HOW DARE SHE

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about women on the internet. It's about how they present themselves, about what they are praised, criticised and hated for. About how at first they win recognition for doing what they do, only for that very recognition to later be rescinded without a moment's notice, again for doing what they do. It's a book about fat women facing backlash for losing weight, about millionaires who film themselves cooking in the kitchen, about whether young pop stars are more credible when their bodies aren't on show, whether clever men should date influencers, whether ageing actresses can still subject their faces to the internet in the same way they used to. It's a book about the public on social media and their apparent addiction to continuous evaluation of these women, as a way of maintaining at least a small degree of control over them. And, to some extent, it is also a book about how I am one of these women on the internet, to whom all of this happens again and again.

Any woman at any time can become the worst woman on the internet. It only takes an edited selfie, an old video clip of you saying something controversial, one holiday post too many without your partner or child, an expensive piece of clothing, a plastic cup, oversized lips, a lunchbox prepared with too much care or devotion for a child or husband.

But being on the internet is also exciting, because you never know what's going to happen next. Will my favourite celebrity still be iconic tomorrow, or will I suddenly have to defend them from everyone? And do I even risk doing so? It's exciting, because you're constantly discovering new things, constantly coming across supposedly better versions of women, asking yourself questions like: how can I make myself better? It's exciting, because you get to know other women living different lives on different continents, with whom you can still share this elusive feeling of sisterhood, arising from the most banal of things. Free tampons in restaurant toilets; messaging a woman you've never met because you want to know why your boyfriend followed her on Instagram last night (you both know that this is

completely insane, and you've both been completely insane in exactly this way several times before); a woman you've never met who looks so effortlessly cool wearing a cardigan in her story; a viral lipliner. And suddenly you're stood in front of an empty shelf in a cosmetics shop with eight other women, and you all know you're there because yesterday evening this apparently perfect woman on the internet said that this product would change your life.

YOU ON THE INTERNET

Here's the thing: the version of yourself that you put on the internet does not exist. It's a worst version of you, a Frankenstein monster stitched together with neurotic attention to detail that

reacts at any given moment to what it sees on the internet. You think about reactions before they exist, and value this particular brand of neurosis as wisdom or caution. You want to be prepared and so, to be on the safe side, you lie in bed at night running through worst-case scenarios. What's the worst thing someone could comment under one of your selfies? What will your ex think of this selfie? What about your mum? How many people will sarcastically forward it to their friends? Why is it embarrassing to admit that all of this matters to you?

You want to hear other people's opinions. But their opinions panic you. You want to be clever, so clever that people are surprised when you *also* look good. You want to be beautiful; everyone on the internet is beautiful now, or incredibly fit, or at least constantly happy. You watch videos telling you how to *glow up* by women who read twenty pages of non-fiction before bed and cover their faces in vaseline to protect against dryness, by people who view entire months as a *challenge.* You're innately aware of how many photos of yourself you've recently posted on Instagram, so you know when it's time to post another book

cover or a screenshot of an article or a petition—which don't interest you nearly as much as you'd like.

You see an infinite number of women on the internet every day. You compare them to yourself, or to your mum, or his ex-girlfriend, and on bad days you wonder who is winning. You don't mean to. A reflex, a bad habit you don't even try to keep in check because, of course, you're the only person you need to justify yourself to. Nobody apart from you knows that you look at other women's bodies in their holiday photos. You wonder if they really eat everything they post, if they're sucking their tummy in, if they've had laser hair removal. You act as if the answers to these questions would help you improve yourself, as if you'd get smarter in the process. But in reality all it satisfies is the greedy desire to answer the omnipresent and incredibly irritating question: who would win in this competition nobody signed up for? You look at how she's changed her body, the colour of her hair. How her partner puts his arm around her in a photo for their anniversary, offering a clue as to whether he *really* loves her. You do not know these women. But years ago, many years ago, we

stopped questioning whether that actually mattered. Whether they belonged to us. The internet is full of influencers making inordinate sums of money, comedians talking about their exes on podcasts, YouTubers filming themselves living their followers' dreams at fashion week. They show us their wardrobes and skin flareups, share their playlists and tips for a healthy gut. So, what else are you supposed to do other than form an opinion about them? The truth is, you do know these women. You *are* these women.

You can't imagine anything cosier than an evening in bed, second screening a series while watching reels on your phone. Your phone stays on silent, unless you're shown something really interesting. Then you pause the series, though you know you could just lower the volume, because you're not really taking it in. You can be re-watching a series for the second or third time and, in a moment of attention, experience entire storylines for the very first time. You know that from the outside it seems nonsensical, this constant, simultaneous stream of sound and light from

multiple screens, that if someone took a photo of you in bed it'd look like the cover of a book critiquing the influence of social media on young people, or the thumbnail for a new episode of *Black Mirror*. The truth, however, is that for you nothing about it feels miserable or dystopian. After a hard day's grind in the real world, you envelop yourself in a blanket of content and finally no longer have to answer to anyone. You know this isn't good, that you could use your time much more wisely and healthily, that you expect more of yourself. But there's also a part of you that yearns for precisely this: being spoon-fed an incessant stream of dull content. And to be really honest, you suspect you use social media better than other people. That's also why you don't feel reproached when people talk about social media *harming* young people. And yet, in truth you do occasionally wonder if you have a problem just like everyone else. The repetitive, almost mechanical opening of the same two apps, sometimes only a few minutes apart, without any hope or expectation that something will actually have *happened* in the meantime. You don't want to

think about it. Nor do you want to read about it in this book, if this is going to be *that* kind of book… It is not. Breathe.

