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Introduction

I was at an all-time low when I decided I wanted to try to fix everyone else's problems. My head was a mess and my heart was broken. It was one of those years where every month brought a new sadness – an *annus horribilis*, I think they call it. And, in a mean-spirited move from Fate, My Bad Year also coincided with THE Bad Year – 2020. The most *horribilis* of all the *annuses*.

During that time, I pitched myself as an agony aunt to my editor at the *Sunday Times Style*. In my twenties, I had written a weekly dating column for the magazine, a fact that occasionally knocks down the door of my subconscious in the middle of the night and wakes me up in a cold sweat. But it remains one of the best job opportunities I have ever been given. And 26 to 28 years old is the perfect time for a person to comfortably narrate their own life for entertainment. It is the sweet spot of exhibitionism, where your lack of self-awareness makes for main-character-syndrome capers, counterbalanced with JUST enough self-awareness to make jokes about them. I finished the column, wrote a memoir about my twenties, then closed up shop for the serialization of my personal life. I'd finally shared enough.

This briefly left me in a journalistic no-man's-land.

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Having written a memoir, people wanted me to continue to insert myself in stories, even when my presence was completely irrelevant to the subject matter. Editors would commission me to write about people, places and things under the pretence of being a neutral observer, then inevitably ask me to crowbar references to my personal life into the copy. During this time, I could have interviewed Barack Obama, and I would have seen: ‘PERHAPS YOU COULD WRITE HERE ABOUT HOW YOUR STORY IS SIMILAR TO HIS?? DOES YOUR DATING LIFE HAVE ANY PARALLELS WITH HIS TIME IN OFFICE?? DOES HE REMIND YOU OF AN EX-BOYFRIEND ETC??’ in the notes from any editor.

Which, of course, I understood. I was the one who had insisted on telling everyone about my life, no one had asked that of me in the first instance. I did try to write a first-person column that included hardly any present-day detail about my life in any intimate way. But the thing that makes a first-person column interesting is the admission of the writer’s flaws, mistakes and disasters, so this was challenging, to say the least. I was also not an opinion columnist. My skin is too thin, my mind too changeable and my courage too paltry. So, with no personal life or public opinions for material, this left me with very little to write about, other than general enthusiastic musings about things I liked. Or mealy-mouthed non-rants about things I didn’t like, cushioned with self-conscious caveats. One of my friends called this sort of gentle, forgettable

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column-writing: ‘I Changed the Batteries in my Remote Control’ journalism. I did not want this to become my legacy.

But I had always wanted to be an agony aunt. In my adolescence, I would buy teen magazines and immediately skip to the problem pages. Sex was discussed in my house, I imagine much more than it would have been for boomers (the last victims of Victorian parenting). But there were no specifics. Instead, it was couched in the vagaries of baby-making and ‘tingly feelings’ and ‘when you care about someone very much’. This was not enough for me. I needed more. Problem pages were my salvation – my perverted eyes would dart over the pages looking for key words: ‘virginity’, ‘masturbation’, ‘discharge’. I took these tips and passed them off as my own, becoming the Playground Sexual Yoda. I would vastly exaggerate my own experiences and give counsel to girls my own age and older.

One of my biggest regrets is that I found childhood and adolescence such a humiliating place to be. When I read my teenage diaries now, I recognize how much I was lying to the page because I was so embarrassed about how young I was. I speak wearily of sex, like I’m bored of it, when I hadn’t even been touched. I note the number of calories and cigarettes I consumed that day, like a jaded divorcee. I wished away my life, unaware I was the proprietor of a material more valuable than gold: youth. I wanted no part in it for my entire childhood. I think my obsession with being an agony aunt perhaps stemmed from this desire – I wanted to be the

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well-lived woman handing out advice, rather than the galumphing schoolgirl lying on her bed reading it.

