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PROLOGUE

The Worst Birthday Ever

WOLVERHAMPTON, 5 APRIL 1988

Here I am, on my 13th birthday. I am running. I'm running from The Yobs.

'Boy!'

'Gyppo!'

'Boy!'

I'm running from The Yobs in the playground by our house. It is a typical playground of Britain in the late eighties. There's no such thing as safety surfaces, ergonomic design or, indeed, slats on the benches. Everything's made of concrete, broken Corona pop bottles and weeds.

As I run, I'm totally alone. I can feel the breath in my throat catching, like sick. I've seen nature documentaries like this before. I can see what's happening here. My role is, clearly, that of 'weak antelope, separated from the pack'. The Yobs are 'the lions'. I know this never really ends well for the antelope. Soon, my role will turn into a new one: that of 'lunch'.

'Yah pikey!' **Copyrighted Material**

I'm wearing Wellington boots, NHS glasses that make me look like Alan Bennett, and my dad's *Withnail*-style army coat. I

do not, I admit, look very feminine. Diana, Princess of Wales is feminine. Kylie Minogue is feminine. I am ... femi-none. So I understand 'The Yobs' confusion. They do not look as if they have dabbled much in either a) the iconography of the counter-culture or b) the inspirational imagery of radical gender-benders. I imagine they were confused by both Annie Lennox and Boy George when they appeared on *Top of the Pops*.

If they weren't so busy chasing me, I would probably say something to this effect. Maybe I would tell them that I have read *The Well of Loneliness*, by famous, trouser-wearing lesbian Radclyffe Hall, and that they need to open their minds to alternative modes of dress. Perhaps I would mention Chrissie Hynde, too. *She* wears masculine tailoring. And Caryn Franklin on *The Clothes Show* – and she seems *lovely!*

'Yah pikey!'

The Yobs stop for a moment, and appear to confer. I slow to a trot, lean against a tree and hyperventilate wildly. I am knackered. At 13 stone, I am not really built for hot pursuit. I am less Zola Budd – more Elmer Fudd. As I catch my breath, I reflect on my situation.

It would be amazing, I think, if I had a pet dog. A well-trained German Shepherd, who would attack these boys – almost brutally. An animal really in tune with the fear and apprehension of its owner.

I observe my pet German Shepherd, Saffron, 200 yards away. She is joyfully rolling in a slick of fox shit, and waving her legs in the air with joy. The dog looks so happy. Today is working out really well for it. This is a much longer, and faster, walk than usual.

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Although today is obviously not working out very well for me, I am none the less surprised when – having finished their

tête-à-tête – The Yobs pause for a minute, and then start throwing stones at me. That seems a bit extreme, I think. I start running again.

You don't have to go to this bother to oppress me! I think, indignantly. I was already pretty subjugated! Honestly – you had me at 'Pikey'.

Only a few of the stones actually hit me and, obviously, they don't hurt: this coat has been through a war, possibly two. Pebbles are nothing. It's built for grenades.

But it's the thought that counts. All this time spent on me, when they could be engaging in other, more worthwhile pursuits – like abusing solvents, and fingering girls who are actually dressed *as* girls.

As if reading my mind, after a minute or so The Yobs begin to lose interest in me. It looks like I'm yesterday's antelope now. I'm still running, but they're just standing still – throwing the occasional rock in my direction, in an almost leisurely way, until I'm out of range. They don't stop shouting, however.

'You bloke!' the biggest Yob shouts, as a final thought at my departing back. 'You ... *bummer!*'

I get home, and cry on the doorstep. It's honestly too crowded to cry in the house. I've tried crying in the house before – you explain why you're crying to one person between the sobs, and then you're only halfway through before someone else comes in, and needs to hear the story from the top again, and before you know it, you've told the worst bit six times, and wound yourself up into such an hysterical state you have hiccups for the rest of the afternoon.

When you live in a small house with five younger siblings, it's actually far more sensible – and much quicker – to cry alone.

I look at the dog.

If you were a good and faithful hound, you'd drink the tears off my face, I think.

Saffron noisily licks her vagina instead.

Saffron is our new dog – 'the stupid new dog'. She is also a 'dodgy dog' – my dad 'procured' her in one of the deals he periodically conducts at the Hollybush pub, which involve us sitting outside in the van for two hours, while he occasionally brings us crisps, or a bottle of Coke. At some point, he'll suddenly come bowling out at a rapid lick, carrying something incongruous like a bag of gravel or a statue of a concrete fox with no head.