You remember how you *inhaled* books as a kid. Now you read reluctantly, because it's good for you, mindful. Your attention span is short and you find it annoying when the books you read exacerbate this: short books, short sentences, easy answers, cool cover. You read them, anyway. And it makes you feel good. And you post the cool cover, when you've posted too many selfies.

All the same, being on the internet is worth it. You've never been so inspired. You've never been so well dressed. You've never been so beautiful. For any question you could possibly have, there are ten thousand strangers waiting in your pocket to answer it. This reassures you. It reduces your workload. Instead of having to ask what you really like, you take an average of everything you've ever seen on your phone and adopt it as a personality. It works well. Only occasionally do you long to be really exciting. It's good that there isn't much competition. Who's

really exciting these days? And were people in the past actually more exciting than today?

The internet belongs to women. At least the part that you can *see*. It's like the supermodels in the nineties: women flounced down catwalks while debates raged over whether they earned too much. The multibillion-dollar corporations behind them belonged to men, just as they do today.

You love the internet: girls everywhere, gays everywhere. Inside jokes everywhere. Small moments that are the most important thing in your life the second they appear on your phone, but are completely passé by the time you try to write them down. When you read about them afterwards, they feel like a faint memory of something whose brief importance you can no longer explain. Pedro Pascal was caught ordering a six-shot espresso in Starbucks. A couple cheat at a Coldplay concert. Taylor Swift is engaged.

All these things are just as important for you as the real world, and of course you could explain *why* that is significant. You just

don't want to explain it to people who don't understand it themselves. That's how you navigate the internet as a woman. *The girls who get it, get it. The girls who don't, don't.*

Sometimes you meet someone at a party and realise within a few moments that they see the same content as you. One of you tells a joke, references a meme, quotes a punchline, and the other looks up as if electrified. Your eyes meet and you're both relieved. You know you've found a companion for life for the next few hours; you don't expect that this person will matter to you tomorrow. The feeling reminds you of a homecoming, but you'd like to find a way of expressing it more subtly because all that's happened is you've met someone who has the same timeline as you. Strangely, these moments still feel big and significant, like a kind of proof that the four to nine hours that you spend every day on the internet are somehow *worth it*. Suddenly another person materialises in front of you who spends their evenings sat in another home, laughing at the same things.

Sometimes, when you can't sleep, you think about how many embarrassing things people could find out about you on the internet. You don't think about the ten year old Instagram posts, which you've already archived because they've since become embarrassing. You think about screenshots you don't know about. Secret hacks onto your cloud. Nudes. Screen recordings of voice notes. Sometimes you just want someone to blackmail you, so you can finally put it behind you.

While waiting to be blackmailed, you zoom into Kylie Jenner's selfies, searching for pores and another reason to feel bad about your appearance, so that you can justify buying a new serum. You watch videos by influencers you *hate*, even though you know it isn't good for you. You're weak, unhappy, easily influenced, and you think that's okay.

The internet is also hell. The things you like to watch, to buy, to copy — they're all mind-numbing. Women who call themselves *clean girls,* because they're copying the aesthetic of a

multimillionaire. Questioning whether you're *boy pretty* or *girl pretty.* The assertion that *anything* a woman wants to do is *feminist.* So it can't be a problem if women showing off their lives as housewives and mothers on the internet repeatedly insist it's in women's nature to prepare dinner for their husbands every night. The fact that you know what a *morning shed* and a *winter arc* are. The fact that everybody is always getting more and more beautiful, on the internet and in real life. You can no longer see any difference between Lindsey Lohan and Christina Aguilera's faces, but you could swear they used to be two different women. The certainty that we've gone too far, as women. On the internet. It can be relaxing and soothing to talk to other women on the internet about banalities like the right lipstick or the perfect way to curl your hair without curling irons. Yet at the same you suspect it's all become too much. Too superficial. Too beautiful. Too capitalistic. Everything is meant to be fun, and everything is also meant be profound. You want to use the brainless internet, but not like other people. You zoom in on selfies and compare bodies, you second screen TV series and stare at your phone. And

then the moment arrives, the moment you actually get scared, shut the laptop in panic, before doing exactly the same thing the next day.

Why do I have to post the book cover as soon as I've bought/ read it.

Are 'video essays' on YouTube really less a waste of time than makeup tutorials, or do you just think that because they're less fun?

Do I hope my favourite influencer looks better or worse on the internet than in real life?

Who is still using a Stanley cup?

What is more embarrassing: posting selfies when you feel especially hot, or posting selfies when you feel especially ugly?

Would I have ever been interested in carpet cleaning without social media?

And sourdough? suncream?

Would I have a skincare routine?

What in my life would be important enough to look up if there was no internet?

Would I know that my skin has cool undertones?

Would I hate the lines next to my mouth that all the women in my family have?

Would the word *neurodivergent* exist?

Would I be stupider without the internet?

Or fatter?

Would I be anyone at all?

ME ON THE INTERNET

Before I could bear looking at myself, I put myself on the internet. My teenage years took place on social media. As privately as everyone else's at first, and then, slowly but surely, the public crept up on me, although I ignored its presence as long as I could. Prominence on social media opens the strangest doors in the world, doors you didn't know existed because it exceeds your powers of imagination to conceive of the rooms hiding behind them. At first I couldn't complain; then I didn't want to complain. Then, I complained.

What it means to be a woman on the internet is now inseparably linked to consumption. Consumption of products, of optimisation, of pop culture. I am a woman who consumes these products. And I am also one of the products that is consumed. I alternate between forgetting one of the two; I can't manage to be both at the same time. Sometimes I post something because I

want to remind a particular person in my life that I exist, and then am later surprised it's been seen by hundreds of thousands of strangers. Sometimes I post a selfie so that more strangers click on my profile because in the next few days I have something to sell: a podcast episode, a new book, maybe a brand has paid me to hold one of their products in front of the camera. And then later I sit in a bar with my best friends and realise that to them I'm just a person who's done what we normally only do when heartbroken: *post a hot selfie.*

If women I don't know speak to me on the street because they know me from the internet, I immediately want to befriend them. They're real people, I think, who I've known for years, although I've never seen them before and will probably never see them again. They will know if I get engaged and what I think of Lorde's new album. They'll never lose sight of me, if they don't want to. And in most cases, I won't even learn their name.

