

## **'The Here and The There'**

### **A pre-established Collection of Uncertainties**

*A reflective essay on womanhood as we see it, composed from the conversations with women around about my age.*

*(The most common word used was guilt)*

You know when you're a child you make the assumptions that you will have a kid and you'll get married and you'll have a job. You don't really think about it. It just will be. And now we're at the stage of life where these are the decisions that we're actually making. We do have a child, we are married. These are just our choices now, these big life choices, and they are happening so much more frequently. This abstract concept of womanhood and adulthood that you now can't escape, is not so abstract anymore. The realisation that you've made all your big decisions, that's the acknowledgment that you're a real adult now. I've done the climbing up the hill and now it's downhill from here and I can't stop or change direction – just hold on for the ride.

I had an idea of what I wanted to do since high school. But then you get lost in your 20s. You just work in bars and get pissed and get laid and you don't really know what you're doing. I think everyone has to evolve and I think it's really hard to do. In your early 20s you have the mindset of 'I was a teenager and now I am an adult and I will be this way forever' and then you get to 40 and you think 'thank fuck I wasn't that person forever'. When I hit 36 though I was just stuck. I had no sense of what I was doing or what was happening and although I was getting through it all, I didn't have any sense of control over it. It's a bit easier now because there's so much more that defines me than when I was in my 20s and early 30s. I realised then that I was still living that teenage self because I was too scared to be myself. Now I'm in my late 30s, I need to be more me but, actually, who is that?

And I have been having an identity crisis for the past few years – it's a bit like 'who am I now though? Now that I'm not all the people I was pretending to be! It's okay to let it all go – just because we fought for it doesn't mean we have to hold onto it forever. That's not me anymore. That aside, I still look after my 14/15 year old self because I look back and see how lost she was and just didn't know what the fuck was going on. It's also that thing about getting older where you just realise there's no heroes - or heroines. No one is perfect and everyone is flawed.

There's the experience that comes with the futile decisions you've made based on bad relationships. Those bad behavioural patterns that are ingrained in you that you just can't escape. I do sometimes get annoyed that I didn't try and figure things out or come to conclusions about what was important earlier. It's only now, at nearly 40, that I'm over my past relationships enough that I can now start looking at the some of the damage it's done to me and really start to understand why I have massive intimacy issues. But certainly I like the fact that I've taken this long to get here because there is that level of confidence that comes with that idea of 'Yup I know what I'm doing'. And if I don't, I know I can figure it out. And if I really don't know then fuck it!

I think age triggers the draw to understand more how I fit into everything, and I don't mean just in a social setting, I mean where do I fit in with my own self and my life. My age and life experience has given me the confidence to do that. I knew I had to figure it out myself because I realised that I can't keep asking or looking to everyone else to confirm that what I'm doing is right or wrong. I had to go back to nothing so I could work out what I thought, because you need to find yourself within that and take responsibility for that to some extent. It's weird because when you get older you're more invincible in some ways because you're more like, this is who I am. But in other ways you're just so much more vulnerable because you've got so many more wounds and a little bit more broken.

I'm learning about gaslighting

The phrase gaslighting is the biggest change for me in dealing with past relationships

I wish I'd known about gaslighting earlier.

I've spent my whole life being gaslit

Fucking gaslighting

Gaslighting is a skill. They can pick up on the things that you're most susceptible, they find it and use it.

They would say something devastating to me, completely destroy me and then deny it.

I realised the other day just how much anger I still have. Those little innocuous comments are remembered and go into the mental rule book – you look better with a fringe or you must always take your glasses off - and they just become habit. I was basically crying every week and grieving for my own life and the anger is the self-preservation protecting you from it all.

For me it came out of the #metoo movement and the overall narrative about the idea of victims. And there was a moment for me when I took responsibility for the situations that I got myself into. That doesn't mean that anyone who was abusive to me was not wrong or it wasn't their fault, but there was something that was allowing me to accept that. To think that's what I was worth! And that was the moment I realised that I didn't need to accept anymore. That was really powerful for me. And the thing I've learned with forgiveness and forgiving other people is that you're also forgiving yourself and giving yourself the opportunity to not carry it anymore. I don't know if that is age or just being tired. And that's where honesty comes in a bit more because you just don't have time to not be. You can waste time working up to a conclusion that's not even right and now I'm at the point where I just don't have time or the headspace to mull things over like I used to. Talking honestly doesn't really scare me as much anymore, although I also put that down to anti-depressants.

