

# Life is pain ... but it doesn't have to be painful, aka the introduction

'Life is pain, highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something.'

Thus spake the Dread Pirate Roberts/Wesley to Buttercup in the glorious 1987 movie, *The Princess Bride*. Aside from learning that one should 'never go in against a Sicilian when death is on the line', this is probably the most valuable lesson that wise film taught me. But, contrary to what the Dread Pirate Roberts/Wesley\* appears to advise in this scene, I have never believed that one should just accept it.

The Nietzschean pirate was not wrong. Life is definitely pain: the *Daily Mail* exists; there are still people in the world who believe that banning abortion will lead to happy families as opposed to mutilated women; every straight man I've ever met prefers boring Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to glorious Katharine Hepburn in *The Philadelphia*

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\* Look, just see the movie, OK? Not only will the whole 'Dread Pirate Roberts/Wesley' thing make sense but your life will be immeasurably improved.

*Story*\* and, call me a crazy idealist, but I'd have thought that by the twenty-first century any movie that suggests the only happy ending for a woman is marriage would be deemed as unacceptable as any movie that suggests the only jobs available to black people are maids, drug dealers, sassy best friends or Nelson Mandela. Oh. Wait a minute.

Then there are the pains that come from within and, going purely from my own experiences and observations, women are particularly enthusiastic about inflicting these on themselves, almost as much as some of the aforementioned exterior agencies are about inflicting them on them, and it is entirely possible that the two sides to this equation are not unrelated, even an ever-interlooping system. After all, bullies look for susceptible targets.

This is not to suggest that women are delicate victims who need protection, or that feminism treats them as if they are, or whatever nonsense some folk come out with to justify not confronting such things: 'Show me a smart, competent young professional woman who is utterly derailed by ... an inappropriate comment about her appearance and I will show you a rare spotted owl,' one journalist wrote in an editorial in the *New York Times*\*<sup>2</sup> in 2011, suggesting that secretly women love to be reduced to their physical appearance and only pretend they don't because they think

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\* A world in which any man prefers a limpid-eyed actress playing a jewellery-obsessed hooker in the dishonest (Truman Capote's alter ego is, for some reason, rendered straight) and racist (Mickey Rooney plays a Japanese man – let us speak no more of it) to a flashing-eyed woman imperiously entrancing Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant is, by definition, disappointing.

\*<sup>2</sup> 'In Favour of Dirty Jokes and Risqué Remarks,' Katie Roiphe, *New York Times*, 12 November 2011.

to do otherwise would be a betrayal of the Sistahz and their 'Orwellian' attitudes to sexual harassment. But then this journalist also seems to think that a woman's age ('young') and employment status ('professional') are in any way relevant to her credibility as a sensible person and, rather more jarringly, suggests that only weak women can't handle harassment (or worse), thus putting the focus and blame on the women's reactions rather than the men's actions (an all too common tack in a variety of contexts), so perhaps we need not waste any more of our time on this theory. Although I can't help but regret not getting to see that owl. I do like an owl.

It's hard to be awesome in an occasionally lame world. That so many bizarrely retrograde clichés and expectations still dominate so much of society and pop culture is depressing enough; the number of people who perpetuate them, internalise them and even enact them because, I guess, it's easier to do this than to come up with one's own ideas, one's own arguments, one's own life, can feel downright deadening on a person's soul.

As a woman who works in the media and watches a lot of movies, I, inevitably, notice this in particular in regard to the depiction of women in the media and movies. This, I guess, is because feminism has arrived at something of an awkward place in that while equal rights (if not equal pay) are, at the very least, expected, anachronistic expectations and depictions of women remain. But to be honest, the fact that we're even talking about feminism or, specifically, the definition thereof is depressing because it seems spectacularly lame to have to stroke one's chin about what gender equality means. I have yet to see a single article asking, say, 'Are Civil Rights Dead?' or 'Is the Fight Against Racism Relevant to

Twenty-First-Century Fiction?’, to paraphrase two recent chin-strokey articles about feminism, neither of which, incidentally, came from the strawmen of daft right-wing tabloids but two ostensibly liberal and ostensibly respected British publications.\* It never ceases to amaze me how much of a meal people still make about the definition of gender equality. I’d have thought that the clue was in the name, but then I always was very literal-minded.

The ubiquitous clichés about life in general, and what one needs to do in order for it to be a fulfilling one – again, going by my personal experience – tend to impinge on one’s subconscious and fester during one’s twenties and thirties, bringing with them the four horsemen of the apocalypse: self-doubt, panic, insecurity and credulity. One knows when these have arrived because one finds oneself reading the *Daily Mail* website, Mail Online, and giving a toss about it.

But contrary to what a certain pirate claimed, one does not have to accept this, or insist that one is unaffected by them because to do otherwise would be a cop-out of some sort, and I swear I’m not trying to sell you anything. Well, other than this book and, seeing as you’re on the fourth page I’m assuming you’ve already bought it.

Instead, one needs to confront these stereotypes and assumptions and then one can see their stupidity clearly. Wait a minute, ‘one’? Who talks like that, other than David Starkey? As I am (spoiler alert) not David Starkey, I shall, briefly, stop hiding behind the presumptuous ‘you’ and coy ‘one’ – ‘I. Ta da! There is not a single word in this book that is not directed at myself. All the lessons in this book are lessons

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\* ‘Is Feminism Dead?’, *New Statesman*, 27 November 2007 and ‘Is Feminism Relevant to 21st-Century Fiction’, *Independent*, 13 May 2011.