Once I spoke to a young woman on the street who was wearing the same necklace as me at the time. I thought it was a crazy

coincidence and told her we had to be soulmates or something. She looked at me somewhat confused, and then told me that obviously she'd bought the necklace because she'd seen me wearing it. Oh, right.

I myself had bought the necklace after seeing it on an influencer, although I have no idea now who it was. I know I must have seen a photo or video of this woman on Instagram and briefly envied her clear skin or shiny hair, maybe also her self-confidence or career. And then I would have bought the necklace in the hope it would bring me a little closer to the urge I had just felt to be this woman. I was then a real woman, buying another woman's necklace because she believes it will make her a better, more beautiful, or more interesting person. Then I posted the necklace on the internet and, in this moment, transitioned from being the real woman into the product myself.

I often meet people who want to talk about how they're so *over it all* now, gesturing dismissively towards their phone, which is

lying face-up on the table in front of them. Generally they expect me to respond with something about cancel culture or to share my suspicions about what beauty filters are doing to young women's psyches. Mostly, I say nothing, because it exceeds my powers of imagination to conceive of stopping it *all*. Where would I meet other women? How would I find out what American teenage girls are wearing to prom this year? How could I feel close to other women if I don't know what moisturiser Kylie Jenner is using? It's silly, it's a game, and at the same time it is much more than that. Unfortunately, something similar to a *life philosophy* is wrapped up in the products we consume, and to deprive yourself of that would feel bigger than depriving yourself of a thermos flask or a hyper-fixation on Sabrina Carpenter's new song. It would feel like depriving yourself of shared experiences and simultaneity with other women. I don't want to deprive myself of it. I want to be where the women are. If necessary, occasionally as a product.

Every bad thought you can think about me, I've already read about myself on the internet. For every doubt I have about myself, I need not ask *if* someone on the internet has already typed it out for everyone to read, I only need to ask *where* I could find it. And why I would want to look for it. The place I go to find pasta recipes and look at my friends' holiday photos is also the place I read about myself, about what a terrible person I am. I don't read too much of this. And I don't think an exceptionally large number of people write bad things about me on the internet. Judging by how people are. Judging by how the internet is. Judging by how I am.

Other people's opinions are omnipresent on the internet, and yet have become completely irrelevant. People can build whole careers out of *not* being liked. A click is a click. Nobody else but you cares how many people *sarcastically* forward your post to their friends. Paradoxically, when someone comments under one of my Instagram photos complaining that I'm totally overrated, it helps me pay my rent. Directly or indirectly. An infinite number

of people have an infinite number of opinions on an equally infinite number of other people, an eternally reproducing and completely superfluous system. And at any time you have to be prepared to have to read them. The only way to ignore criticism on the internet is not to take yourself too *seriously*. And even if you're not the target of the hatred you read everyday on the internet, your personal horizon for what people can be hated for—for what attracts attention and what people seemingly find irritating—expands automatically. The most beautiful women on earth get comments under their videos from people who are openly angry that, actually, they're not as beautiful as everyone else seems to think. There are people on the internet who think Beyoncé can't sing. That Margot Robbie isn't a good actress, and she's ugly. Kendall Jenner was suddenly too fat for the catwalk, according to the internet. Serena Williams is overrated as a tennis player. You read this and somehow know that it's bullshit. Vicious bile, probably from desperate men who would never even consider writing these things, which they don't even believe, without the anonymity of the internet. They want attention.

Don't give it to them. But sometimes a residual doubt remains, the urge to reconcile your own reality with what the idiots write online. Are they right, or am I? And of course the thought you'd like to avoid, but which still occasionally creeps into your consciousness: if these women are despised, if they're supposedly too fat, too ugly, too untalented: what, then, am I?

THE BEST WOMAN ON THE INTERNET MAKES MEN ANGRY

There's a short answer to the question of why people listen to Taylor Swift. I prepared it for myself when I realised men were asking me surprisingly often at parties. The question is never without subtext; there's a challenge inside it, a laying down of the pop cultural gauntlet, the latent assertion that your music taste must be too limited to understand that Taylor Swift is essentially trivial pop trash. Usually the question is accompanied by the claim

that all of her songs *sound the same*. Still, there is an intended air of generosity to the whole interaction: if you do the work of explaining to me what I don't yet understand, I'm willing to listen. It's one of those pop culture questions that isn't actually looking for an answer, since the existence of the question itself so clearly illustrates an entrenched point of view. ('People spend money on this?', 'Who put that in a museum?' 'You need a degree for that?')

When I'm asked why I'm a Taylor Swift fan, I tend to say: because she's the best songwriter since Bob Dylan and she should have won the Nobel Prize for Literature instead of him. I say this partly because I think it's true, but mainly because the men asking the question find it so unbelievably annoying.

