

MIRANDA
HART

Is It Just Me?

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To my dear reader chum

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1. Life, eh . . . ?	1
2. Music	19
3. Hobbies	33
4. Office Life	53
5. Technology	75
6. Beauty	93
7. Bodies	119
8. Exercise	137
9. Diets	149
10. Health	153
11. Holidays	175
12. Christmas	195
13. Who's Top Dog?	223
14. Mothers and Children	237
15. Dating	257
16. Weddings	279
17. Culture	291
18. Dreams	311

1

Life, eh . . . ?

My Dear Reader Chum, a very hearty hello to you. What Man honour and privilege it is to have you perusing my written word. It is nothing short of tremendous to have you to chat to and, I hope, now that we're on sentence three, you are sitting comfortably. Or maybe you're lying. Lying, perhaps, on a beach, or snuggled in your bed; perhaps you've constructed a small fort out of cushions, in which case I applaud you. Or maybe you've thrown caution to the wind, and you're lying on the bookshop floor having a little breather (if that's the case, I'm not being rude, but you're a bit weird). Maybe you're standing on a commuter train, using this book as a filter between you and a repellent armpit. If so, I'm terribly sorry. That's no way to start the day, is it? Face in a pit. Commuter trains are the only place you'd not question standing what in any other social scenario would be freakishly and embarrassingly close to a friend, let alone a stranger. But, I welcome all readers standing. Maybe there are others kneeling? Perhaps you're in church; maybe you're at a wedding, with this book tucked surreptitiously into the Order of Service.

Whatever position you find yourself in, I hope you are ensconced and comfortable, for we are – can you believe it? – already on our second paragraph, and well in to this little

literary journey together. Should you wish to continue, I suggest that you take this opportunity to arm yourself with a cup of tea and a biscuit, or a bucket of cappuccino and a bollard-sized muffin, or a nourishing soup or, if you're so inclined, just break all the rules and grab yourself a full-on roast. For we've got a book, yes, a whole *book*, to romp through together, and I wouldn't want you going hungry as we begin a-romping (now stop it, cheeky: you're making up your own jokes).

What I'd most like to say up front and with all the love that I can muster is that you are very welcome indeed. Whoever you are, however you've chosen to arrange yourself, and whatever snack you've selected, I clasp you firmly to my writerly bosom. Let there be no confusion about that. You are a much-loved guest in my storybook castle. I applaud you for choosing – and I say this with absolutely no impartiality or objectivity of any kind – such a marvellous book. Of all the books on the shelf, just look what you've gone and bought. Give yourself a round of applause, even if you're in public. I dare you. Actually I tell you what, as this would make me very happy: if you're in public and see someone else reading this book, why don't you applaud each other? What a lovely moment that would be. I advocate that as much as I advocate adults galloping, or people randomly wandering into an optician to try on the most unflattering and amusing glasses for no good reason. It's what I call 'making your own fun'. Because you have to, really, don't you? As, let's face it; life does have a tendency to throw up difficulties, depressions, moments of boredom, loneliness or grind. I don't know. Life, eh?

'Life, eh?' It's a phrase I've heard myself and others say over the years, many times. It's often only just audible, thrown away over a sigh, or comes at the end of a laugh. A phrase,

Is It Just Me?

or tic, or jerk, or (and I beg your pardon) ejaculation reserved for significant moments. Times when you just can't put into words the emotions and happenings of this weird and wonderful journey of existence. I recently said it on holiday with my friend, Nicky, looking out at a sunset over the sea, when she and I realised we'd known each other ten years to the week. We looked back at all we had wanted then, and all we had achieved. It was a lovely moment, and I heard myself punctuating the conversation with, 'Life, eh?' When my little sister had a daughter, we sat with my newborn niece in our parent's garden, where she and I had often sat as young girls thirty years before. We said together, wistfully, 'Life, eh?' It says everything without having to say anything: that we all experience moments of joyful or painful reflection, sometimes alone, sometimes sharing laughs and tears with others; that we all know and appreciate that however wonderful and precious life is, it can equally be a terribly confusing and mysterious beast. 'Life, eh?'

