

I'll dredge up Matilda, Jo March and Hermione Granger who I can cite as suitably studious, substantial literary feminist influences, all of whom I liked but didn't idolize, unfortunately. No, I can't tell the truth, I tell myself as I watch Odette transform from a graceful swan to an even more enchanting lady form, all waves and curves and delicate limbs.

She is just too feminine to be a feminist.

I'm not sure when I first began to define what a woman could be, and could not be, but all of my teenage years are permeated with the memory of the belief that books were for me and beauty was for others. Somewhere along the way I latched on to the idea that women of substance, politically conscious, world-changing women worth paying attention to, were above the frivolities of feminine indulgences. Reading *Vogue* and *Elle* I learned that beauty was painfully exclusive, that cheekbones and skinny genes and wealth were the assets you needed, and I began to see prettiness as a foreign world I had no place in. I grew to resent feminine women and decided that a woman simply could not be charming and clever at once; you had to pick one and I knew which one garnered respect, if not desire. I'd dress in clashing prints, spangly bug earrings and bold tights because quirky girls had thoughts, were interesting, and those girls sashaying around town in crop tops with belly-button piercings blinking ostentatiously

most definitely had no thoughts to spare for anything outside the sphere of their own physical perfection.

I'd stroll past my crush, nose buried in *Anna Karenina*, wondering agonizingly when he'd notice my depth, substance and most commendable abstention from low-cut tops and desperate bids to be an object of sexual fascination. And there was even that time I dressed as Harry Potter for the school graduation party as a silent, ironic protest against the fishnet stockings and streakily applied tans of my less censorious peers. I thought I was hilarious and mature, but when an attractive boy glanced at me across the room, with my orange juice and smudgy lightning-scar, and shook his head in disgust, I knew what he meant. But I remained confused.

I liked me, I knew me, I knew I didn't have to be beautiful to be worthy and it was much more valuable and interesting to have thoughts, dreams and plans to heal the world. It was better to spend time developing one's mind with Russian novels than with the latest reality star's diet and lifestyle coffee-table book. I'd earn respect and admiration in my career by being well-read, socially conscious and understated, whereas gluing dainty bejewelled pieces of acrylic to my nails would set me back two hours of intellectual cultivation. And yet, all the while, the expression of unbridled femininity was something I could not get over.

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I do remember the first time a beautiful, feminine woman showed me love. I was eleven years old, bone-thin from a relentless eating disorder, standing on the steps of yet another perfect stranger my mum hoped would cure me, when she opened the door and lit up the air around her. My new therapist, all peroxide-blond hair, shimmery skin and shunted-up bosom that refused to go unnoticed. I hunched closer into myself, feeling scared of her gaze, unworthy of her attention, feeling so hopelessly insignificant in the presence of a real-life princess.

‘Hi, Beautiful!!’ she bellowed out, loud enough for the whole street to hear, and she hugged me so tight I almost coughed. And then she took me in and began to help me put my broken soul and life back together. She healed me by the things she said, but mostly by who she was, a radiant, brilliant, creative, compassionate, kind, wise, sensitive, strong, soft and gorgeous woman who showed me love and consideration for an hour each week. She looked at me through those beautiful, soulful, glitter-lined eyes with love and warmth, and reflected somebody worth loving, somebody who didn’t need to be punished for existing and who in fact had her own gifts to uncover.

She was the first hint that a woman could be all things. That she could mull over Osho’s *Book of Secrets* while she waited for her tan to dry. Or be madly in love without losing

herself. She was a wonder and a miracle and a seeming cacophony of oxymorons. She was the most powerful woman I'd ever met and for the first time I saw that feminine charm, beauty shared generously, not hidden self-consciously, was a gift and an asset, and a vehicle for change.

As I grew up and met more goddess-like women, as frivolous as they were smart and loving, I forgave myself my penchant for girly indulgences. I spent time on things that would not change the world but would make me feel good and powerful, and more capable of changing the world. And as I indulged this fascination, I felt the grip of obsession with it lessening. My knees no longer buckled at the desperately sought assertion from boys that I was 'cute'.

I know, my mind would reply drily to those shallow observations. *Next?*

But was my derision for femininity not more appropriate to express and more feminist of me? Has a patriarchal society worn me down and caused me to waste precious time and energy on pandering to the male gaze? These questions have plagued me lately as I try to find myself in the feminist conversation, to recognize someone more nuanced, more human, undeniably feminine, soft, vulnerable, and strong too. Is she so elusive? Is she just confusing people? Does femininity impede feminism?

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A few months ago I had the chance to interview the legendary and oft controversy-stirring animal rights activist, Ingrid Newkirk, the founder and president of PETA, the largest animal rights organization in the world. I was nervous and geared myself up for a difficult conversation with this tough, undeniably fearless woman, about whom I detected no sense of vulnerability. When I picked up the Skype call, Ingrid's video flashed on and a soft-spoken blonde lady asked why we weren't going to be videoing this conversation. I explained that there's no need with a podcast and we'd never done it with video before, at which point Ingrid shared, disappointed, that she was looking 'all beautiful' and had put on make-up especially for the conversation. I laughed and relaxed as this famously outspoken and unstoppable activist bemoaned the fact that she'd taken the time to make herself up and our listeners would not get to see it.