In adulthood, I continued to be drawn to a certain type of female advice-giver. I wanted women in black cashmere to tell me, in no uncertain terms, how to live my life. What recipes to make, what man to date, what haircut to try. This is one of the reasons that Nora Ephron is my favourite writer and eternal life guru – the advice in her journalism and personal essays is full of militant specifics (don't spend too much on a handbag, don't eat egg whites on their own, add more butter to the pan and more bath oil to your tub). I do not want smiley lifestyle vloggers with very white teeth and very sculpted faces to begin a video with 'Hey, guys' before telling me to try these sweet potato brownies 'that can be made non-vegan if that's what you like'. I don't want that at all. What I want is an imperious dame to tell me to get my shit together. I want a clever, funny, no-fucks-left-to-give woman to give me a list of seemingly random rules to make my life better. More efficient, easier and, above all, more pleasurable. I want her to tell me that I'm a fool if I don't follow these rules. This is something I find so difficult to receive from men, but give me a wise older woman in statement earrings telling me what she's learnt and I'll follow her to the ends of the Earth. If you can't find me at a wedding, and I'm nowhere to be seen by the cheeseboard or free bar, the chances are I am sitting at the feet of a grandmother or great-aunt, engulfed in Shalimar perfume and stories of lost love.

There is only one man whose life advice I've ever sought

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out. During the *annus horribilis*, on one of my many sleepless nights, I wrote to Nick Cave. He writes a newsletter, The Red Hand Files, in which his fans write in to him and he answers in the capacity of a mystical and poetic agony uncle. Even during my years as an avid problem-page fan, I'd never actually written in to a stranger and asked for help. But there I was, some time in between midnight and dawn, typing away on my bed in the dark, asking Nick Cave to help me. I won't say what I asked, because it is too mortifying. And he never replied, but that didn't matter. What I learnt from sharing my most private pain with a semi-professional problem-solver was that the mere act of asking for help was, in itself, healing. It was as if I had crept down to the docks under the cover of darkness and floated a message out in a bottle, imagining how it might be received. By writing it I was acknowledging that someone might care about me; that they'd be able to say the right thing without knowing me. Because I was feeling something other people had felt and therefore I wasn't, as I'd suspected, the loneliest and strangest woman in the world.

Years ago I had quite literally begged for an advice column at another magazine (which I won't reveal except to say it was *Vogue*) but had been rebuffed. This was definitely for the best, as I recognize now that it's hard enough to receive advice from a thirty-something, let alone a twenty-something. But, aged 31, I managed to persuade my wonderful *Style* editor that this would be the right medium for me – a place where I could speak intimately to the reader, without necessarily speaking intimately about

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myself. Where I could give an opinion on people's emotions, rather than an opinion on the state of the world. In the first decade of my professional writing life, I'd written about all my fuck-ups, which I think is good training for an agony aunt. I couldn't and wouldn't claim to be a sage, or an expert, or even a person who made the right decisions. I would just be a person who'd made mistakes and was interested in learning. Someone who was trying to better understand life, just like the person writing in to me.

My first batch of letters was uncharacteristically zany. There was the woman who slept with a man 'almost immediately' after a first-date lunch, a retired male dentist whose kids were sick of him introducing them to his 'latest flames', a woman who was moving to Paris and was nervous about embarrassing herself in front of the locals as she liked to get 'biblically slaughtered' and a woman who feared she loved dogs more than men. A couple of years into doing this weekly column, I now know that the same problems come up over and over again every week (*they don't love me, I don't love them, I don't want to be friends with someone any more, my mum's annoying me*). It is why Claire Rayner, perhaps our most beloved advice columnist, apparently ended up categorizing problems and answers for efficiency (e.g. this letter is problem 45, needing answer 78). I like writing about these stalwarts of agony – there is something reassuring about their frequency and the fact we are all united in our own horribly unique pain. They're often the columns that get the most widespread sharing

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and responses. But you can't answer them over and over again without repeating yourself and then advice that was meant sincerely seems trite.