Those kinds of moments – the big ones, the meaty ones, the births, the deaths, the reminiscences – I can handle. Those kinds of moments I enjoy or endure, much as we all do. There's usually a sort of road map for them. Traditions. Procedure. But . . . where I feel alone and unprepared is with the less serious but undeniably discombobulating and embarrassing hiccups, nuances and foibles of just . . . being a person.

Let me furnish you with a recent example: has anyone else, whilst negotiating a slippery prawn in a smart restaurant, catapulted said prawn over their shoulder so it hit their next-door diner in the eye? Now it is, of course, at times like this that one should remain very serious. Stand. Go over. Perhaps say to the poor lady, 'Are you alright? I'm terribly sorry. Could I get you another coffee?' (the prawn landed in her cappuccino

and sank delicately through the foam), and generally make all the right social noises. But in that sort of situation, I get stuck in a helpless state of giggles and can't communicate at all. I couldn't help it: it was the *noise* of the prawn when it whacked her in the eye. A sort of dull splat. Of *course* I exploded into giggles and called her a bit of a name: Mrs Prawn Eye, to be precise. And to her face. Which didn't help. Nor did my trying to make her see the funny side by saying, 'I wouldn't drink that coffee, it looks a bit fishy, ha ha.'

Her stern look would normally have warned me off, but on seeing a prawn whisker on her lash, again there was nothing to do but laugh.

So, I changed tack and regrettably, as sometimes happens, embarrassment tipped me into rage directed at the unfortunate waiter: 'Excuse me, good sir. Thank you very much, to you. Now can I just say, on behalf of both myself and poor Mrs Prawn Eye – nay, Whisker Lash, here – that if I order prawns I want them ready to put straight into my mouth, yes? Why should I have to remove the inedible bits and do all the prawn-administration, the "prawn-min", if you will? What's that you say? "It's all part and parcel of eating prawns?" Well, I tell you this, good sir, thank you to you: I quite firmly believe that any activity that is messy enough for a restaurant to provide me with a finger bowl should be carried out by the kitchen staff. Sorry, could you come back, please? What? No, I won't leave. I've paid for these prawns and I'm damned well going to finish them. No, YOU calm down.'

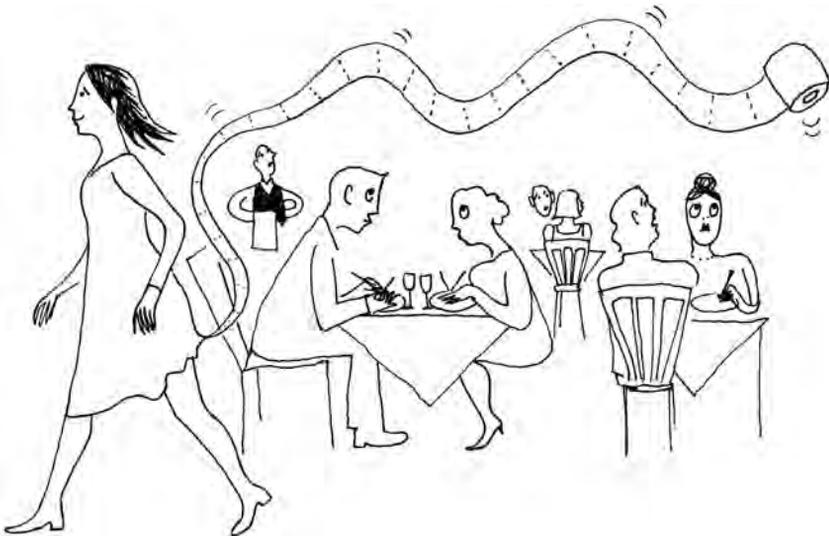
I'm sure you can imagine how the rest of the evening panned out (if you can't, it involved a security guard, ten minutes hiding behind a wheelie-bin, and an illegally sourced chicken korma). In the grand scheme of things, I can see this experience is not so huge, but in the moment it feels like the toughest thing one

Is It Just Me?

will ever experience. I suppose what I'm trying to say is does anyone else have trouble negotiating these sorts of life hiccups: smart restaurants and all the accompanying etiquette or . . . is it just me?

Worse still, is it just me or has anyone else been on a date, thought it was going quite well, gone to the loo to have a breather, looked in the mirror and said, 'Not too shabby, missus,' then walked confidently back to the dining area not realising that loo roll was unwinding behind you from where it's stuck in the back of your tights and swirling over other diners' heads, adorning the restaurant like a streamer? Then wondered, how on earth does one deal with this?