The first hit of real life was when I caught my mum being Santa! That's the moment when you realise your parents can't fix everything and that they can disappoint you. It's such a brutal moment. I feel like a grown up now but only really recently. Not even having a kid changed that. Because I think I was still a total fuck up even then. I still hate brushing my teeth and I've been doing it every day for 35 years. I struggle to gauge age at this age. I think about my mum when she was my age now because I distinctly remember her turning 40. And I can't correlate me now with that idea of 40. What am I doing here with my green puffy jacket like a middle-aged lady? When did I arrive here? Was it because I stopped drinking?

Before I had a child I remember I used to think about how busy I was of a day. Now I spend hours in my bed just trying to figure out how I'm going to do tomorrow. And sometimes I feel so trapped. How the fuck is this possible? I literally don't have the hours in the day to do it. I physically don't have enough time and I'm struggling with the stress of it all. Juggling everything. It's just constant juggling and to what end? Your kid fucking hates you! You know all those poems like 'Letter to my daughter' type of thing or a letter to my child or the next generation type thing? Well I wrote one the other day for my daughter and it's was more along the lines of ' I'm not writing you a letter – fuck you! This wisdom is hard fought for and it's mine. I'm not giving it away so you can screen shot it and ridicule me. This is my stuff! You'll just cancel me and call me irrelevant.

I thought I'd be a better parent.

We've been fed ideas about how we're supposed to be and what you're supposed to do and what life should look like. A husband, a house, a dog, two kids. And I got to my 40s and that's not how it worked out at all. Which does put the pressure on me now at this age because I don't have that and I can't help but ask 'well what is this then? I got to the point where I was happy with the notion of both being single or being with someone because either was a distinct possibility. But, whatever your set up, people are trying to push you into a standard married couple no matter how much you say I really like it like what I've got and it works really well for me.

Even taking into account the publication of people like Betty Friedan and the idea of the 50s housewife – you should aspire to have a good husband and a good house. Yet all the 1950s housewives were taking Valium and cheating on their husbands because they were so unsatisfied and they couldn't understand why because they had 'everything'. Women have had babies and then you stay at home because you are the best person to bring up the child and that's how it's always been. And men go out to work to fund you to stay at home because that is your job. But with that comes the shit. And that is changing and it's obviously not like it was in the 50s but it's still there. It's still in our society. And that's the thing I don't like about it. That idea of what a modern woman should be to be successful is completely constructed.

I feel that we're balancing the opportunities that were brought to us as a result of second wave feminism in the 70s but still expected to adhere to outdated societal roles. We're still getting judged by half of society for the choices we make. What you have to be and how you have to think. What you're thinking about, how you're feeling. The older generation had to be so extreme to open those doors for us and now it's us that are the ones working at make it the norm. We are the ones that are deciding to have children or not, adopt, or go it on our own and having to deal with all those life problems whilst also maintaining a career which is self led in many ways and, as a result, are living the changed conventions of what family could be. At the same time, there's the attitude that if you choose not to be married with children or make some sort of unconventional life choice you're not allowed to have issue with it because you've 'only got yourself to blame' for taking the untested path.

If I haven't seen someone for a while and they ask what I've been up to and I run through the list of the things that I've done and achieved, without question, they'll always ask after if I have a boyfriend, yet. And it feels like a complete disregard for everything I have just said. And, of course, when I reply I am single I inevitably get this look of pity, like they know better than me. These people, in spite of me having a really great single life and being happier than I've ever been, are judging my success on that one thing. And then I'll ask them how they are and they go straight into moaning about their fucking husband! But I get it, it's such a cultural thing. Mind you, these people that are so sure of everything are usually wankers.

There's an order of things. There's always an order of things. I always presumed that I would be the stable one in the relationship. That he would fuck off somewhere because of his job and the lifestyle that would bring and I would be the one who stayed at home and the one to come back to. That's how I envisaged a partnership to be and my role in it. Now I can see that that idea came from fancying male rock stars and the role that females took in that narrative were always the girlfriends that are stood at the side of the stage. A supporting role in someone else's life. It was only when I met the guy I'm with now and everything flipped. It only occurred to me then that I was the chaotic one that was travelling everywhere and I was the one that needed my partner to be the anchor point in amongst it all.