'It's gone a bit serious in there,' he would say, before gunning off at top speed, pissed.

On one occasion, the incongruous thing he came out carrying was Saffron – a one-year-old German Shepherd.

'Used to be a police dog,' he said, proudly, putting her in the back of the van with us, where she promptly shat all over everything. Further investigation revealed that, whilst she had been a police dog, it was only a week before the police dog trainers realised she was profoundly psychologically disturbed, and scared of:

- 1) loud noises
- 2) the dark
- 3) all people
- 4) all other dogs
- 5) and suffers stress incontinence.

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Still, she is my dog and, technically, the only friend I have who isn't a blood relation.

‘Stay near, old friend!’ I say to her, blowing my nose on my sleeve, and resolving to become cheerful again. ‘Today will be truly notable!’

Having finished crying, I climb over the side fence and let myself in through the back door. Mum is in the kitchen, ‘getting the party ready’.

‘Go into the front room!’ she says. ‘Wait in there! And DON’T LOOK AT THE CAKE! It’s a surprise!’

The front room is packed with my siblings. They have materialised from every nook and cranny in the house. In 1988, there are six of us – there are eight by the time the decade is out. My mother is like some Ford car production line, producing a small, gobby baby every two years, as regular as clockwork, until our house is full to bursting point.

Caz – two years younger than me, ginger, nihilistic – is lying across the sofa. She doesn’t move when I come in. There is nowhere else for me to sit.

‘AHEM!’ I say, pointing at the badge on my lapel. It says, ‘It’s my BIRTHDAY!!!!’ I am forgetting all about crying now. I have moved on.

‘It’ll be over in six hours,’ she says, flatly, immobile. ‘Why don’t we just stop the charade now?’

‘Only six hours of FUN left!’ I say. ‘Six hours of BIRTHDAY FUN. Who KNOWS what could happen! This place is a MAD HOUSE, after all!’

I am, by and large, boundlessly positive. I have all the joyful ebullience of a idiot. My diary entry for yesterday was ‘moved the deep fat fryer onto the other worktop – it looks BRILLIANT!’ **Copyrighted Material**

My favourite place in the world – the south beach at Aberystwyth – has a sewage outfall pipe on it.

I truly believe the new, stupid dog is our old dog, reincarnated – even though our new dog was born two years before the old dog died.

‘But you can see Sparky’s eyes in there!’ I will say, looking at the stupid new dog. ‘Sparky NEVER LEFT US!’

Rolling her eyes in disdain, Caz gives me her card. It is a picture of me, in which she has drawn my nose so that it takes up approximately three-quarters of my head.

‘Remember: you promised you’d move out on your 18th birthday, so I can have your room,’ it says inside. ‘Only five years to go now! Unless you die before then! Love Caz.’

Weena is nine – her card is also based around me moving out and giving her my bedroom: although she has robots saying it, which makes it less ‘personal’.

Space really is at a premium in our house, as evidenced by the fact I still have nowhere to sit. I am just about to sit on my brother Eddie when Mum comes in, holding a plate of burning candles.

‘Happy Birthday TO YOU!’ everyone sings to me. ‘I went to THE ZOO. I saw a FAT MONKEY – and I THOUGHT IT WAS YOU!’

Mum crouches down to where I am on the floor, and holds the plate out in front of me.

‘Blow them out and make a wish!’ she says, brightly.

‘It’s not a cake,’ I say. ‘It’s a baguette.’

‘Filled with Philadelphia!’ mum says, cheerfully.

‘It’s a baguette,’ I repeat. ‘And there’s only seven candles.’

‘You’re too old for a cake any more,’ Mum says, blowing out the candles herself. ‘And the candles cost you two years each!’

‘That would be 14.’

‘Stop being so fussy!’

I eat my birthday baguette. It's lovely. I love Philadelphia. Lovely Philadelphia! So cool! So creamy!

That night – in the bed I share with my three-year-old sister, Prinnie – I write up my diary.

'My 13th birthday!!!!' I write. 'Porridge for brekkie, sausage and chips for dinner, baguette for tea. Got £20 all in all. 4 cards and 2 letters. Get green (teenage) ticket from library tomorrow!!!! Man next door asked us if we wanted some chairs he was throwing out. We said YES!!!!'