During the interview Ingrid shared how she would still cry at night, warm in her bed, thinking of the animals who were shivering in gestation crates. And how she was temporarily distracted from founding and growing PETA into the powerful organization it is today when she got home from India and 'discovered boys'. And how she can only watch cartoons when she winds down because she witnesses so many atrocities towards animals in her daily work. In an elegant, gentle

English accent reminiscent of Princess Diana, she taught me to smile and see the best in people when explaining that fur-trim coats were made using barbaric practices, and then switched just as easily, cheerily, into explaining her posthumous plans to have her flesh barbecued in the same manner as cow flesh in order to make a point.

I sat for a few moments after the interview, stunned and happy. Here again was a woman who I thought so surely was one thing and not the other, demonstrating lightly that she could, in fact, be everything.

The perplexing thing was that after the interview was released our podcast received a handful of complaints from listeners (who mostly, it should be noted, had chosen not to listen to the interview) citing their disappointment at us for interviewing a woman who they saw as an enemy to the feminist cause. The sexualization of women in PETA's advertisements was mentioned. And a porn site that PETA launched where sexy videos were interspersed with animal rights messages.

Controversial? Yes. Uncomfortable? Absolutely. And yet, on the sidelines, I can't help but cheer for these loud and bold campaigns that showcase strong women activists using their sexuality and their physical charms to draw attention to a cause they champion. And I can't help but cheer for Ingrid employing every tactic – the *softly, softly* approach, smiling

and extending love to strangers, and the shocking, somewhat cynical marketing that sex, above all, gets people to look - to achieve her goal. It baffles me that she is cited as an anti-feminist, but I reason that maybe people just haven't heard my friend describe her as his 'boss's boss's boss's boss', or the hushed, reverent tones PETA employees take when they say they have to 'run it by IEN first', and maybe Ingrid doesn't give a flying fuck whether people think she's a good feminist or not, so she spends her time saving animals' lives rather than mending her public image and pandering to public opinion. And this is when I realize that perhaps feminism isn't about being morally pure or well-liked, and is more about doing the damn thing. Maybe it's about being a woman in her truth, fighting for her cause, her dreams, her vision and doing it exactly as she sees fit.

Back on the once cream-coloured, now possibly blood-soaked sofa, the meeting is coming to a clear end. It's been respectably long and cats have stood me in good favour once again. A professional alliance has been made, I realize, but not one that would survive an unsolicited bloodstain; not yet anyway. So being the coward that I am, I stand up and let her go first, leading me to the door as I spin expertly, noiselessly to check. The panties, to their credit, really do work. Not a drop or a smidge or a smudge to be seen. Not even a tiny heart-shaped splodge, which, now that relief has set in and I'm on

my way out the door, seems kinda sad. I would leave that office traceless, totally devoid of my particles, with the image of my divine cat's little face enduring longer in the mind of the casting director than my own.

It was not worth the heart palpitations, I think, shaking my head as I trudge down the stairs and out into the street. The panties. Feminism. It was not worth not being my truest, most confident, best self – aka girl with tampon. But what's a girl, nay, a woman, to do in this ultra-feminist society where if you're not with them you're against them? I think back to another moment a few weeks ago, when I had been unconscionably angry for an entire day for no apparent reason and decided to check my period calendar app, hoping for some precise chemical justification for my untenable nastiness.

'The mood-elevating and sedating effects of rising oestrogen and progesterone combine to give you the potential to be relaxed, mellow and the calm in the centre of any storm.'

I put down my phone, perplexed, exasperated. If this app had a helpline I would have called them up and demanded 'Why then does it feel like I *am* the storm?' I call up my friend to unfurl all of my tangled feelings and pain knots and try to find some sense among them.

'You're not depressed, you're just complex', he sighs.

AND THERE IT IS.

COMPLEX.

WOMEN ARE COMPLEX.

THAT'S ALL.

One day we're the storm, loud and unmanageable. One day we're the sun, radiating light in every direction. One day we're air, breezing in and out invisibly. One day we're fire, furious and passionate. And we don't need an app to tell us when our anger is justified. Or to shave off our hair to be true feminists. Or unanimous approval to prove we're a trailblazer. Or damn underwear to declare us liberated. And we certainly don't need to devise a new set of feminist rules and specifications that tell some women they qualify and others, 'You can't sit with us'.

The words of my acting teacher come to me as I write this. 'I dare you the courage to be all of who you are, all the time.' It's her class motto and a mantra and a challenge for the artist to be brave and open.

And to me it's also what I hope feminism can do: give all of us the courage to be our full selves and know that all parts are OK. I hope feminism can do this for me and you and the young women growing up in this climate, and for men – especially for men – who are not adept at embodying their feelings and their truth, and who need women to lead by example and give permission.

My feminist icons are not the classic ones, the consistent and easily identified ones. They are at times problematic and eyebrow-raising, and they sit firmly in the grey area. I'll never be Malala, pure of heart and ego-less, standing on a podium at the UN fighting for women's education. Or Rose McGowan with her shorn head, slouching defiantly on TV and railing against toxic masculinity.

I'll be more like J.K. Rowling, calmly reading her new novel to a library, letting the writing speak for itself and wearing bright red lipstick and a jacket so glorious and spangled with sequins that when she hugged me she left a tiny scratch. Or Pamela Anderson, standing on a boat in sky-high stilettos, campaigning against the seal slaughter in Canada alongside Sea Shepherd. Or Ingrid, fretting over her make-up and then going to brainstorm her next anti-fur billboard. Or heck, even Belle who through kindness, compassion and a generous heart tamed the baddest beast in town. Say what you want about her feminist shortcomings – ain't nobody messing with Belle and her books and her beast.