I've suffered that classic thing of being female and not having the right background when it comes

to work. There is research to back up that men will apply for a job if they meet 50% of the criteria and if women met 90% they would then apply. As part of that research there was a company that were called up on for not interviewing one female for a director's position. It turned out that was because not a single female had applied. Only when they lowered the salary by half did female applicants increase. That's the difference between men and women – for a woman with three children any opportunity given could change their life. For a man it's often just another day because opportunities come and go so much more frequently.

Men are just not having to make the same decisions that we do. They don't have to consider parenting and how that fits into a job or their career in the same way that women do. They get judged in a different way. It does just seem that for a guy they don't have to think about whether or not they can get the job or whether or not they can do the job because they've never had to question themselves because, oftentimes, they don't even have to be the best candidate – it all comes down to confidence and ego. That's not to do a disservice to guys that aren't built that way but generally able-bodied white men have never really experienced that on a large scale. Is it confidence or privilege or have they just never had to think about it?

One of my male friend's was talking about privilege and he said 'yeah but I worked really hard to get where I am' and I get that but no one is not saying he's not. We're saying that if, in your whole situation, everything was exactly the same but you were female would it have been worse and the answer is yes it would. We're not saying the Queen has it worse than you because she's female and you're a working class-man, no one's saying that. We're saying if, in your situation, you changed this one thing would it be worse. That's all!

I do think things have changed a lot in the past two years. I don't think without the #metoo movement I would be doing what I'm doing right now. Without a doubt. They are now actively looking for females in this industry and I would never have had that chance before because people just did not think outside the box. They didn't think there was ever a problem or people just assumed there wouldn't be a female who could do it. I wonder if that whole insecurity/fear thing that we've been feeling, I wonder if in a generation that are ten years behind us will feel that as much, because it's more of a level playing field. I think they're more likely to be 'yup I can do that'. Whereas I think women our age are more likely to be 'well, you know, I could, maybe'. We are under-confident as a gender because we're taught to be but I think that is changing.

I've just kind of grown weary of all the men that are fucking things up. Just move over and let the women take over. I mean we're not perfect but we're a hell of a lot better. It's just time for a different perspective and women do just look at things differently. It's just fucking dudes winging it again though. Hey white privileged man, here's twenty grand to do what you want with. Where the fuck do they get the confidence from because they really weren't very good! And what the fuck is going on with Elon Musk. He really scares me. The quota has literally been white and male for five hundred years. I've seen instances of a man trying to mansplain the vulva and vagina to a female gynaecologist. He wrote a twenty page thesis on the topic and was still wrong. Outer vaginal lip area – that's a long way not to say vulva! And then the man mansplaining that a woman misused the word mansplaining! And you can't mention periods in the afternoon because you have a male presenter. And Trump is like 'grab them by the pussy'. What is it I'm not getting! I'm so fucking bored of men being total dicks.

I don't like just putting it down to being an older generation but is there any point picking a battle with a 90 year old. But then if you don't say something it just becomes systemic and it just perpetuates it. You really do have to pick your battles because there's so many of them now

I remember an instance with a man I'd never met talking to me about the film, The Revenant and I

commented on how much I disliked it. The guy's response was 'yeah I can see that'. When I asked why it was unsurprising I didn't like the film, he responded 'well it is a guy's film'. I'm sorry, I didn't realise that films were gender specific. It's the double misogynistic whammy of you've just made a film gender specific and you've made assumptions as to why I didn't like a film without any further enquiry. You're basically telling me why I didn't like a film without asking and the conclusion you reached was because I'm a girl and the film is about men.

Listen to what you're saying. The language needs to change!  
Just the nature of women speaking words out loud that make sense is instant— BURN HER territory. Feminism only really starts to work when we change the language and the vocabulary and the prolific use of feminised insults. Because the misogyny of language is accepted.

