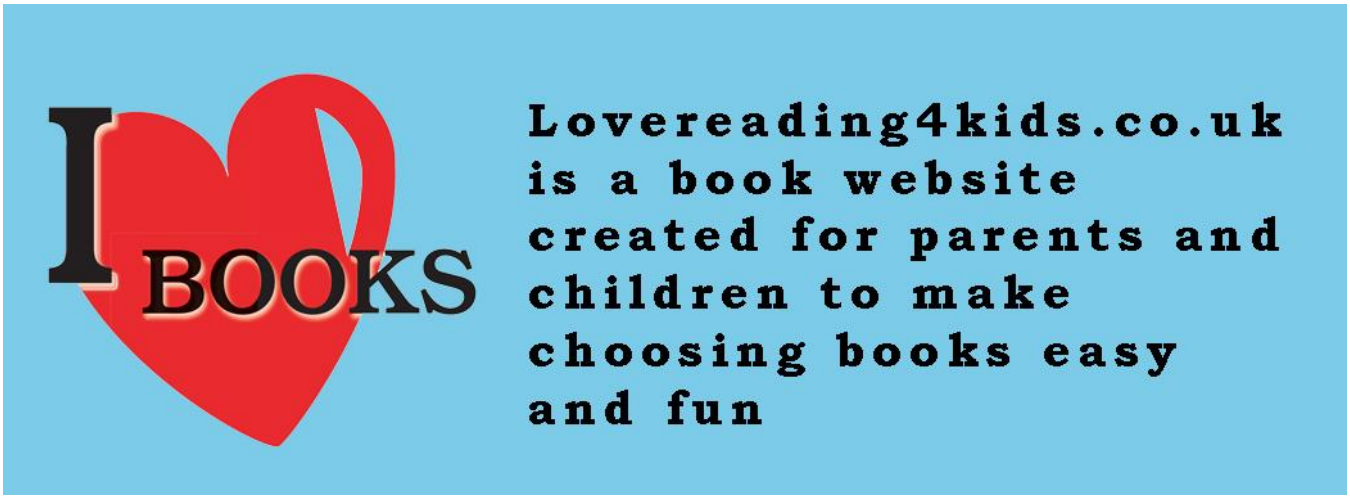


Opening extract from

Becoming Betty

Written by

Eleanor Wood

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To Alexis Maryon – who was there while I wrote this entire book: in a borrowed tower block, at favourite tables in Tout Va Bien and Café des Tribunaux, and on a few cross-channel ferries – with love and gratitude always



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To Do

1. Become cool.
2. Make new friends.
3. Decide WTF I'm going to do with my life.
4. Possibly stop making lists?

Lizzie:

Soooo, it's almost time for my Big New Start . . . I'm going out today to buy a whole new wardrobe before I go forth and be awesome – are you two with me in my epic quest??! xxx

Daisy:

Lizzie, you are your own perfect geeky self just the way you are. You don't need new clothes. YOU ARE AWESOME.

Jake:

Come on. Let's be real. You're nice and everything, Lizbot . . . But a few new outfits wouldn't go amiss. It can't hurt.

Lizzie:

See? I can't just go there with a stupid plan like 'be myself'. That would defeat the whole object.

Daisy:

Nonsense, my love. What you should NEVER do is listen to Jake. You're like Mary Poppins: Practically Perfect in Every Way.

Jake:

Except your hair. Your hair isn't perfect. It's kind of meh. Please note that I am telling you this because I love you. Constructive criticism. Real friends are honest, Daze.

Lizzie:

Um, thanks?

Jake:

WELL, YOU ASKED.

Daisy:

Don't listen to him, Lizzie. Are you really going to take hair advice from someone who has a Pinterest board entitled 'Hair Goals' that ACTUALLY INCLUDES A PICTURE OF JUSTIN BIEBER?!

Jake:

Girls. Hilarious as this is . . . Where are we meeting for this exciting shopping expedition?