Where's the flipping guidebook? There are thousands of years of writing devoted to dealing with birth, death, ageing, love and the meaning of it all; but absolutely nothing to tell me how to handle the indignity of briefly turning oneself into a human party popper, to the immediate detriment of one's romantic prospects.



Excuse me?

Yes, hello? Who's rudely interrupting my tome, please?

It's me. Me. Your eighteen-year-old self, Miranda. Don't you recognise me? Six feet tall, thin as a rail, school-issue straw boater, one red, one green sock, and a lacrosse stick slung over my shoulder?

Oh, well, hello. My dear gangly young self. How absolutely lovely to see you in all your *Mallory Towers* finery. Why, I was just –

This isn't a social call.

Oh?

I'm just a bit freaked right now, as I don't particularly like the way you're talking, actually . . .

I think I'm talking jolly good sense, thank you very much.

No, you're not. So ner. For starters, you're saying we went on a date and got loo roll stuck in our pants. Please say that's not true . . . please . . .

Of course it's not true. (It's true, reader, true.)

PHEW. Because talk about total mortificato; I mean, I might as well just give up . . .

OK, let's drop it now . . .

Is It Just Me?

No, but seriously, massive dweeb alert.

All right.

And telling people in a book – not that many people will read this rubbish.

Rude. Can you leave, please?

One mo-mo. You're basically saying life is a series of embarrassing moments which leave you feeling alone in your confusion and shame. I am not sure I like that.

Well, I'm hoping that by sharing our discomfort with the way life sometimes goes, others will relate to us and we'll all feel a little bit less alone.

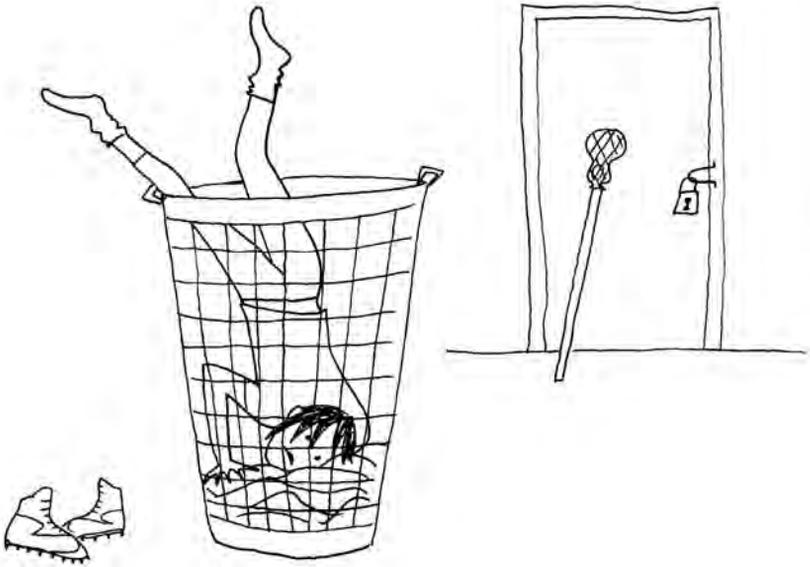
OK, but please DON'T tell anyone that in Maths yesterday when Mr Beckett asked me to define Pi I said, 'It depends on the filling.'

I think you'll find you've just told them.

Oh . . . bog off.

You bog off.

*Consider me bogged . . . *runs away embarrassed, trips over a lacrosse boot and falls into a laundry basket* Meant to do that.*



Sorry about her, where were we? Oh yes, messing up romantic prospects . . . Has anyone else ever drunkenly addressed a post box as ‘darling’, certain that it was their stout, red-jumper-clad then-boyfriend? And gone in for a kiss, fully embracing the post box? The real boyfriend was ten feet away, silently looking on at this crazy woman and her post box cuddling antics. Are these – the loo roll, the prawn and, worryingly, many more besides – common occurrences or, well . . . *is it just me?*

This is the nub of life, isn’t it, dear reader? (Good word, ‘nub’. Say it loud, say it proud; wherever you are, one, two, three . . . *NUB*. Lovely, very satisfying.) Yes, the nub of life is surely negotiating and avoiding idiocy. Doing your best to hit the pillow at night without, for once, having to go over the day in your head for its one excruciating moment. Last night, I lay

Is It Just Me?

on my bed in what I can only describe as my 'foetal-criinge-ball' position, as I re-lived my opening gambit to an important man at a formal work do.