I stare at the entry for a minute. I should put everything in, I think. I can't leave out the bad stuff.

'Some boys were shouting rude thinks [sic] in the field,' I write, slowly. 'It's because their willies are getting big.'

I have read enough about puberty to know that burgeoning sexual desires can often make teenage boys act cruelly towards girls.

I also know that, in this case, it really was *not* suppressed desire that made those boys throw gravel at me while I ran up a hill – but I don't want my diary to pity me. As far as my diary will know, *I* had the philosophical upper hand there. This diary is for glory only.

I stare at the entry for my 13th birthday. A moment of unwelcome clarity washes over me. Here I am, I think, sharing my bed with a toddler, and wearing my dad's old thermal underwear as pyjamas. I am 13 years old, I am 13 stone, I have no money, no friends, and boys throw gravel at me when they see me. It's my birthday, and I went to bed at 7.15pm.

I turn to the back page of my diary. This is where I have my 'long-term' projects. For instance, 'My Bad Points'.

My Bad Points

- 1) I eat too much
- 2) I don't take any exercise
- 3) Quick bursts of rage
- 4) Loseing [sic] everything

'My Bad Points' were written down on New Year's Eve. A month later, I have written my progress report:

- 1) I no longer eat gingernuts
- 2) Take dog for a walk every day
- 3) Trying
- 4) Trying

Underneath all these, I draw a line, and write my new list.

By The Time I'm 18

- 1) Loose weight [sic]
- 2) Have good clothes
- 3) Have freinds [sic]
- 4) Train dog properly
- 5) Ears pierced?

Oh God. I just don't have a clue. I don't have a clue how I will ever be a woman.

When Simone de Beauvoir said, 'One is not born a woman – one becomes one,' she didn't know the half of it.

In the 22 years that have passed since my 13th birthday, I have become far more positive about being a woman – indeed to be honest, it all picked up considerably when I got some fake ID,

a laptop and a nice blouse – but in many ways, there is no crueller or more inappropriate present to give a child than oestrogen and a big pair of tits. Had anyone asked me in advance of my birthday, I think I would have requested a book token or maybe a voucher for C&A, instead.

At the time, I was – as you can see – far too busy fighting with my siblings, training my dog and watching the classic musicals of MGM to ever have made space in my schedule for becoming a woman until my hand was forced, eventually, by my pituitary gland.

Becoming a woman felt a bit like becoming famous. For, from being benevolently generally ignored – the base-line existence of most children – a teenage girl is suddenly fascinating to others, and gets bombarded with questions: What size are you? Have you done it yet? Will you have sex with me? Have you got ID? Do you want to try a puff of this? Are you seeing anyone? Have you got protection? What's your signature style? Can you walk in heels? Who are your heroes? Are you getting a Brazilian? What porn do you like? Do you want to get married? When are you going to have kids? Are you a feminist? Were you just *flirting* with that man? What do you want to *do*? WHO ARE YOU?

All ridiculous questions to ask of a 13-year-old simply because she now needs a bra. They might as well have been asking my dog, I had absolutely no idea.

But – like a soldier dropped into a war zone – you have to get some ideas, and fast. You need reconnaissance. You have to plan. You have to single out your objectives, and then *move*. Because once those hormones kick in, there's no way to stop them. As I rapidly discovered, you are a monkey strapped inside a rocket; an element in a bomb-timer. There isn't an exit plan. You can't

call the whole thing off – however often you may wish you could. This shit is going to happen, whether you like it or not.

There are those who *try* to stop it, of course: the teenage girls who try to buy themselves time by aggressively regressing back to their five-year-old selves, and becoming obsessed with ‘girliness’, and pink. Filling their beds with teddies, to make it clear there’s no room for sex. Talking in baby language, so they aren’t asked adult questions. At school, I could see some of my contemporaries were choosing not to be active women – out there, making their own fate – but to be princesses, just waiting to be ‘found’, and married, instead. Although obviously I didn’t analyse it like that at the time. I just noticed Katie Parkes spent every maths lesson drawing hearts on her knuckles in Biro and showing them to David Morley – who, by rights, should have been experiencing his first stirrings of sexual excitement when looking at my exemplary long division instead.