Daisy:

Churchill Square, Urban Outfitters side. No lateness excuses will be tolerated from either of you. Lizzie, no obsessing over what to wear. Jake, no staring in the mirror and losing track of time. K?

Today is the first day of the rest of my life. That is official.

I mean, I might say that fairly often. Which I suppose makes today something like the two-hundredth first day of the rest of my life. And today looks quite a lot like all the other first days of the rest of my life did.

But this time it's different. This time I'm actually making it happen. So I am outside Urban Outfitters, waiting for my friends and trying to look nonchalant, with a feeling of genuine excitement. The sun is shining on the busy Brighton street, but the chill of autumn is in the air – along with the promise of the new term and new beginnings. My headphones are playing some appropriately inspirational vintage Bruce Springsteen. I made a playlist especially for today, heavy on the motivational power pop. I need it to get me through the necessary evil of shopping for new clothes – I know it's for the greater good, but I'd rather spend my money on records than clothes. Record shops don't have changing rooms, mirrors and unflattering lighting.

Luckily my soundtrack is working, which is the beauty of music and the perfect playlist. All things considered, I'm feeling basically . . . OK.

Even more so when I see Daisy get off the bus and wave like a hyperactive windmill as soon as she spots me. Daisy is like an excitable puppy, and she has the same way of making you feel better about yourself with a big enthusiastic welcome. Not to mention that she's always excited about coming into Brighton for any reason other than school – her parents live out in a 'picturesque'

country village in the South Downs, and Daisy can never wait to escape from there any chance she gets. This is why she spends most of her time round at mine or Jake's.

'Lizzie!' she exclaims breathlessly, as if it's an amazing coincidence that she should see me here, rather than something we've been planning for ages.

She envelops me in a huge hug that smells very strongly of strawberries. Well, kind of like synthetic strawberry sauce with sweets on the top. She read in some Buzzfeed 'Top 10 Ways to Make Boys Fall Madly in Lust with You!' or similar that strawberries are an aphrodisiac, and she's been dousing herself in sickly scented pink products from the Body Shop ever since. She won't listen to polite reason from me, or much more direct insults from Jake, and she wasn't even deterred by the wasps that kept attacking her at the beach all summer.

'You look gorgeous!' I say to her, focusing on the positives and ignoring the smell as best I can.

She makes a disbelieving face in response. Daisy is one of those classic girls who doesn't realize that she's pretty, even though I'm always telling her. I would kill for her naturally blonde hair and perfect skin, but she's always telling me to shut up and saying she's too short and too fat. She says I'm as bad as she is at running myself down, so I can't criticize, but then again I'm not as gorgeous as she is.

'Hey, look – there's Jake,' Daisy says, grabbing my hand. 'He's obsessing over the mannequins in the Topman window. We'd better go and save him from himself.'

She's right – Jake is staring pensively at a mannequin wearing a bright yellow suit jacket and the tiniest shorts I've ever seen. I mean, if the mannequin actually had balls I'm pretty sure you would be able to see them. Experience tells us that if we don't talk some sense into Jake, he will soon convince himself that this should be his latest new look. Then he will ask us why we didn't warn him, when all he ends up with is an empty bank account and non-stop mockery from all sides.

Jake loves the idea of looking like a high-fashion model, but unfortunately for him he's more like a ruddy-faced farmer. He's built like a rugby player, and could probably be one if he didn't hate physical activity and the outdoors so much. He keeps hoping that he might catch cheekbones from all the fashion magazines he reads, but it's a lost cause.

'Do you think I could pull off those shorts?' Jake asks right on cue, without bothering with such niceties as saying hello.

Daisy rolls her eyes behind his back.

'No,' I tell Jake. 'Sorry, but . . . just no. And if you dared to try, I can guarantee that nobody else would want to pull them off either!'

'That's so rude, Lizzie. Rude. I've been one-hundred-per-cent supportive about this little gothic orphan Annie eyeliner thing you're doing these days. I haven't said a single bitchy word.'