I learned by falling flat on my Semitic-nosed face. This has been the way of my whole career. In the daylight hours – as opposed to the evening ones in which the majority of this book was written – I pretend to be a newspaper columnist and a fashion writer, and at a conservative estimate, at least 70 per cent of my fashion articles have been written when I’ve been wearing, at best, vaguely coordinated pyjamas, by which I mean a ‘Vote Obama 2008!’ T-shirt (customised with tea and Marmite stains), leggings and Ugg boots. It’s how Anna Wintour edits *Vogue*, you know. Those who cannot do, teach; those who cannot teach, teach gym; those who cannot teach gym, write bossy essays on the subjects at which they so consistently fail.

Few can understand why they believe or are doing something in the moment of believing or doing. That generally comes in the sentimentalised light of retrospect or – more brutally if more usefully – if someone else shines a shaming spotlight on it at the time. This brings me to the tale of what happened when Erinsborough withered under the pitiless gaze of Gallic scorn.

One afternoon when I was thirteen I signed up for the French exchange programme at my school, presumably having hit my head very hard in PE that morning. This brief act of insanity resulted in some random French kid coming to stay with me for two weeks and then I went to stay with her for another two weeks. We were paired together purely by our corresponding ages and, I strongly suspect, our shared religion, or maybe it was just a coincidence that our schools just happened to put together the only two Jewish girls in the programme. Contrary to what our teachers perhaps envisioned, this French girl, who I will call Fifi for no defensible reason, and I did not do renditions of dance

routines from *Fiddler on the Roof* and debate the finer points of the Talmud while sitting round a campfire made of Chanukah candles. We hated one another as only two teenagers who don't speak one another's language and are forced to spend a solid month with one another can.

Yet while I returned from the experience with no greater understanding of the perfect and imperfect tenses than I had at the start, Fifi did teach me something else that had nothing to do with linguistics. On her first day, I brought Fifi to school with me and, afterwards, being an extremely cool and cutting-edge teenager, brought her directly home afterwards so as not to miss even the opening notes of the theme song for the essential daily viewing of *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. As I sat there on the sofa, bowl of grated cheese in my lap ('*L'après école repas du choix*,' I explained to a nauseated-looking Fifi), mouth possibly a little slack with excitement at the gripping storylines involving someone not paying for a caravan in Summer Bay, and Madge and Harold going on a hot date in Lou's Place, I felt what would soon be a familiar sensation: Fifi's disapproving eyes upon my face.

'What is this?' she asked in an accent I'm just about resisting rendering phonetically.

'Oh, they two are TV movies in Australia,' is what I said in French. Speaking one another's language badly was how Fifi and I communicated for the whole of the month, meaning that we were not only never speaking the same language, we were hardly ever speaking any language at all.

'They are good?'

'They super cool.'

'They do not please me.'

'OK. They please me.'

'What stories they tell, please?'

‘Much stories. This one, two old people eat dinner in an expensive restaurant. Other, a person did not pay for a car.’

‘That sound not interesting. Why you watch?’

The reason I watched them was the reason I did pretty much anything when I was thirteen: because all my peers did. These shows were what everyone in class talked about at school; I don’t think I ever even considered whether I liked them any more than I’d ever considered whether I liked water: they were a vital part of my existence, a part of my survival. But at that moment, Fifi became the little boy pointing out the royal nudity, the Australian soaps were the naked emperor and I was the heretofore duped villager, and I saw them for what they were: ridiculous pantomimes with cardboard scenery that I spent five hours a week watching. As much as I’d like to say at this point that I promptly gave up watching the Australian soaps and never again bought a *Neighbours Annual* book, that would be a lie (come on – we’re talking social ostracism in the fourth form here). But I was at least now a little discomfited by it and it did make me become more self-aware and questioning about why I did things. So *merci*, Fifi. It almost makes up for the weekend you made me spend at Eurodisney.

This, in a sense, is what I’ve tried to do with this book: be like my French exchange and point out that some things do not need to be. And as for the things that do unavoidably need to be, I’ll suggest ways in which they can be rendered more bearable.

Now, before you dive off from the steps of this introduction and into the swimming pool of the book itself, I must warn you of something. There is a fair amount of sex talk in this book. Sorry, Mum and Dad/You’re welcome, everyone else! This was not exactly my intention when I set

out to write this book, and, in fact, I didn't even notice it until I reread the finished product and I'll admit I was, if not clutching a white lace handkerchief to my lipsticked mouth, a touch surprised. My general attitude to sex is similar to the one I have to exotic travel: happy to experience it as an activity, somewhat less interested in reading about it.

But then, it was inevitable (maybe). My conscious intention in writing this book was to address some of the clichés and tropes that can, all too easily, shape one's expectations of life and oneself, and Lord knows there are a lot of clichés about sex and how it should feature in a woman's life. So what I'm saying is this: I've written the words 'blow job' a number of times here, but it's purely for professional purposes. And just to clarify, I don't mean that in a prostitutional way.

Seeing as I started this introduction with an eighties film quote, I'd like to end with one. It took Bill S. Preston esquire, Ted Theodore Logan and Abraham Lincoln a journey through time in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* to learn the lesson that one should 'Be excellent to one another.' It's not a bad motto to live by, but I'd timorously like to suggest that there is something else that is arguably more important. I know a lot of women who are excellent to other people but feel less than excellent in themselves. Anyway, 'excellent' suggests, to me, perfection. Fuck that. Be strong, be confident, be good to yourself. Be awesome.