And at the most dysfunctional end, of course, there are the kamikaze girls who wade into war with their pituitary – trying to starve it, or confuse it into defeat, with anorexia, or bulimia.

But the problem with battling yourself is that even if you win, you lose. At some point – scarred, and exhausted – you either accept that you must become a woman – that you are a woman – or you die. This is the brutal, root truth of adolescence – that it is often a long, painful campaign of attrition. Those self-harming girls, with the latticework of razor-cuts on their arms and thighs, are just reminding themselves that their body is a battlefield. If you don’t have the stomach for razors, a tattoo will do; or even just the lightning snap of the earring gun in Claire’s Accessories. There you are. You have dropped a marker-pin on your body, to reclaim yourself, to remind you where you are: inside yourself. Somewhere. Somewhere in there.

And – just as with winning the lottery, or becoming famous – there is no manual for becoming a woman, even though the stakes are so high. God knows, when I was 13, I tried to find one. You can read about other people’s experiences on the matter – by way of trying to crib, in advance, for an exam – but I found that this is, in itself, problematic. For throughout history, you can read the stories of women who – against all the odds – got being a woman *right*, but ended up being compromised, unhappy, hobbled or ruined, because all around them, society was still wrong. Show a girl a pioneering hero – Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Parker, Frida Kahlo, Cleopatra, Boudicca, Joan of Arc – and you also, more often than not, show a girl a woman who was eventually crushed. Your hard-won triumphs can be wholly negated if you live in a climate where your victories are seen as threatening, incorrect, distasteful or – most crucially of all, for a teenage girl – simply uncool. Few girls would choose to be right – right, down into their clever, brilliant bones – but lonely.

So whilst *How To Be a Woman* is the story of all the times that I – uninformed, underprepared, fatally deluded as to my ability to ‘style out’ a poncho – got being a woman wrong, in the 21st century, merely recounting experience doesn’t seem to be enough any more. Yes, an old-fashioned feminist ‘consciousness raising’ still has enormous value. When the subject turns to abortion, cosmetic intervention, birth, motherhood, sex, love, work, misogyny, fear, or just how you feel in your own skin, women still won’t often tell the truth to each other unless they are very, very drunk. Perhaps the endlessly reported rise in female binge-drinking is simply modern women’s attempt to communicate with each other. Or maybe it is because Sancerre is so very delicious. To be honest, I’ll take bets on either.

However, whilst chipping in your six penn'orth on what it's *actually* like – rather than what we *pretend* it's like – to be a woman is vital, we still also need a bit of analysis-y, argument-y, 'this needs to change-y' stuff. You know. Feminism.

And this is where the second problem arises. Feminism, you would think, would cover all this. But feminism, as it stands, well ... stands. It has ground to a halt. Again and again over the last few years, I turned to modern feminism to answer questions that I had but found that what had once been the one most exciting, incendiary and effective revolution of all time had somehow shrunk down into a couple of increasingly small arguments, carried out among a couple of dozen feminist academics, in books that only feminism academics would read, and discussed at 11pm on BBC4. Here's my beef with this:

- 1) Feminism is too important to only be discussed by academics. And, more pertinently:
- 2) I'm not a feminist academic, but, by God, feminism is so serious, momentous and urgent, that now is really the time for it to be championed by a light-hearted broadsheet columnist and part-time TV critic, who has appalling spelling. If something's thrilling and fun, I want to join in – not watch from the sidelines. I have stuff to say! Camille Paglia has Lady Gaga ALL WRONG! The feminist organisation Object are *nuts* when it comes to pornography! Germaine Greer, my heroine, is *crackers* on the subject of transgender issues! And *no one* is tackling *OK!* magazine, \$600 handbags, the pants, Brazilians, stupid hen nights or Katie Price.

And they have to be tackled. They have to be tackled, rugby-style, face down in the mud, with lots of shouting.

Traditional feminism would tell you that these are not the important issues: that we should concentrate on the big stuff like pay inequality, female circumcision in the Third World, and domestic abuse. And they are, obviously, pressing and disgusting and wrong, and the world cannot look itself squarely in the eye until it's stopped.