I'll set the scene: a drinks party. I am standing in a group of people I feel relatively comfortable with, no drink has been spilt, I am conversationally fluent, no nibble has landed on clothing causing an embarrassing stain: so far so good. Then my agent comes over to introduce me to an important head honcho who is apparently keen to meet and perhaps work with me. Clearly a risk taker.

AGENT: Miranda, this is Bob.

BOB: Hello Miranda, very nice to meet you.

ME: You too.

I go in for the handshake. He goes in for the kiss. But don't worry; as he leans in I quickly move my hand before it ends up anywhere inappropriate. I further save the moment by aiming for the correct side of the cheek for the kiss, avoiding that, 'Oh, we nearly snogged, ha ha' hideousness. Tick, well done me.

But then here it comes, the hateful post-introductory conversational hiatus. Who's going to start the formalities and break the ice? Surely my agent will say something? I start to panic: it's me, *I've* got to say something. Quick.

'So, Bob . . . how do you pronounce 'Bob'?'

'Ummm . . . *Bob*,' said Bob, looking perplexed.

'Right, good, no, I thought so, I just . . . good.'

My agent has never stared at anyone with such disappointment. Bob looks confused, very confused . . . And, of course, I've created another conversational pause. We're back where we started.

My agent quickly says, 'Bob has just come back from Australia.' Brilliant save, now we can all say, 'Oooh, lovely,' and ask inane questions about his trip, bore ourselves silly with small talk and feel socially comfortable.

So there I am on my bed in foetal-tinge-ball position replaying: 'HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE BOB?' 'HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE BOB?' It wasn't even as though it was written down to have to ask; somebody had already introduced him as 'Bob': that's how you pronounce it. But even if it WAS written down, it's Bob. B. O. B. How could you possibly and in any conceivable way mispronounce BOB? 'HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE BOB?'

When I was eighteen I was certain that it was just me who regularly came a cropper in life. Any little embarrassment I'd quickly cover up, so as to convince people that I wasn't really 'that idiot'. Do a little trip in the street on a jagged bit of pavement, and before anyone could laugh and point the finger, I'd quickly turn it into: 'Actually, I meant to do that. I'm practising for the triple jump. Olympic triple jump.' Then follow it with a demonstration. I might even do another triple jump demonstration after a minute or so, to prove it *really* wasn't a trip. I was quite the triple jumper, with Olympic ambitions, and practise I must.

I was certain – absolutely certain – that everyone else just *breezed* through life. For example, I'd walk past a neighbour's BBQ, hear the familiar, jolly, incoherent hum of a social occasion from afar and hope that *someone* at that event had sat down to eat a sausage bap and felt the chair sinking into the lawn. Is it just me that regularly experiences the sinking-chair-into-grass scenario? Always awkward. You hope people don't notice but you invariably slip so far down, and at such

an angle, that the chair often tips you up on the lawn as if to say, 'Don't sit on me, fatty.' Rude al fresco chairs.

The trouble was that if at the age of eighteen I *had* braved the BBQ, I wouldn't have seen others failing, stumbling, muddling through. I never did. I just looked on with envy, miserable in the assumption that everyone else was happy and uninhibited. That everyone else *wanted* to be there, and anticipated absolutely no awkwardness with the experience. I would never have imagined that anyone else was harbouring that most devastating secret of all: that they felt a bit self-conscious, and just wanted to be at home watching telly in their pants.

Then, there was the joyous moment in my teenage years when I saw the film *Dirty Dancing* for the first time, and witnessed the initial meeting of Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey. If you don't know the scene I'm about to refer to, then you must watch the film, but for now let me explain. Jennifer Grey's opening gambit, in a brief conversational pause when she is totally over-awed by Patrick Swayze's handsomeness, is: 'I carried a watermelon,' whilst no longer in possession of it. The Swayz didn't know that she'd been carrying one, so telling him she carried a watermelon was possibly the weirdest thing she could have said. 'Yes' I thought. 'There's another idiot. It's me and Jennifer Grey versus the world.'