I automatically raise a hand up to my face, suddenly

self-conscious. I suppose it must be obvious I've been trying out a new look, but I was sort of hoping nobody would notice, while at the same time finding me inexplicably more attractive. I've been trying to change my image gradually, over the course of the summer holidays, via stealth. Like if anybody knew I was trying to look different, they might be like 'Who do you think you are?' As if I should just stick to being boring old Lizzie Brown, like I've always been.

Only two months ago, before I became known for being a complete freak, I was officially the most boring girl in the world's most boring school. *B* for effort, *B* for achievement. Ten *B*s at GCSE. Not one of the high-achieving geeks of the class – and let's not forget that this is the age of the geek, where nerd-status is cool – but not one of the seriously cool girls either. Always somewhere in the middle.

But not any more. All that's about to change. That's why today is the first day of the rest of my life. Or whatever. While Daisy and Jake are staying on at West Grove to do A levels, tomorrow I am starting at sixth-form college. It's my chance for a brand-new start, where nobody knows me and I can be whoever I want. It's scary, but I am so, so excited.

'Come on,' Daisy says, as if reading my mind. 'Today is supposed to be about Lizzie. We need to find an outfit that will knock them all dead on her first day at her new college.'

'While we're still stuck in the world's most hideous –

and most *burgundy* – school uniform,' Jake grumbles. 'It's so unfair.'

The original plan was that we would all embark upon the adventure of sixth-form college and new horizons together. Daisy, Jake and I had this scheme to reinvent ourselves and become cool. Finally. This seemed like a brilliant plan for about two seconds, but Daisy and Jake, who both have much stricter parents than mine, weren't allowed to leave West Grove Secondary for sixth form, as the school is renowned for its results and university applications and all that stuff.

My parents, cringe-makingly, are kind of the 'cool' parents of our group. Well, my dad is, and he usually manages to talk my mum around. Daisy has too-good-to-be-true, super-religious parents, who are like something out of the 1950s, and Jake lives with his 'very involved' hippie therapist dad. Sometimes I envy them, in a weird way. Still, my parents said it was up to me where I went. In the spirit of optimism and reinvention, I decided to be brave for once and go it alone.

So this is my chance. And I'm doing it for all of us. I have to get it right.

'Let's shop!' Daisy commands. 'Just think: what would RuPaul do?'

Just as Jake spends his life inhaling fashion blogs and hoping his life will start to resemble the images within the pages, Daisy is inspired through the medium of reality TV. The motivating words of RuPaul are her current favourite. She is also a fan of waddling around like a duck

sticking out her bottom, after watching the Kardashians, and putting on an affected accent and flipping her hair around a lot in the manner of a Chelsea girl.

'Well,' I interject, 'it's more like what would RuPaul do if he had a total of fifty quid left from his summer-job savings . . .'

'So basically we're looking at either one nice thing from Urban Outfitters or a whole bag of Primani swag . . .' Jake muses.

'And I definitely want money left for chips after,' I remind him. 'And a milkshake.'

'Priorities, priorities . . .' Jake tuts. 'We're talking about your all-important brand-new image here!'

'He's right, Lizzie,' says Daisy.

'Don't worry,' I tell them. 'I've already thought it through. We can go to Beyond Retro.'

If I'm making a whole new start, I want to be different. And there are loads of racks of weird, cheap old clothes there. I can buy myself a whole new vintage image and still have enough money left for chips.

An hour later I'm happily eating my chips in the American diner on the seafront. At my feet I have a shiny yellow carrier bag containing a vintage dress with a bright 1960s pattern. It's made of flammable man-made fibres and feels a bit like a dishcloth. I love it more than I have ever loved any item of clothing in my whole life.

'Not being funny, Lizzie, but it looks like my nan's curtains,' Jake proclaimed when I came out of the

changing room in it. 'My eyes actually hurt.'

'He's right, you know,' Daisy agreed. 'It's like something out of the drama costume cupboard at school.'