But all those littler, stupider, more obvious day-to-day problems with being a woman are, in many ways, just as deleterious to women's peace of mind. It is the 'Broken Windows' philosophy, transferred to female inequality. In the 'Broken Windows' theory, if a single broken window on an empty building is ignored, and not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to break a few more windows. Eventually, they may break into the building, and light fires, or become squatters.

Similarly, if we live in a climate where female pubic hair is considered distasteful, or famous and powerful women are constantly pilloried for being too fat or too thin, or badly dressed, then, eventually, people start breaking into women, and lighting fires in them. Women will get squatters. Clearly, this is not a welcome state of affairs. I don't know about you, but I don't want to wake up one morning and find a load of chancers in my lobby.

When Rudy Giuliani became mayor of New York in 1993, his belief in the 'Broken Windows' theory led him to implement the 'Zero Tolerance' policy. Crime dropped dramatically, significantly, and continued to for the next ten years.

Personally, I see the time has come for women to introduce their own Zero Tolerance policy on the Broken Window issues in our lives – I want a Zero Tolerance policy on 'All The

Patriarchal Bullshit'. And the great thing about a Zero Tolerance policy on Patriarchal Broken Windows Bullshit is this: in the 21st century, we don't need to march against size zero models, risible pornography, lap-dancing clubs and Botox. We don't need to riot, or go on hunger strike. There's no need to throw ourselves under a horse, or even a donkey. We just need to look it in the eye, squarely, for a minute, and then start laughing at it. We look hot when we laugh. People fancy us when they observe us giving out relaxed, earthy chuckles.

Perhaps they don't fancy us quite as much when we go on to bang on the tables with our fists, gurgling, 'HARGH! HARGH! Yes, that IS what it's like! SCREW YOU, the patriarchy!' before choking on a mouthful of crisps, but still.

I don't know if we can talk about 'waves' of feminism any more – by my reckoning, the next wave would be the fifth, and I suspect it's around the fifth wave that you stop referring to individual waves, and start to refer, simply, to an incoming tide.

But if there *is* to be a fifth wave of feminism, I would hope that the main thing that distinguishes it from all that came before is that women counter the awkwardness, disconnect and bullshit of being a modern woman not by shouting at it, internalising it or squabbling about it – but by simply pointing at it, and going 'HA!', instead.

So yes. If there is a fifth wave, then this is my contribution. My bucketful. A fairly comprehensive telling of every instance that I had little, or in many cases, no idea ... of how to be a woman.

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CHAPTER 1

I Start Bleeding!

So, I had assumed it was optional. I know that women bleed every month, but I didn't think it was going to happen to *me*. I'd presumed I would be able to opt out of it – perhaps from sheer unwillingness. It honestly doesn't look that much use or fun, and I can't see any way I can fit it into my schedule.

I'm just not going to bother! I think to myself, cheerfully, as I do my ten sit-ups a night. Captain Moran is opting *out!*

I am taking my 'By The Time I'm 18' list very seriously. My 'Loose [sic] Weight' campaign has stepped up a gear – not only am I still not eating gingernuts, but I'm also doing ten sit-ups and ten press-ups a night. We don't have any full-length mirrors in the house, so I've no idea how I'm doing, but I imagine that, at this rate, my boot-camp regime will have me as slender as Winona Ryder by Christmas.

I'd only found out about periods four months ago, anyway. My mother never told us about them – 'I thought you'd picked it all up from *Moonlighting*,' she said, vaguely, when, years later, I asked her about **Copyrighted Material** and she told me across a Lil-lets leaflet, stuffed in the hedge outside our house by a passing schoolgirl, that I'd discovered what the whole menstrual deal was.

‘I don’t want to talk about this,’ Caz says, when I come into the bedroom with the leaflet, and try to show it to her.

‘But have you *seen*?’ I ask her, sitting on the end of her bed. She moves to the other end of the bed. Caz doesn’t like ‘nearness’. It makes her extremely irascible. In a three-bedroom council house with seven people in it, she is almost perpetually furious.

‘Look – this is the *womb*, and this is the *vagina*, and the Lil-let expands *widthways*, to fill the ... *burrow*,’ I say.

I’ve only skim-read the leaflet. To be honest, it has blown my mind quite badly. The cross-section of the female reproductive system looks complicated, and impractical – like one of those very expensive Rotastak hamster cages, with tunnels going everywhere. Again, I’m not really sure I want ‘in’ on all of this. I think I thought I was just made of solid meat – from my pelvis to my neck – with the kidneys wedged in there somewhere. Like a sausage. I dunno. Anatomy isn’t my strong point. I like romantic 19th-century novels, where girls faint in the rain, and Spike Milligan’s war memoirs. There isn’t much menstruation in either. This all seems a bit ... unnecessary.