What I crave most are problems that are unusual – full of strange details that take you into the middle of a moral maze and really make you examine the best course of action. It's why one of my favourite letters was from a woman who had fallen in love with her mother's long-term boyfriend's son (effectively her step-brother). After having the best sex of her life with him, she was confused as to whether what they were doing was right or wrong or even legal (it was, the *Sunday Times* subeditors assured me). This was not a problem I had ever heard before, and I really had to think about where I stood. I lobbied the opinion of every colleague and friend in the week I was writing it, in order to interrogate all possible outcomes. These are the columns I get most excited about when I see them in my inbox. Although, I am haunted by an alleged story that an advice columnist for a national paper once earnestly answered a series of fantastically detailed and unusual problems, only to discover they were prank letters detailing the plots of famous films. E.g. 'I run an antiquarian bookshop in Notting Hill and I have fallen in love with a customer. The problem is, she has a very different job to me and lives in America. Should I pursue things?' Whenever I get a story that seems a little *too zany*, I always cross-check it with IMDb to make sure I'm not the punchline to an admittedly very funny joke.

Many of the problems I was sent in my first year of agony aunting were underpinned by Covid. I didn't want

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to keep referencing the pandemic as the reason for our misery as it felt obvious and a little, well, miserable. But I did think it was important to acknowledge its knock-on effect into unexpected areas of our exterior and interior lives, particularly as we were all so new to it. I received a lot of letters from people who had fallen out with family members because of differing politics, something that discussions of Covid made impossible to avoid. Agonizers wrote in describing their loneliness, sadness at missing out on life, fear they were not making the most of being young or single. Another recurring letter consisted of admissions from the long-married that they were thinking about their first love. This was both inevitable and relatable to me, someone who became an archivist of their own relationships during the lockdowns. Bereft of physical connection, I found comfort in the virtual. I read WhatsApp conversations with best friends that dated back to 2017. I scrolled back to the first photo on my iPhone in 2010 and flipped through my history like it was a glossy magazine in the hairdresser's. I googled the names of old boyfriends followed by 'LinkedIn' or 'Just-Giving' to see if I could get back in touch with who they were and are, without getting back in touch with them.

As well as trying to avoid blaming Covid for everything, I also try to avoid going in too hard on the internet. I just can't read or watch much more about the evils of the internet. We all know that too much of it can be damaging. We all know that certain people can't use it healthily. The internet is like alcohol or driving or sex. We need to

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be taught its risks, how to use it safely, and I imagine our usage of it will one day be monitored and restricted. We're not there yet and, until we are, I don't think it's useful to begin too many sentences with: 'In the age of social media . . .' It's too lazy to outsource every problem to the presence of a digital world. I don't think our anxieties were invented by the internet. I just think the internet has given us a place to put them and make them multiply. And, in my past, lamenting on the downside of the internet, I have overlooked the ways it can enrich our lives. In my own life, I know lots of very happy couples who have met through dating apps or on social media. And, as my friends and I get older and find it increasingly difficult to find time for each other, I concede I would feel much less close to the people I love were it not for WhatsApp groups and 'close friend' stories on Instagram and shared albums of godchildren and shared calendars for us to work out how and when the hell we're going to meet up.

What I'm now interested in is how internet-related problems are the symptom of an underlying issue. That's what I always hope I can help a person diagnose. A recurring worry in the Dear Dolly inbox is one of missing out. I'm so often contacted by twenty-somethings who have just moved to London and worry that they're not having enough fun, or by single people who feel like they're not going on enough dates. Most commonly, I hear from women in relationships who are terrified that they aren't entirely fulfilled. Frightened that the choice they have made has closed off other, better possibilities, they

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want me to tell them whether the steadiness they've found with their partner is what a long-term relationship is meant to feel like, or whether it's actually just stagnancy and a lack of stimulation. There is an argument that this collective commitmentphobia has been aggravated by social media, the tyranny of constant comparison and our hyper-awareness of other potential opportunities. But I think the more compelling case is that commitment is simply harder when we live for so much longer; that the problem is existential rather than digital. As our average life expectancy creeps slowly up to 90, meeting someone in middle age could still mean a fifty-year relationship. So of course the prospect of lifelong commitment is more daunting for us than it was for our grandparents, particularly when women have only very recently been able to explore the same sexual freedoms and career opportunities as men. This struggle between wanting a rooted, domestic existence and a life of nomadic liberty is a very human instinct, one that has been examined endlessly in the psyche of male stories and tormented male protagonists. Now, it's our turn to wrestle with this quandary. It's one I'll never tire of exploring.