The real answer to the question of why I like Taylor Swift is longer, and goes something like this:

In 2020 Netflix released a Taylor Swift documentary called *Miss Americana*. The film starts with Taylor Swift sitting on a sofa on the phone to her publicist, Tree Paine. It's the year she released her album *Reputation*, the Grammy nominations were announced a few moments ago, and Paine has the list of the most important

award categories. The woman at the other end of the line seems flustered or embarrassed, while Taylor Swift, anticipating disappointment, gazes into the distance in the space somewhere behind the camera. Paine waits the half second that people wait before having to deliver bad news, and then explains that although she doesn't have the complete list with all the relevant categories yet, at this point Swift has no nominations. Taylor Swift continues to stare into the distance, seems to think for a moment and then finally says: 'This is fine, this is good, actually…' before continuing to stare, saying nothing. Her body language barely changes over the course of the conversation. When she picked up the phone her shoulders were already slumped forward, her back was already hunched; she was already disappointed. 'I just need to make a better record', she says, eventually. There's a short pause, in which neither says anything, until her publicist wraps things up. Gently and resolutely, with a routine that suggests her and Taylor Swift have been in similar situations many times before, she says, '*Reputation* is a great record'.

Some say a lot happens in the documentary, others say almost nothing does: your opinion directly correlates with whether or not you're interested in Taylor Swift. There is no through-line culminating in a dramatic final concert, the start of a world tour, the release of a new album. The documentary is *everything*. Swift in the studio. Swift on her biggest crises. Swift on her relationship. At the end of the documentary, another album has emerged. *Lover* receives three Grammy nominations, a moving and cliched resolution to the film that probably isn't included for that very reason. Instead, there's an interview that seems to have come about quite incidentally. Swift is sitting by a window, seemingly talking to herself about the process of creating *Lover*, and, on a somewhat meta-level, about why this documentary is happening now of all times. She wanted, she explains, to make use the last years she's young enough to have *this kind of success as a woman*. Soon she'll be thirty and, like every other female artist who gets older, society won't tolerate her success much longer. Again she

looks somewhere into the distance, everything sounding quite depressing and true at the same time.

When the documentary was released, that still made sense. Taylor Swift's career could easily have ended, or at least faded out, in that way that seems harmless from the outside but is brutal on the inside, when success doesn't disappear overnight but instead everything gets successively less and less *big*. Swift's most successful album, with some of her biggest hits, had already been released. *1989* was played to death in every shopping centre, at every wedding, in every karaoke bar around the world, and was always in the top 100 albums of all time lists. It signalled the start and also the end of a new Swift era: the move away from country towards pop. The scandals that one expects in a big career arrived after *1989*: the eating disorder, a girl gang constantly photographed arm in arm leaving New York restaurants, too many event appearances at the side of too many famous men.

Today, the interview clip seems almost pathological, or at least naive. How could *the* Taylor Swift be so consumed by self-doubt that she ever thought her career could end in her early to mid-thirties? Since the moment at the window, where Taylor Swift looked into the distance and planned her ascent, she's released four new albums and three re-recordings of existing records. She's been nominated for a total of 25 Grammys and her world tour was the most successful in history, ahead of Bruce Springsteen, Elton John, and Michael Jackson.

Swift has *actually* fulfilled the empty promise that countless young people in pop culture have been credited with: she really does embody the experiences of an entire generation. This experience is of non-stop anxiety, of constant inner vigilance that tries to prepare for nightmare scenarios which most likely will never happen. From the inside of this anxiety, it seems sensible, even logical, to cling neurotically to all the things that still make you happy, just as it seems feasible to be unhappy today because of all the unhappiness that may await you in future. With *Lover*,

Taylor Swift wrote a whole album about being newly in love, about imagining how terrible her life would be if they were ever to break up. Taylor Swift takes the liberty of being neurotic in precisely the non-cute way that men don't understand, that isn't sexy. No smudged eyeliner, no oversized band T-shirts, no chipped nail polish, no Gilmore Girls coffee without milk, no Instagram photos of beautiful women with mousy brown hair, captioned *#35mm*. Definitely not, therefore, the kind of femininity that seems to have loomed large over every generation of young women since social media was invented.

Taylor Swift cultivates the Sisyphean neurosis of young women who are incapable of looking erotic. It's constantly persevering, even when it feels like your world is falling apart. It's sobbing on the bed ten minutes before sending an email to your landlord because the shower is still mouldy. It's insomnia because, for the fourth time this week, you're wondering if you've ever actually loved your boyfriend, only to hope the following morning that he'll propose soon. It's restless anxiety that expresses itself in always doing too much, always over-preparing, putting too many

exclamation marks after *thanks* at the end of an irrelevant email so you don't come across as rude. It's being too dolled-up, wearing too much glitter, making too much effort to present as many versions of yourself as possible, to please as many people as possible. It's being a disco ball, as Taylor Swift describes in *mirrorball*: *I've never been a natural, all I do is try, try, try.*

Taylor Swift makes music for women who have failed at romanticising their sadness, who secretly pine after the beautiful, sad women in films who laze around until a man shows up wanting to fix them so that he can pull her apart and destroy her all over again. Taylor Swift makes music for women, like me, who have watched Sofia Coppola's films their whole lives and are full of admiration for these women, who luxuriate in dissecting their suffering, while knowing full well: that could never be me. I'll never be sad enough, silent enough, thin enough. I could never gaze idly out to sea for long enough. My sadness will never be aesthetically appealing. For the rest of my life, my sadness is likely to remain simply sad.

Swift has a knack for riddles, symbols and inside jokes with her fans. You can never really know for sure that she hasn't announced her new album a year ago in a secret Instagram message. It is impossible to know what was actually planned years before and what's mere coincidence, loaded with significance in hindsight by overambitious fans. Fans pay attention to the time on clocks in her music videos, to the number of fingers she holds up during performances, to the number of exclamation marks in a post thanking the audience at her last concert. Everything Taylor Swift does is treated like the next important clue to a puzzle that you don't even really know exists. (She announced her last album in part by having paparazzi photograph her in clothes whose product descriptions on the designers' websites offered little hints to songs or possible release dates.) Even if only a fraction of the riddles her fans solve are actually deliberate and the rest are just the manic symptoms of a parasocial relationship, the effort Taylor Swift makes to interact with her hardcore fans is still touching.