‘And it happens every *month*,’ I say, to Caz. Caz is now actually lying, fully dressed, under her duvet, wearing Wellington boots.

‘I want you to go away,’ her voice says, from under the duvet. ‘I’m pretending you’re dead. I can’t think of anything I want to do less than talk about menstruation with you.’

I trail away.

‘Nil desperandum!’ I say to myself. ‘There’s always someone I can go to for a sympathetic ear, and a bowl full of cheery chat!’

The stupid new dog is under my bed. She has got pregnant by the small dog, Oscar, who lives over the road. None of us can quite work out how this has happened, as Oscar is out of those

small, yappy types dogs, only slightly bigger than a family-sized tin of baked beans, and the stupid new dog is a fully grown German Shepherd.

‘She must have actually dug a hole in the ground, to squat in,’ Caz says, in disgust. ‘She must have been *gagging* for it. Your dog is a whore.’

‘I’m going to become a woman soon, dog,’ I say. The dog licks its vagina. I have noticed the dog always does this when I talk to it. I have not yet worked out what I think about this, but I think I might be a bit sad about it.

‘I found a leaflet, and it says I’ll be starting my periods soon,’ I continue. ‘I’ll be honest, dog – I’m a bit worried. I think it’s going to hurt.’

I look into the dog’s eyes. She is as stupid as a barrel of toes. Galaxies of nothing are going on in her eyes.

I get up.

‘I’m going to talk to Mum,’ I explain. The dog remains under my bed, looking, as always, deeply nervous about being a dog.

I track Mum down on the toilet. She’s now eight months pregnant, and holding the sleeping one-year-old Cheryl whilst trying to do a wee.

I sit on the edge of the bath.

‘Mum?’ I say.

For some reason, I think I am allowed only one question about this. One shot at the ‘menstrual cycle conversation’.

‘Yes?’ she answers. Even though she is doing a wee and holding a sleeping baby, she is also sorting out a whites wash from the washing basket.

‘You know – *my period?*’ I whisper.

‘Yes?’ she says

‘Will it hurt?’ I ask.

Mum thinks for a minute.

‘Yeah,’ she says, in the end. ‘But it’s OK.’

The baby then starts crying, so she never explains why it’s ‘OK’. It remains unexplained.

Three weeks later, my period starts. I find it to be a deeply uncheerful event. It starts in the car on the way to Central Library in town, and I have to walk all around the Non-Fiction section for half an hour, desperately hoping it won’t show, before Dad takes us all home again.

‘My first period started: yuk,’ I write in my diary.

‘I don’t think Judy Garland ever had a period,’ I tell the dog, unhappily, later that night. I am watching myself cry in a small hand-mirror. ‘Or Cyd Charisse. Or Gene Kelly.’

The bag of Pennywise sanitary towels my mum keeps on the back of the bathroom door has become my business now, too. I feel a sad jealousy of all my younger siblings who are still ‘outside the bag’. The towels are thick, and cheap – stuck into my knickers, they feel like a mattress between my legs.

‘It feels like a mattress between my legs,’ I tell Caz.

We’re playing one of our Sindy games. Four hours in, and Caz’s Sindy, Bonnie, is secretly murdering everyone on a luxury cruise ship. My Sindy, Layla, is trying to solve the mystery. The one-legged Action Man, Bernard, is dating both of them simultaneously. We argue constantly over the ownership of Bernard, even though he actually belongs to Eddie. Neither of us want our Sindy to be single.

‘A horrible, thick mattress,’ I complain like in *The Princess and the Pea*.

‘How long are they?’ Caz asks.

Ten minutes later, and six Pennywise sanitary towels are laid out, like a dormitory, with Sindys sleeping on them.

‘Well, this is lucky!’ I say. ‘Like when we found out that a Brussels sprout looks *exactly* like a Sindy cabbage. See, Caz – this is the *bright* side of menstruation!’

