

Introduction

It is a surprisingly hot Easter Sunday when I begin writing this book. From my desk, I observe passers-by caught off-guard by the April heatwave – mottled legs, self-consciously stripped of their winter casings, roam free in outfits better suited to the Med: embroidered smocks, booty shorts. I am wearing leggings with a tasteful rip at the groin, an oversized T-shirt and furry clogs. I have been alone in the house for two days – my baby, at her grandparents'; my phone, on airplane mode – before I venture out into the sunshine. 'You are wearing your slippers,' notes the cashier at the newsagent. Easter brings a dip in business; I am his entertainment for the day. 'I am not wearing my slippers,' I correct him. 'They *look* quite slippery, I grant you, but look at their ridged rubber bottoms,' I continue, plonking a clog up on his counter. 'They are outside shoes.' And then I trot home in my inside-outside shoes – a strangely singular figure on this celebratory weekend – the happiest or, rather, the most content (because they are *not* the same thing) that I have been for a long time.

There is no specific reason why I feel so content today. Why I am alone, but not lonely. Possibly it's because everything is quiet and the weather is lovely, I am free of responsibility and enjoying writing. Possibly I just woke up on the right side of the bed. Who knows? And yet we live in a world where we expect to know everything about ourselves, like

hyper-vigilant self-guards, in order to live our *most optimal* lives. As a generation, we've been rushing towards this moment since we could walk. We grew up alongside the positive psychology movement of the '90s, also known as the study of 'the good life', telling us that the key to happiness lies within. We were raised by boomer parents and the constant reminder that, unlike them, we have So Much Choice. We were safe in the knowledge the ceiling had been broken and that we had all the tools at our disposal. We can be whoever we want to be! And yet there is a widespread feeling of restlessness among millennial women. Like something is not quite adding up. Like we might be getting life wrong.

The *paradox of choice* is a theory coined by the psychologist Barry Schwartz to describe how choice has become just as much a straitjacket as a liberation. 'The official dogma of all Western industrial societies runs like this,' he says. 'The more choice people have, the more freedom they have. And the more freedom they have, the more welfare they have.' Having no choice is unbearable, he writes in his book of the same name, but having too much choice can be dizzying, especially when it's over things that shouldn't matter. No one's life was ever improved by 175 different salad dressings, or scrolling through 88 pages of black dresses.

Schwartz's theory feels especially significant for millennial women, brought up thinking that 'since choice is good, it's only good'. That with maximum choice comes maximum chance of getting life right. More economic, psychological and social freedom – hard-fought for by previous generations – has led to an overall better quality of life for the vast majority of us. But for many women, it has also led to conflicting pressures: we can work full-time, but we are also still assumed to be the primary care-givers; we are free from retro beauty standards and yet the avenues to self-improvement have intensified through the lenses of wellness, surgery and social

media. Rather than being satisfied with what Schwartz calls ‘the good enough’, we are vulnerable to a socially enforced perfectionism. Success has always been relative (recall the fable about the farmer who, on finding his only cow dead, prayed to God for his neighbour’s cow to also die). The difference is now we no longer compare ourselves with our peers past whom we stroll, but the perfect strangers past whom we *scroll*. A whopping 83% of women say that social media negatively impacts their self-esteem. *Quelle surprise*. We are drowning in a sea of *comparisonitis*. As we splash in the lives of others, options begin to feel like obligations. The adage ‘strive for progress, not perfection’ has been flipped on its head. In the *Goop Lab* documentary, Gwyneth Paltrow, queen of self-polishing, unwittingly sums up the pressure we feel to eternally strive for something better: ‘You only get one life, so why not milk the shit out of it?’ she crows delightedly.

With more choice, the parameters for what makes a good life – and what makes a good *woman* – narrow. The grey area is too large to navigate and so we tread the familiar, claustrophobic ground that has dogged women for centuries. I was struck with this realisation when I participated in a Radio 4 segment about the row between Coleen Rooney and Rebekah Vardy (a pop culture moment dubbed ‘Wagatha Christie’). The presenter, Paddy O’Connell, chastised me for being ‘too equivocal’. We were talking about two women and so obviously I had to pick a side. Was I *for* Rebekah, or *for* Coleen? Who was *right* and who was *wrong*? This is not to throw shade at O’Connell – black-and-white morality, particularly when it comes to young women, is consistently reinforced. And I think *that* is where our disconnect comes from. Women have been told for so many years that either they are the right type of woman or the wrong type of woman; that they have the right set of opinions or the wrong

set of opinions; and so with what seems a surfeit of choice (and avocados), comes a sort of confidence collapse.

As someone with considerable privilege – able-bodied, white, privately educated, married with children – I clearly do not face all the same struggles as other millennial women. This book is a subjective piece of work, written by a Middling Millennial (I was born in 1987), not a finite conclusion on What Millennial Women Want. Many of the anxieties I write about are, somewhat inevitably, middle-class anxieties. If you struggle to feed your children or can't afford the bus fare, then you likely do not give a toss about wellness or WhatsApp or what you are wearing. But the global middle class is a socio-economic group growing at tremendous speed, comprising more than half the world's population. Worrying about the kind of life you lead is a privilege, to be sure; but it is not a niche concern. It is one that many women, in their many different circumstances, share. 'Am I living the right life? I'm as filled with anxiety as anyone else,' said Zadie Smith last year, in a live conversation with fellow novelist Diana Evans.

The problem with writing about a specific generation is that there can be a tendency to write about their worries as if they are the first generation to have them. Spoiler alert: the struggles millennial women face are no different to the struggles women in previous generations faced. Their *form* is different (we are no longer fighting for the vote, for example, but for parity in the workplace) but their *intention* is the same: to have a purpose, to feel valued, to seek contentment. As Betty Friedan said in *The Feminine Mystique*, a book about the restlessness of 1960s suburban housewives, it is the responsibility of every generation to sift through the weeds. To look at the lives we are living and to think about how they serve us.

This book is my attempt to sift through the weeds. To analyse the tools we use and have pressed upon us in order to navigate the effluvia of modern life. And how, in our various attempts to make life easier for ourselves, we often make it harder. Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, 'I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in.' I see this as a reminder to resist complacency and impotency by keeping clear-eyed about the choices that we want to make, and those that do not matter. This book does not offer answers. It won't help you nail *the right life*, assembling pieces as if it were a Pinterest board. But I hope that by asking the right questions, we can start to find comfort and cohesion in the good enough.