When her 2019 album *Lover* appeared, Swift invented something that later became known to fans as 'the Lover House'. It originated as a couple's home in one of her music videos. Each room represented one of her previous albums, including relevant interior decoration and—of course—ambiguous symbols referencing song lyrics on that album. Some fans were worried that the Lover House was Swift's way of announcing the end of her career; there was no space for new albums because there were no empty rooms left in the house. Later, for two (perhaps unplanned?) albums released during the pandemic, the hallways between the staircases were cleared. According to the logic of the Lover House, the next album would have to be her last. Luckily, Swift had a plan: her next record was called *Midnights* and enveloped the house with a starry night sky. The House was finally full.

In an interview with talkshow host Jimmy Fallon, Swift explained that her fans' obsessiveness and precision in solving her riddles had motivated her to become ever more detailed-oriented

and complex in her work. It was just a bit of fun, she said, an insider joke between her and her fans. But it also happened to lead to a kind of gamification of her music. Her fans analyse her lyrics and artwork looking for clues, they interpret her albums' symbolism, her facial expression in the press photos. Maybe I exaggerated a little, and actually Bob Dylan did deserve his Nobel Prize for Literature more than Taylor Swift. What's uncontroversial, however, is that nobody else has written lyrics that have been analysed more often, more precisely and more comprehensively than Taylor Swift. She's made lyric analysis into a kind of escape room game, leading millions of people around the world to engage with poetry on a quasi academic level. Extremely unusual. Insanely uncool. The best thing ever.

The fact that she's encouraged her fans to be attentive and media-competent listeners means that Swift is able to let her songs exist beyond their respective four minutes. At a time when albums are becoming increasingly irrelevant, Swift created a world tour whose entire concept was submersion in the different aesthetics and sounds of her various albums.

In 2023, the Eras tour began, with the House serving as a kind of programme. The evening ran through every era of her albums and traversed every single room in the House. Swift raised the symbolic stakes for any potential future album as far as possible. The Eras tour could have easily been a goodbye tour. The House was full. Simply adding new rooms, building a new house, burying the house as a funny idea and never mentioning it again—all these might have been possible in another pop career. Swift, however, had promised women around the globe that she took this game just as seriously as they did. There are no knowing winks, no irony, no 'it wasn't that important, actually'.

In 2024, Taylor Swift announced her new album at the Grammy Awards, where she picked up the very prize she'd not even been nominated for years before. *The Tortured Poets Department* was supposed to break the spell of the Lover House, because it was now obvious her career was still going strong. A few days before the album launch, Swift posted a video on her

social media: we see a room in the Lover House and open a door, leading us into a long, brightly lit corridor and then, apparently, out of the house. The corridor looks like a hospital or a clinic—harsh, white light and austere doors, one of which we eventually stop in front of. We arrive at a room with a sign on the door that reads *The Tortured Poets Department*. We have left the House. We find ourselves in a psychiatric institution.

In fact, *The Tortured Poets Department* is the album on which Taylor Swift deals more intensely than ever before with the pressures of increasing public attention, with the demands of both fans and critics in equal measure. The album has not expanded the Lover House, but exposed it for what it always was: the delusion of a woman who thought she could, despite everything, build a home for herself in the public eye.

The Tortured Poets Department is an almost neurotically precise analysis of Swift's increasingly complicated relationship with her public persona, with the pressures facing women in the public sphere and online, with the impossibility of keeping any part of

her private life private. It also provides definitive proof that nothing Taylor Swift does could ever be cool. It's the album of a neurotic, uncool and incredibly successful singer-songwriter who's seemingly started coming to terms with being precisely all of these things. *The Tortured Poets Department* is not chill, it is full of justifications and over-explanations, alternating between a teenage pose of defiance and depressed panic attacks. At the height of her fame, Taylor Swift released an album that was bound to be too unwieldy for big radio hits or rapturous reviews from music critics. After spending years making a *better* album to get enough Grammy nominations, she released an album at the most important moment in her career that can primarily understood by her fans. She secured Grammy nominations in the most important categories, but went home empty-handed on the night. In videos of the awards you see a woman, who years before sat on a sofa and decided she needed to make better albums, dancing to performances by other female artists with a drink in her hand, as if she hadn't even noticed she wasn't taking home a prize of her own. Taylor Swift had shown uncool women the

world over that something can be waiting for you at the other end of the corridor.

Being asked at parties why you like Taylor Swift is part of the lore, the identity, the whole point. What's annoying about her is that she doesn't even try *not* to be annoying. There's no deeper level, no secret, no mystery that fans haven't yet unlocked. Taylor Swift is simply not cool. And she makes music for uncool women who aren't interested in pretending they're unbothered about the rest of the world. She's the woman who sang *I've never been a natural, all I do is try, try, try*. She wrote better albums to get more Grammys and stopped when she realised she'd pulled it off. Taylor Swift makes clear to everyone what women so often keep secret. She tries hard. She works hard. She asks us to come to terms with the fact it isn't easy. *All I do is try, try, try.*

GRACEFULLY

To be successful on the internet you have to be hot. Or rather, it helps to be hot. Unashamedly posting sexy photos of yourself also helps. Years ago the phrase 'selfie for the algorithm' was established on Instagram. Women write it when posting a photo of themselves, to make clear they're not posting it *voluntarily*, they just want to promote the other things they post (statistics, articles, petitions). It hasn't, however, been conclusively proven that the algorithm does in fact reward women's selfies and penalise article screenshots. I've gone viral enough times with photos of text to doubt, at least a little, that Instagram actually cares about *what exactly* goes viral, so long as something does. Part of the truth is surely that people prefer selfies to links to statistics, articles and petitions, and, noticing this, the algorithm rewards these selfies with more reach. Even if a combination of both is true, it still means you can't even post a newspaper article without feeling

pressure to be as hot as possible. If you let yourself go, if you don't play the game, if you don't pop your hips out or push up your boobs in your mirror selfie, the punishment is nobody seeing the column you're recommending today. Women's age and appearance is therefore constantly at play in social networks (at least as subtext). It affects how seriously we are taken, how much we can get away with, whether people believe we're competent and successful, whether we're intentionally or accidentally funny, desperate or happy.