I ignored them and bought it anyway. They might laugh, but this is the different kind of look I have always dreamed of and never had the guts to pull off.

I love the new brave me.

'You know,' Daisy says, slurping her milkshake and changing the subject, 'I really think this is the year I'm going to get a boyfriend.'

'Yeah, and this is the year I'm going to win *X-Factor*,' says Jake with a roll of his eyes.

Have I mentioned I also love my two best friends?

'Well, it *might* be,' I say, jumping to Daisy's defence. 'If I can go off to college all by myself, there's no reason why all our dreams can't come true. Finally. It's about time, right?'

'Yeah, yeah – all right. Dial it down a notch, Pollyanna Sunshine.' Jake throws a chip at me.

'I'll eat that if you're not having it,' Daisy says quickly, snatching it up off the table and slathering it in mayonnaise. 'But seriously, this is going to be our year. I can sense it.'

We are all the same. This is why the three of us are friends. An unkind person, like most of our classmates back at West Grove, might say that the three of us are mostly friends because nobody else wanted to be friends with us – to be honest, we were sort of thrown together. But the three of us are actually all the same: our friendship

is based on the fact that we are all incurable daydreamers. In fact, against the odds, we are pretty much a perfect little gang.

For years now we have been sitting around and talking about what we're going to become, one day in an unspecified near future, and how awesome it's going to be – eventually. Our time together mainly consists of fantasizing and making up stories, and each of us humouring the others about the actual sad state of reality. Our big ideas have always been so far removed from real life, it's like some sort of depressingly aspirational sci-fi novel: *Do Losers Dream of Electric Sheep?* or *The Wannabes' Guide to the Galaxy*.

Jake wants to be famous, only he's not sure how, so his planned means of doing so vary. Popular options include: boyfriend of footballer, or one of those weird people who has loads of plastic surgery and ends up looking like a cat, just because, as he says, 'It would be a lol.'

Daisy's sole ambition is to get a boyfriend. She flips between sometimes not caring who it is, as long as it's someone – *anyone* – and sometimes insisting he has to be the world's most perfect male specimen. At one time she was convinced it was going to be Harry Styles, but she claims to have grown out of that. She has eyes out on stalks whenever we walk down the street, looking out for the special person who will turn out to be her one true love.

Jake and I keep telling her she shouldn't worry so much – she's just the sort of person who is likely to

blossom later in life – but boys at school don't tend to look twice at her because she's so wholesome and young-looking. They have no idea that she's secretly boy-crazy.

We might all be bordering on delusional, but at least Jake and Daisy both have some idea of what it is they want out of life. I don't really have a clue. I just know that I want *something*. Something different, something more. It's just that I have literally no idea what that might be. I've always been so envious of people who are really good at a particular subject, or a sport, or a musical instrument.

When I was a kid I was forever searching for my favourite new hobby – so much so that it became a running joke in my family, until my parents realized that it was genuinely upsetting me and contributing to my 'generalized anxiety', which was yet to be diagnosed but evident in full force even when I was a small, nervous child.

There was the time I was desperate to be great at gymnastics – but really I just wanted the leotard and was too scared even to attempt a cartwheel in case I hurt myself. The violin lessons I begged my parents for and then dreaded so much I used to hide in the school loos every week and cry. That time when I was fourteen and decided to 'go emo' and everyone just laughed at me.

Going to college is finally my chance to change all of that. I'm ready – I have never felt so ready for anything in my life.

'A toast, guys,' I say, raising my chocolate milkshake

and grinning around the table with my mouth full. 'To new beginnings.'

'To new beginnings,' the other two dutifully chorus.

'And to me having sex,' Daisy adds.

'And me becoming a reality TV star,' Jake adds after her. 'And to Lizzie finally becoming cool – but not so cool she gets new, better friends and forgets all about us.'

'As if!' I laugh. 'But I *am* going to be really cool.'

'In your hideous polyester nightmare dress.'