why would you willingly partake in an activity that derives its name from a three-pronged spear used to eviscerate Roman prisoners?'

She admitted she was nervous of things she didn't understand. She thought it was a natural human tendency -the fear of the unknown. Gemma was constantly surprised that so many people paid good money to go abroad, throwing themselves into situations that made them feel disorientated and scared.

Gemma wasn't proud of her fears. She wanted to be braver. She wanted to challenge herself. Now, more than ever.

'Don't worry about it,' said Ian. 'There's nowhere left worth visiting anyway. Everywhere's accessible, everywhere's touched by tourism, there's no dusty corner of

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the world that a Canon Ixus hasn't snapped to show the folks back home. There's nothing left to explore.'

Of course she nodded agreement, her instinctive reaction when faced with something she felt ignorant about. But secretly she wondered. Maybe there was somewhere left to explore. Maybe each of us explores new territory, new lands, every day.

'How's that?' she imagined Ian questioning her, with his lopsided grin.

'Love, emotions, relationships . . .' she imagined herself replying, faltering as she tried to formulate confused thoughts into words. 'There are no maps, no charts any more. We're like those people who went out to Australia in the 1800s; they had nothing to tell them what was there, they had to draw their own maps, build new roads, new towns, new railways . . . we're the same . . . with relationships. Everything's new, the old maps don't work any more. Don't you think?'

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