A beautiful young woman is sitting in a branch of the US fast-food chain *IHOP*, where she's being served pancakes. Her face is fixed in an expression of strained euphoria and she's doing a dance for joy in her seat, jiggling her shoulders and head cartoonishly. She reaches for the knife and fork without stopping the dance or taking her eyes off the pancakes. These pancakes can't just be the high point of her day, they look like the high point of her *life*—but you don't believe her euphoria. Something in it seems staged and attention-seeking. It takes a moment to

realise what you keep having to remind yourself online: someone has propped their phone up, pressed record, performed exaggerated joy for pancakes, edited it together with appropriate music, all before finally posting it. There's too much intention to find it authentic.

In the background, you see a woman at another table watching the whole thing from a distance, with a mixture of irritation and embarrassment. The video of the pancake woman is one of the very first results that comes up if you search—on any platform— for the concept *millennial cringe*.

A beautiful young woman enters an American diner. She seems worked up, almost frazzled but in a cute way, the diner looks well-loved and provincial, the kind of place where everyone knows everyone. She needs coffee, she tells the man behind the counter, who frowns. How many cups has she had today so far, he asks. She smiles coquettishly. 'None', she says, not even trying to seem convincing. He frowns again. 'Five', she confesses. Reluctantly, he gives her a cup of coffee and they flirt a little. When she sits at

a table, another customer comes over and he flirts with her too. She rebuffs his advances. Finally, the beautiful young woman's daughter comes into the diner, also young and beautiful, also urgently in need of coffee, and also flirted at by the same customer. This is the opening scene of the first episode of *Gilmore Girls*.

If this first scene could also have somehow alluded to the fact they can both eat unbelievable amounts of fast food, then all of Lorelai and Rory Gilmore's most important character traits would have been explained in the series' first four minutes. Only a little later in the episode does Lorelai joke that the most important things in life are family, education and *cake*.

The *Gilmore Girls* were a noughties phenomenon, whose success must surely owe in part to the fact the series was never perceived as for women, even though it was about women. *Gilmore Girls* united women's and men's fantasies. The protagonists were beautiful, but seemingly didn't care about being so; men were crazy for them, but they weren't interested in

reciprocating; they were ditzy and struggled with basic everyday tasks, never so much to be consistently annoying, but always too much to not find them at least a bit charming. (In the first episode Lorelai oversleeps on her daughter's first day back at school after the holidays and can't find any clean clothes, so accompanies Rory to a welcome meeting with the headteacher wearing hot pants and cowboy boots.) They were self-absorbed, charming, could eat anything without gaining weight, and were forever coming unstuck on account of their own cuteness. At every moment they were preoccupied with avoiding failure in the face of the world and its adversities. Put simply, they were *girls*.

Lorelai Gilmore was a Hot Mess, a new type of woman introduced to pop culture in the late nineties by Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*. Bradshaw was exactly like her successors in *Gilmore Girls*, *Bridget Jones* or *Miss Undercover*: charmingly absent-minded, clumsy and, most importantly, nice to look at, especially for the men around her. Gorgeous but involuntarily single, at risk of becoming 'weird' after years of failed relationships. Hot

Messes said the wrong things in meetings, had no interest in convention, and, above all, were so preoccupied with themselves and their failures in everyday life that they never posed a real threat to the men who fell in love with them. Hot Messes were the flailing hope that 'it'll be okay' made incarnate. As film and TV stars from the early noughties, they finally seemed to give women permission to not always be perfect (even if the series generally looked perfect). Hot Messes were independent, without being unfeminine, desirable without realising it, approachable because they found life a struggle. They were irresponsible towards their careers, money and future, right up until the moment a man threatened to rescue them against their will. A Hot Mess liberated masculinity as well as femininity, she was hot and unthreatening and she was nice and ditsy; a woman everyone agreed would be an exciting hyper-fixation for the decade to come.

Bradshaw, Gilmore and Jones were *the* women who could define the way millennial women saw themselves. Their

personalities were adopted and applied to women's own lives, watered down for the realities of life without a rent controlled apartment in Manhattan. Millennial women declared that constantly performing failure in daily life was a desirable pose: an addiction to coffee because life was a never-ending struggle, being forever stuck in a liminal space between adulthood and teendom. Concepts like 'adulting'—a playful description for irritation at having to do grown-up things, only made bearable by vast amounts of coffee *or* white wine—come from this era. There was one issue, though: charming women always have a problem when they threaten to grow old.

At the start of the 2010's, *cringe* became part of internet culture. It originated in a reddit group that's still active today, in which users began to collate particularly embarrassing videos and photos from social media. *Cringe* describes a particular form of vicarious embarrassment that arises when seeing someone do something without even a hint of self-awareness. People going on musical talent shows when they can't sing, posting sexy selfies

when they're not sexy, filming themselves eating pancakes in a restaurant and thinking they're incredibly cute when everyone else is just embarrassed. *Millennial cringe* appeared at the start of the 2020s, when Gen Z became old enough to shape the social media zeitgeist for themselves. An alleged lack of healthy self-awareness was what ultimately proved the downfall of millennial women. They'd fallen for the narrative of their own invention; they believed the ideal woman that they'd dreamed up would be timeless. An adorable woman struggling through life, who would always have the world at her feet because she looked so cute knocking back her morning coffee in order to get through another day of *adulting*.