Because the sanitary towels are cheap, they shred between my thighs when I walk, and become ineffective, and leaky. I give up walking for the duration of my period. My first period lasts three months. I think this is perfectly normal. I faint quite regularly. I become so anaemic my finger- and toenails become very pale blue. I don’t tell Mum, because I’ve asked my question about periods. Now I just have to get on with them.

The blood on the sheets is depressing – not dramatic, and red, like a murder, but brown, and tedious, like an accident. It looks like I am rusty inside, and am now breaking. In an effort to avoid handwashing stains out every morning, I take to stuffing huge bundles of loo roll in my knickers, along with the useless sanitary towel, and lying very, very still all night. Sometimes, there are huge bloodclots, that look like raw liver. I presume this is the lining of my womb, coming off in inch-thick slices, and that this is just how visceral menstruation is. It all adds to a dreary sense that something terribly wrong is going on, but that it is against the rules of the game to ever mention it. Frequently, I think about all the women through history, who’ve had to deal with this ferocious bullshit with just rags and cold water.

No *wonder* women have been oppressed by men for so long, I think, scouring my pants with a nail-brush and coal-tar soap, in the bathroom. Getting this blood out of cotton is a bitch. We were all too busy *scrubbing* to agitate for the vote until the twin-tub was invented.

Even though she's two years younger than me, Caz starts her periods six months after me – just as I'm starting my second one. She comes crying into my bedroom, when everyone else is asleep, and whispers the awful words, 'My period's started.'

I show her the bag of sanitary towels, on the back of the bathroom door, and tell her what to do.

'Put them in your knickers, and don't walk for three months,' I say. 'It's easy.'

'Will it hurt?' she asks, eyes wide.

'Yes,' I say, in an adult and noble manner. 'But it's OK.'

'Why is it OK?' she asks.

'I don't know,' I say.

'Well, why are you saying it, then?' she asks.

'I don't know.'

'Jesus. Why do you bother talking?' The *stuff* that comes out of your mouth.'

Caz gets horrific cramps – she spends her periods in the bedroom with the curtains drawn, covered in hot water bottles, shouting 'Fuck off' at anyone who tries to come into the room. As part of being a hippy, my mother doesn't 'believe' in pain-killers, and urges us to research herbal remedies. We read that sage is supposed to help, and sit in bed eating handfuls of sage and onion stuffing, crying. Neither of us can believe that we're going to have to put up with this for the next 30 years.

'I don't want children anyway,' Caz says. 'So I am getting nothing out of this whatsoever. I want my entire reproductive system taken out, and replaced with spare lungs, for when I start smoking. I want that option. This is pointless.'

At this juncture, it seems there is absolutely nothing to recommend being a woman. Sex hormones are a bitch that have

turned me from a blithe child into a bleeding, weeping, fainting washerwoman. These hormones do not make me feel feminine: every night, I lie in bed feeling wretched, and the bulge of my sanitary towel in my knickers looks like a cock.

I take everything off, sadly, while I get my nightie out of the drawer. When I turn around again, the dog has slunk out from under the bed, and started to eat my bloody sanitary towel. There are bits of shredded, red cotton wool all over the floor, and my knickers are hanging out of her mouth. She stares at me, desperately.

‘Oh God – your dog’s a lesbian vampire,’ Caz says, from her bed, turning over to sleep.

I go to retrieve my knickers, and faint.

In the midst of this hormonal gloom, however, the cavalry finally arrives, over the hill, jangling its spurs, and epaulettes shining in the sun: my green library card. Now I’m 13, I can get adult books out of the library, without having to borrow my parents’ cards. And that means I can get secret books out. Dirty books. Books with sex in.

‘I’ve been having these dreams,’ I tell the dog, as we walk to the library. The library is on the other side of The Green – a gigantic, desolate stretch of grass, where one must be constantly on the lookout for The Yobs. It doesn’t do to boldly walk in the middle of it – this leaves one exposed. You must stick to the outer edges, near the houses, so that if you get attacked the people who live in the houses can get a good view of you getting your head kicked in without having to fetch their binoculars.

‘Dreams about ... men,’ I continue. I look at the dog. The dog looks back at me. I think the dog deserves to know the

whole truth of what is going on here. I owe her that much, at least.