Exploration is always what I'm trying to do when I read and respond to letters. It is very rare that I give a clear-cut answer. When I interviewed Graham Norton and asked him about his time as an agony uncle, he told me that he always felt it was his job to imagine the viewpoint of the subject of the complaint. If someone writes in to talk about the distress caused by their friend, partner, family member or boss, it is easy to express sympathy and tell

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them that they're in the right. What is harder is to deliver a compassionate view from all sides. That, I feel, is the real toil of the agony aunt – to imagine what it is like for the people surrounding the agonizer. To extend your empathy to all parties. I try my best to do this in my replies – even when I disapprove of the person being written about, I try to imagine what might have made them behave that way.

There have been a few times when I have struggled to offer an alternate perspective to the agonizer, namely those who seem to be in relationships, friendships or family dynamics that are coercive or potentially dangerous. In these instances, the safety of the person writing takes precedence over any attempts at an answer told with a 360-degree view. I once got a follow-up email from one of these letter-writers who told me that after she read my reply to her in the magazine, she ended her relationship. It was a reminder of how seriously to take those letters when I do reply to them, which is rarely, because I am very aware that 'school of life' does not provide the necessary training to answer them.

The only topic I am steadfastly strident on is puritanism in all forms. I hate puritanism. And there's too much of it around these days. I don't like our phobia of excess and our fetish of restraint. I won't let someone be judgemental about their own eating or drinking or promiscuity, especially if their judgement is clearly internalized from others. And, generally, I don't like people complaining about other people's lifestyles and personal habits. I'm also pretty intolerant of enforced career worship. Admittedly, I myself

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am pretty work-obsessed, but the older I get the more I realize that this is not the right choice for a lot of people. I don't think anyone should be judged for prioritizing their relationships and happiness over their job. And I don't like people complaining about their friends or partners not having as much ambition as them. Basically, I try to veer people away from attaching morality to things I don't deem as being achievements (e.g. being thin, rich, virginal or sober).

My unwillingness to moralize in each and every column is something a certain type of reader absolutely hates. The *Sunday Times* commenters, the regulars, turn up to the comment section every week and order the usual: a judgement. Who's right, who's wrong, who should get into trouble. They want a binary ruling on the person's ethics and, if I don't give it, they will fight it out amongst themselves below the column. Something I find quite fascinating is how high the engagement always is on any letter pertaining to fidelity. When a column goes live on the subject of cheating, the shares and comments are unusually multitudinous. Cheating or being cheated on is a sad but common experience – at some point in almost everyone's life it's likely we'll do it or it will be done to us. And yet, according to my readers, the unfairness of this fact of life still seems to be the thing that scandalizes us the most. In the absence of organized religion and its societal sanctions, we have newspaper comment sections instead.

I have long been plagued by a male commenter, whose name I won't mention because that's exactly what he wants, who chimes in every Sunday, sometimes just one minute

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after midnight when the online edition goes live, to announce that he is considering giving up his *Sunday Times* subscription on account of my column. His issue with my writing pre-dates the agony aunt column, so this threat of his has been looming for well over five years now. He just finds me so boring, that's his main gripe. He's endlessly bored by me. Occasionally, he writes his own version of how he'd advise the person writing in. I have now come to realize that he sees the comment section every Sunday as his own miniature column. I very much understand this inclination, and I'd probably be the same if I were him. So when I see other commenters congratulate him on the quality of his comment that week, I feel strange happiness for him and a mutual triumph for the pair of us.