In 2016, a few years before *millennial cringe* became a phenomenon, the first wave of Hot Mess revivals arrived. More than ten years after the first two films, *Bridget Jones* appeared in her third iteration, while Netflix bought a four-part miniseries of *Gilmore Girls*. A few years later the *Sex and the City* reboot arrived with *And just like that*.

More than any other revival, it was the *Gilmore Girls* that revealed how important it was for Hot Messes to be above averagely attractive. Lauren Graham, who played Lorelai, was in her early thirties at the start of the original series, gorgeous and ultra-slim. She had exactly the kind of look you need to play a woman who eats burgers for breakfast, stuffs her face with sweets on the couch with her daughter, and takes her to school the next day wearing hot pants. It would have been unthinkable to cast a fat or unattractive woman in such a messy, glutinous role. Lorelai's fat best friend Sookie was in fact played by Melissa McCarthy in *Gilmore Girls*, who we virtually never saw eating although she was a chef, and loved cooking with expensive, healthy ingredients to an almost neurotic degree. Sookie would never have eaten fast food, since viewers probably wouldn't have found it hot or cute. In the fourth series, there's even an episode in which Sookie and Lorelai organise a children's birthday party and Sookie refuses to make fast food, instead cooking elaborate organic dishes that the children hate. Although Sookie is pretty

clumsy, especially in the first series, in general she's talented, disciplined and successful. The opposite of a Hot Mess.

In the 2026 revival Lauren Graham was still an incredibly attractive woman, but she didn't look how women in series tend to look if they want to play the heroine of the piece rather than the fat best friend. She'd put on weight, not enough to be fat but still enough for the predominantly female viewers of *Gilmore Girls* to infer that she might feel bad about it, as some of them probably did themselves. The revival dealt awkwardly with its former Hot Mess being in danger of becoming a straightforward Mess. The first episode opens with Lorelai and Rory coming home with tacos, while Lorelai's partner Luke (who—spoiler!—poured the coffee in the first ever episode) gets dinner ready. Indignant, he asks if they'd both rather eat tacos when he's literally cooking them dinner. Lorelai stands by the fridge and asks him defiantly, though somewhat embarrassed, if he's trying to body shame her. The situation quickly resolves itself. But Lorelai is forced to do what women have to when they no longer fit media's preferred

mode of femininity (white, young, thin, hot). She positions her appearance in the context of what's been said before somebody else has to. She rushes ahead, trying to explain that she knows what people might think, which is that she eats too much, but that nobody need worry about thinking it because she can *laugh* about her changing figure. Lorelai continues to talk about food in the reboot but is never shown eating, while the original devoted entire episodes to her guzzling fast food. The first episode ends with an argument between Lorelai and her mother, as the former tries to express her grief over her father's death. 'I've not eaten anything in two days', she says desperately, to which her mother sighs mockingly: she's surprised, she says, that Lorelai didn't just order a pizza to her father's grave during the funeral. There is something cruel in this comment; it lacks the levity of this kind of dig in the original, when Lorelai's mother was constantly sniping at the dinner table. Lorelai had changed. She'd gone from the woman who joked about cake being the most important thing in life to the woman who no longer eats on camera and instead must endure jokes about her diet. Hers is the fate awaiting young

women who think they can escape the severe judgements that ageing brings.

Carrie Bradshaw's creators also dealt awkwardly with her advancing years in *And just like that*, but in a different way. They removed all personality traits that had made her so charmingly absent-minded in the original. The new Carrie Bradshaw is a remake in the revival, a woman consisting of empty voids where character should be: she likes high-heels and loves Mr Big, but has also jettisoned everything that might now be detrimental to her character. Instead of moving through the world with a never-ending stream of questions ('I couldn't help but wonder…'), Carrie became a woman who either had an answer to everything, or was clever enough to venture a politically correct suggestion. The woman desperate for male recognition, stomping through Manhattan in costume on the hunt for a man to seduce, had been transformed into a woman who mainly seemed upset about missing her former best friend, Samantha, after her husband died. *Sex and the City* thrived on showing women as they actually were,

though they knew they could be better, and became *And just like that,* in which women acted how they were supposed to. The remake unwittingly reveals the bind of having a Hot Mess as a main character. To avoid the risk of an ageing Carrie Bradshaw appearing nothing more than a Mess, the revival presented an entirely new woman: she might have been a Hot Mess twenty years ago, but now she wants nothing to do with it.

Female audiences seemed to project onto Bridget Jones more intensely than other protagonists of the era. The prevailing interpretation first time around, and even more so around the revival, was that Bridget Jones was *not* fat. It was shocking that slim, beautiful Renée Zellweger was supposed to be a chubby, unattractive woman. In fact, Bridget Jones is never portrayed as fat, just as a woman desperate to lose weight (two things with almost no real relation to one another). Nor is Bridget Jones portrayed as unattractive, but as a woman who can't believe men genuinely like her. In reality, in the first film her two long-term

admirers Mark and Daniel literally come to blows over who should be with her.

Bridget Jones was perhaps the most perfect representation of the Hot Mess, a woman who appeals to both men *and* women because they see completely different things in her. Women see any absence of stereotypical feminine grace as evidence for an ugly and undesirable oddball, while for men she is fodder for sexual fantasy, so long as she's hot enough.