I met an editor of a magazine who was talking about all the submissions he had to get through for an upcoming issue and he said – 'it's alright though, periods, birth get them out the way and then I can focus on the proper subjects.' It's not even anger it actually makes me feel sick. If I sat here and said all men are pricks because they wank all the time and I'm tired of it. You can bet they'd all turn round and call me up on it. I can't believe he just dismissed two of the processes of the body that men can't have. There's a reason to tell female stories and I need to be reminded of that before I get despondent. I have friends who have their wombs falling out of their vaginas because of having children and also have felt this love that I can't describe after having a child, also the horror of giving birth. None of you know about this or about literally having blood coming out of your body every month. It's not a small thing!

This fascinating mixture of blood and shit

My tits are fucking agony and I'm really struggling with my menstrual cup and I really don't want to go back to tampons because I've realised how much they dry me out and sanitary towels give me such a rash. I thought it was thrush for ages but actually it was just the bleach and the glue on the sanitary towel! Fuck you all! I'm getting my coil out after ten years and I'm not going to put another one in. I really want to just know what my body is like without anything up my fanny. Just for once in my life. I feel like I've been taking drugs, putting things in my body so that can men can put their dick in me.

I keep thinking how weird our censorship laws are in this country. Look at *Mamma Mia* which is a PG rating. You just see the main characters under the covers obviously having penetrative sex and then this whole amazing story line about how she doesn't know who the Dad is. But if all of those things implied they were fingering or something that wasn't just straight-forward penis in vagina sex, it would go from being a PG to a 15. It's not family friendly unless she's having unprotected sex with the aim of procreating. What about IVF? If you've had IVF success then remember there's three times the amount of women that have failed. Why aren't we talking about that on screen? Or secondary infertility? Or the shame of abortion? We can't talk about failure within creating life because that's like the ultimate failure of being a woman being projected onto it.

Understanding there is no normal is a really difficult thing. I've definitely grown up with fat is bad thin is good. Success is thin. But then when I was thin it was probably the most depressed and chaotic and the worst part of my life. And I feel like the physical signs of ageing are not going to let me not think about it anymore and that really bothers. It's getting to the point where I can't physically put my head far enough back to straighten out my saggy neck enough. I just wish the skin on my face would give me more time. But it's just about finding your way through it and accepting the idea of moving into different versions of yourself. It's also about letting go of a childish relationship and a childish ideology. But it's also really hard to say goodbye.

That's the thing, I feel at this age it just feels like all these disparate threads that have been our many lives up until this point – like being a kid and then a teenager and then early 20s, mid 20s. Late 20s, 30s nearly 40 – those threads are finally starting to draw together and make sense. I kind of view my existence as a spectrum – a spectrum that is co-existing at all times across time. I do feel that I am the 6 year-old that was left by her Dad but I am also the 80 year old that is wise and knowledgeable. I like to feel that all those existences exist at all times. So I almost feel the comfort of my future selves telling me it's going to be alright and I can also tell the child that was hurt and traumatised it will also be alright. I feel love and compassion and understanding for that younger self and I'm hoping to feel that now from my older self. I've got to take responsibility for this now and I don't blame anybody for it anymore and I can accept that this is where I am now. That's my mountain and I'm going to walk that one day. And actually, when you're pushed, you have to do it because you've got no other choice, really. It's interesting what your mind and body does when it's pushed.

## **A few things that helped -**

### *Reading list*

Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender – Edited by Frances Bonner, Lizbeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Janes and Catherine King  
Hunger Makes a Modern Girl – Carrie Brownstein  
Distance & Proximity – Thomas A Clarke  
A Philosophy of Walking – Frederic Gros  
She Said – Jodi Kantor and Amy Twohey  
The Outrun – Amy Liptrot  
Upstream – Mary Oliver  
The Living Mountain – Nan Shepherd  
A Field Guide to Getting Lost – Rebecca Solnit  
Wanderlust – Rebecca Solnit  
My Life on The Road – Gloria Steinem  
My Name Is Lucy Barlett – Elizabeth Strout  
Bedsit Disco Queen - Tracey Thorne  
Art Sex Music – Cosey Fanni Tutti  
Trouble with Lichen – John Wyndham

### *Listening List*

Poppy Ackroyd – Escapement  
Phoebe Bridgers – Stranger in the Alps  
Kate Bush - Hounds of Love  
Billie Eilish - When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?  
Kathryn Joseph – From When I Wake the Want Is  
Hannah Peel – Mary Casio: Journey to Cassiopeia  
Hannah Peel – Awake But Always Dreaming  
Rachel Sermanni – So It Turns