Despite the occasional noisy detractor, I have always loved writing for the *Sunday Times*. As a feminist with liberal politics, it is a hugely privileged position to find yourself in as a writer. I have a direct line to Middle England. Every week when I sit down to write my column, I am excited by this prospect. I can sneak messages into the back page of the *Style* section, then that gets sneaked into houses in Hampshire. Judges and lawmakers and Tories may be reading my words over their toast and marmalade. I don't need to convince other left-leaning people my age that women shouldn't feel shame for having casual sex, or a person shouldn't hide the fact their ex-partner is trans. But I am always aware when I choose which letters to respond to that there's an opportunity to normalize

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subjects in households where they may still be stigmatized. And normalization is always more effective than instructing, not least because I still have so much to learn myself. I never, ever want to lecture people, but I do want to try to expand my empathy as an agony aunt (and human), and I hope readers want to join me too.

Most of the letters I get are from straight women writing in about men. I long for a more diverse range of issues from a more diverse range of letter-writers, but I can only respond to the people writing in (despite naysayers' insistence that the problems are made up by the editorial team – they're really not; if they were, they'd be much more varied, I promise). Occasionally, men write in to me, and I'm always struck by how differently their problems are structured. Women's letters mostly follow the template of: 'Here's my problem, here's why I think it's my fault, here's why I know it's not really a problem so I feel silly for writing to you, thank you for reading this, even writing it down has made me feel a bit better. Am I a bad person?' Whereas male agonizers tend to feel much more comfortable with placing blame on whoever they're writing about, and are confident in the fact that their problem really is a problem and one that is worthy of discussion.

Sometimes it's hard not to feel a bit blue about it all. If I were to look at the majority of letters I get week on week and put them all side by side, the story is one of female anxiety; of not feeling good enough. Of worrying that we're not being the right sort of girl from birth to death. Every decade of womanhood is marked by a new self-doubt.

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It begins with teenage girls who hate the way they look, continues into early twenties with women who are anxious about having not lost their virginity yet, then they worry about why they've never had a relationship by their mid/late-twenties and blame themselves. Then women get to their thirties and I'm inundated with messages of terror at the prospect that they'll never have children. Then they do have children and I get letters about being a terrible mother or a terrible friend because they can't balance a social life and family life. Then their children grow up and they worry about being terrible partners and wives. Then there are the letters of panic from women in their seventies writing in about their husband's erectile dysfunction and asking whether it's incumbent on them to spice things up.

When replying to all of these women, the first thing I always try to do is to take the shame out of their question. I think it's useful to remind the person that whatever it is they're experiencing, the likelihood is that other women have experienced it too. Which means they can focus on solving the problem rather than feeling self-loathing about it. I now understand that agony aunt trope of 'it's completely normal and perfectly healthy'. I never thought I'd be an it's-completely-normal-and-perfectly-healthy sort of woman. But here I am, your no-nonsense matron, telling you 'It's nothing I haven't seen before, girls.'

When appropriate, which is most of the time, I will then go on to explore how their personal problem is attached to societal sexism. If women write to admit they feel shame about their sex life or sexual past, or express

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hatred of their physical appearance, I think it's important to put it in its wider social context to fully understand where these feelings of self-doubt may originate. This is particularly relevant when I get my most common letter, which is from women who are terrified that they're not going to have children. I feel personally invested in this topic as the years I've spent writing the column have coincided with the period of my life where fertility scaremongering is inescapable. I want to do everything I can to provide women with the solace that I'm always looking for. To be reminded that a lot of fertility 'facts' are based on outdated and unsubstantiated science, that there is more than one way of having a family and that, most importantly, you never know how quickly your life is going to change.

These letters – the ones where women fear they aren't being the right kind of women – are the ones I find the easiest to respond to. My replies are an attempt at healing my own wounds as well as those of the women who've written to me. In putting together this collection, I went through every word of advice I've committed to print and I can see that, while I'm no longer a 'tell-all' writer, my most complicated emotions and my most sacred experiences hide in plain sight in these columns. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in the moment of my life when I thought I had a handle on nothing, I decided to advise strangers on everything. I could, in most cases, begin each response with: Dear Dolly. How very, very lucky I am that part of my job is being given the time and space to process life in this way.

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