That's why I love watching *You've Been Framed*. Not because it's the funniest programme on television ever (which it is, closely followed by *The Planet's Funniest Animals* – cat falling in a loo, anyone?), but because I secretly play *You've Been Framed* bingo. If I've done five of the things on the programme that night, Bingo, and reward with a glass of wine.

I remember in my teenage years thinking, 'I wish I could do things in life *my way*.' I wished I could negotiate the intricacies

of this life with a confidence that meant I could subvert conventions, break the rules and get rid of the need to be ‘acceptable’, which had been stamped on me by my very British upbringing. But a maverick I wasn’t.

At eighteen I thought, ‘Never mind. I shouldn’t worry that Jennifer Grey and I are the only idiots in the world.’ Because hope told me that as I got older I would gain the elegance and confidence to breeze over the speed bumps of life in my own special style. But the fact is (and thank heavens that eighteen-year-old Miranda isn’t around to hear this), I am still an idiot. Life still throws up an almost daily, certainly weekly, moment that seems impossible to navigate with grace. I might deal with it better these days . . . The other day, for example, in a café, I leaned forwards to push my chair back before getting up and the inevitable occurred. A really quite significant fart. But I didn’t cover it up: I admitted it, I laughed it off. I coped. We’ve all done it, right? It’s the pushing back motion of the chair, with the slight bend in the leaning forwards . . .? We’ve all done it, yes? Reader? Hello? Moving on . . .

I also used to think that fame might bring confidence. ‘Perhaps fame’s the ticket to freedom,’ I thought: any weird or wrong moments could just be passed off as part of your eccentric famous persona, and thus be beyond judgement. ‘What’s that? Miranda’s got her head in the bin and can’t get it out again? Oh, well. That’s famous people for you. Probably some sort of meditation technique she picked up from Sting.’ You can be whatever you want to be when you are famous, can’t you?

What I’d say to Little Miranda – lying in her dormitory at her all-girls boarding school, dreaming of the bright lights – I’d say, firstly, I am now a tiny weeny bit famous. I know: life,

eh? But I also feel duty-bound to say that fame doesn't bring you freedom from self-consciousness: not a bit of it. Quite the opposite. Recently, I was checking in at an airport and was asked to put my hand luggage in what I elegantly refer to as the 'hand-luggage-size-measurer-does-your-bag-fit-in-here-hole-cage-bracket-prison' thing. My bag was a touch on the large side, but it fit; well, more or less. The woman in charge of the desk, a creature so dollishly well-put-together that her only career options must have been 'air hostess' or 'Lady Penelope from *Thunderbirds*' said, in her most cloying, annoying, sibilant hiss, 'No, sorry, it has to fit fully in. All the way, please.' So I did as any mildly offended Englishwoman would have done under the circumstances, and gave my bag a defiant shove. It now fit very nicely – too nicely. It was stuck. My hand luggage was stuck in the 'hand-luggage-size-measurer-does-your-bag-fit-in-here-hole-cage-bracket-prison' thing. I asked a burly stranger – always my first port of call – to give it a yank. He did so, and the bracket fell over with a clatter. I was now, officially, 'causing a kerfuffle'. (Great word, kerfuffle – it keeps on giving. Almost worth causing one just so you can use it.) Then, the *thing* happened: the 'getting recognised' thing. All of a sudden, I wasn't just a bolshy lady accidentally making a fuss – I was Miranda off the telly making a fuss. A small crowd gathered, then a larger crowd and, before I knew it, my shame was being held up before a gang of tittering holidaymakers, all muttering things like: 'Is it?' and 'Who's she?' or 'Is she the one who – ?' with 'No, it's not, is it?' and 'Was she on *Grand Designs*?' followed by 'Doesn't she look *cross*?' and 'I hope her trousers fall down. I think they might be about to fall down.' A phone was whipped out. I feared becoming a YouTube sensation, one of the day's 'Top Hits' alongside a video of a fat panda eating a Yorkie bar. Far from easing the pain, the tiniest bit of well-known-ness

only magnifies it. You shift from curiosity to accidental freak show.

**eighteen-year-old Miranda charges in, panting, in a green pleated skirt and fetching Aertex shirt* Hiya. What have I missed? What have you been talking about?*

Oh, hello you. Aren't you meant to be playing lacrosse or something?