‘I’m in love with Chevy Chase,’ I tell the dog, in a sudden, joyful burst. ‘I saw him in the video to Paul Simon’s “Call Me Al”, from the 1986 *Graceland* album, on Warner Bros., and I just can’t stop thinking about him. I had this dream where he kissed me, and his mouth felt exciting. I’m going to ask Dad if we can get *The Three Amigos* out of the video shop on Friday.’

Requesting *The Three Amigos* from the video shop will be a bold move – the next video for rental has already been earmarked as *Howard the Duck*. I will have to pull a lot of fancy footwork but it will be worth it. I have not told the dog yet but the thought of kissing Chevy Chase has made me so excited that, yesterday, I listened to ‘Call Me Al’ 16 times on repeat, imagining him touching my face while Paul Simon plays the bass solo. I am so hot for Chevy. I have even imagined what my first line to him will be – the one that will capture his heart.

‘Chevy Chase?’ I will say, at a party very closely modelled on the ones I’ve seen in *Dynasty*. ‘Any relation to *Cannock* Chase?’

Cannock Chase is just off the A5 to Stafford. LA-born movie star and comedian Chevy is going to both get, and love, this joke.

Of course, I have had crushes before. Well, one. It didn’t go very well. When I was seven, I saw an episode of *Buck Rogers*, and fell in love with that dumb American space-cowboy, so obviously based on Han Solo they might as well have called him San Holo and had him ride around in the Fillennium Malcon, with Bewchacca. **Copyrighted Material**

As the new love-chemicals rushed through me – Bucknesium and Rogertonin – I discovered what love is, and found that it’s

just feeling very ... interested. More interested than I had been about anything before.

I was interested in absolutely everything to do with Buck. Just looking at his face was interesting. How he stood, near a door = interesting. The way he held the obviously lightweight and plastic laser gun as if it were very heavy = interesting. The theme tune takes on such an unbearable load of yearning and Buck Rogerness that – 28 years later – I still feel stirred when I hear it.

Obviously, these were all some big-assed feelings to be dealing with, and so I did what we always did when an event of some import is going on. I grabbed Caz – then five – and pulled her into the airing cupboard with me. Like the Mitfords used to – except theirs was probably much larger than ours, and didn't smell of Bold, mouse droppings and farts.

'Caz,' I said, pulling the door as shut as I could, and assuming an expression of deep portent. 'I have something incredible to tell you.'

I paused, staring at her.

'I ... am IN LOVE, with Buck Rogers. Don't tell Mum.'

Caz nodded.

My burden lifted, I opened the door again, and gestured for Caz to leave. I watched her cross the landing and go down the stairs. I heard her open the front room door.

'Mum. Cate's in love with Buck Rogers,' she said.

I learn then, in that moment – as mortification burns across me like hot ash – that love is agony, all crushes should remain secret, and that Caz was an untrustworthy, faint-hearted son of a bitch.

Copyrighted Material

All these facts stood me in good stead, subsequently. I learned a lot in the airing cupboard that day. Just 20 minutes

later, I was stuffing frozen peas into Caz's pillowcase whilst whispering, portentously, 'And so the war begins.'

But – having crushed all feelings of love for so long – the onrush of adolescent hormones have made it now impossible to ignore them any longer. The 13-year-old girl with her hair in plaits, edging around The Green, talking to her pregnant dog, is actually crazed with lust.

'I'm going to get the novelisation of *Fletch* out,' I tell the dog. *Fletch* was a very average movie of the time, starring Chevy Chase. 'There will be a picture of Chevy on the cover, and I am going to look at the picture of Chevy, and then copy it into my Love Book.'

The Love Book is a recent invention. On the cover it says 'Inspiration Book' but it is really 'The Love Book'. So far, I have nine pictures of the Duchess of York in there, and a very small picture of Kermit the Frog, cut out of the *Radio Times*. I love the Duchess of York. In 1988, she's very fat, but married to a prince. She gives me hope for the future.

I've already planned exactly what I'm going to do with the novelisation of *Fletch*. When I get home, I'm going to wrap it up in a vest and hide it at the back of my knicker drawer, so my parents don't see it. It's very important my parents don't think I'm starting to fall in love with people, because then they might notice that I'm growing up, and I'm kind of trying to keep it secret. I think it will cause some kind of incident.

At the library, I find the novelisation of *Fletch* easily. It has a satisfyingly big picture of Chevy on the cover – I am going to wear down some pencil lead copying out *that* sweet face.