Nope. Match got rained off.

It didn't, though, did it? You actually got sent off for putting sweets and cigarettes on the half-time plate instead of oranges.

Who wants an orange when there are Wham bars in the world? So, what's been going on?

I've been continuing to explain to my lovely reader that I've often found life rather . . . tricky. As you know, we're a bit awkward, aren't we?

Yeah. But don't worry, we're going to grow out of that by the time we're twenty-eight. Life will be sorted by then. I'll be nearly thirty. That's REALLY old. By the time I am twenty-eight, I'll have the love and support of a confident husband, achieved my career goals and be poised for a graceful old age. Hang on, why are you laughing?

Well, it's not going to be quite like that. It's still going to be interesting and jolly good, just . . . bumpier. A bit bumpier.

Oh.

And may I also point out that thirty is very young. Very young, indeed. As indeed is thirty-eight, which I happen to be. In fact, I would say thirty-eight is probably the age when a woman is only just reaching her *lowers voice* sexual *normal voice* prime.

Urh, urh, urh.

Moving on. I have a hunch that life is a bit bumpy, not just for us, but for everyone, so I've been sharing our little foibles with my dear reader. I told them about Jennifer Grey carrying the watermelon, and how much we loved that –

We LOVED that.

Exactly. It made us feel that we weren't alone. And I'm hoping that maybe this book can serve the same purpose. Can help someone feel that they're not the only one who always sweats the small stuff.

Yeah. That would be quite a cool thing to do.

getting a bit grand, politician-style Maybe, just maybe, this book can be . . . someone's watermelon. Because *even grander now* life isn't always about the big things, but the little things. The little things we encounter over the years that go to make up the big part of life –

Now you've gone too far. You've ruined it.

Soz. But I hope that it'll give *you*, eighteen-year-old-Miranda, a glimpse of what's to come. A few pointers because, just to warn you, life might take some unexpected twists and turns.

So, I have chosen eighteen vital subjects to reflect upon: one for each year of your life so far – I know, clever, isn't it? We weren't given a rulebook at birth about this whole how-to-manage-life business (there really should be some kind of manual, methinks), but I can at least show you what I've learned since childhood. Call it your own personal *Miran-ual*. Ooh, don't you love that? A *Miran-ual*. I am very pleased with that.

Show off.

But come on – *Miran-ual*.

Yes, all right. Now, I've gotta dash. Me, Bella and Clare-Bear are watching The Breakfast Club in the common room. For the thousandth time. Don't you just love it? 'Eat. My. Shorts.'

What?

*It's a quote from The Breakfast Club, you dweeb. Bella's got a new Swatch watch just like one Molly Ringwald wears. She'll be showing it off. Bella's so annoying. Later. *vanishes**

Bye, Little Miranda.

So, My Dear Reader Chum, whoever you are . . . Whether you are a bit famous or not famous, young or old, tall or short, dark or fair, beanpole or Rubenesque, soprano, alto, tenor or bass – I am hoping you might relate to my tales, rants and musings. I'm hoping it's *not* just me. So, let us for now park

Is It Just Me?

life's big issues. You may say to me, 'But, Miranda, each of your chosen subjects is an innocuous, trouble-free issue – there's surely nothing to discuss?' Well, I will say to you this: there is many a muddy, murky, lurk behind my carefully chosen chapter headings. Let's forget the economy, forget war, forget births and deaths and big, deep, serious gubbins. Let's buckle down to the nuance-y nub of life on our literary romp. I'm talking the different stages we go through in life. I'm talking dating; I'm talking holidays and all that blooming beach etiquette. I'm talking how to cope with being mistaken for a pregnant lady on the bus when all you're really carrying is a second-helping-of-pie-and-mash baby. Not that that has ever happened to me. (It has.) I'm talking not feeling awkward having a massage; I'm talking how to use chopsticks with grace. The real coalface of life.

I'm not sure I'll have all the answers to these conundrums (or is it conundra?). But I'm practically an expert having made every mistake going, and it will be a pleasure simply to get these weighty issues off my chest. (Or issues off my weighty chest. Either works.)

Now, let's enjoy a brief fanfare, drum roll, excited cheer and a replenished cup of tea or second roast dinner as we turn the page, proceed to chapter two, and confront head-on our first issue . . . MUSIC.