When people went in search for an explanation to *millennial cringe*, the prevailing thesis was that Gen Z's humour had evolved. The first generation's self-conscious way of speaking into the camera, their exaggerated jokes and mannerisms, were now out of step with the new generation, who prized nonchalance above all else. The zeitgeist had changed, and the punishment for outmodedness is ridicule.

In early 2025, when the first wave of millennial cringe had passed and Gen Z's new narrative of coolness was established, I

came across the model and It girl Alex Consani (at least two years too late). Consani was born in 2003, but even then she looked older, not actually old, but timeless in a supermodel way, more mature than normal early twenty-somethings, as if she'd been buying alcohol in the supermarket aged fifteen. Her fame began at the point when pop culture started looking back to the noughties. Fashion's politically correct era was over once more: models were thinner, more laconic, no longer rhapsodised in interviews about fast food. She was a woman with a flat stomach.

Consani looked like the ideal supermodel for the age. She was fantastically beautiful—like an alien, thin and self-confident— but, above all, she was *funny*. It seemed she had to give backstage interviews before every runway she walked; her interviews were quick, charming and witty, especially when you remember that a woman who looks like that doesn't actually need to have a personality. The videos she posted on TikTok were sporadic and went viral (with a few exceptions), reaching 5 or 10 or 15 million views. Alex Consani has that certain something that It girls need. The longer I followed her, the more I was overcome by a feeling

of irritation, the more of her videos I watched—filmed by friends on the street attempting to order an 'Aperol Sprizzzzzz' in terrible, made-up French, or dancing ironically on a train platform while passengers try to push past her—the more I realised: this is the same as millennial cringe. It's performative, it's exaggerated, affected—and that's why it's funny. But Alex Consani is young. She's beautiful. She's successful and kind of weird, a Hot Mess to whom all doors will open for the next ten years. *It's her world, we're just living in it.*

Maybe I'll see Alex Consani's videos in a *cringe compilation* in a few years time, or, contrary to expectations, people on the internet may continue to evolve. Maybe my feelings towards the women I admire online will change, as they did towards the Hot Messes of the noughties. I was too young for Bradshaw, Gilmore and Jones when they first appeared on screens, but they did accompany me later, as willing receptacles for my insecurities at every stage of becoming a woman. As a teenager, I was relieved that even Bridget Jones found a husband, because it meant things

might turn out okay for me too. In my twenties, I was encouraged that even though Carrie Bradshaw clearly annoyed her on-off boyfriend Mr Big, she deployed just the right amount of charm and cuteness that he eventually took pity and married her after all (even if it took him two attempts). When my thirties arrived, I found in *Gilmore Girls* a continuation of the mysterious feeling of girlhood that by then had kept me on social media for almost two decades: being a woman can be magical, fascinating, almost intoxicating, if only you're thin, white and beautiful enough. At every stage of life, I felt new euphoria at the belief that simply by continuing to self-optimise I would eventually fulfil the promise of my own womanhood. The end was in sight, and still is. I don't know exactly *what* I was, and still am, working towards, but I can do what was apparently stamped into my DNA as a woman: I can try. Not only try to be loved, no—I am working so that one day I can live the life that's promised to me, a life in which I can be messy and weird and make mistakes. All I have to do in return for being allowed to exist is to be hot enough.

The reboots of all these films and series in the 2010s and 2020s felt like a hangover after a night of crossing too many boundaries in the hope you'll have forgotten by the next morning. Having promised me a life so much more exciting and uncompromising than my own, these revivals committed the cardinal sin for women. They'd gotten old. Too old to flirt their way out of any tight spot, too old for the world to forgive them their flaws because they're cute enough. Getting older seemed to be such a scandal that not even these characters' creators could resist acknowledging it. They'd nurtured and loved their heroines across the years and series, but, even to them, allowing their protagonists to go on being *hot* and *messy* would be absurd. The physicality no longer matched the personality. Watching a suddenly politically correct Carrie Bradshaw and an introspective Lorelai Gilmore trade in their old selves for more anodyne versions, I was struck by a realisation that had been creeping up on me ever since I started becoming a woman, though I have tried to outrun it: your happiness is borrowed. Peace is provisional. Your personality is not a gift.

I think about Lorelai Gilmore all the time. I think about her when I pluck my eyebrows and dye my roots, when I try to apply blusher in the right spot to make my face look thinner, when I wonder whether push-up bras could change my life and if so, how. I think about her when my appearance unleashes another spiral of shame and envy. I want to look good and I don't want to offend anyone by doing so. I don't want to look good for anyone except myself. I don't want attention from men, but I want to exist in this world, which is built around attention from men. I don't want to be myself, but I am scared of the version I would have to be if I were tougher, more uncompromising, more extreme. I don't think there's a woman in the world who needs to lose weight. Except me, of course. I want to be happy. I don't want to be left by my husband at forty for a younger woman. I want to be complimented at sixty for ageing well, but I do not know why. I have this gut feeling, a memory of countless times I stood by while one woman said appreciatively that another was ageing well, which only ever means that she looks younger than

her actual age. I want to be the exception. I want to keep my job. In 25 years, I do not want to be hit by the realisation that everything I was as a young woman only worked because I was a young woman. Every attempt I make to look better than I actually do reminds me that my appearance isn't a trivial matter; it is and remains inseparably intertwined with the question of how much I, as a woman, am *allowed* to do. How low-effort I'm allowed to be and how shameless. How funny I have to be, how much makeup I should wear. Whether people find it disgusting or sexy when I eat, whether it could be hot if I took drugs. How often I have to shower or read the newspaper to be perceived as well-educated and sophisticated. Whether maybe my personality does, in fact, rest on the fact that enough men tolerate me because my appearance is sufficiently appealing to balance out everything else. My appearance, as a woman, is always more than my appearance. It's the question of the kind of life I want to lead and whether this life will be allowed me by my surroundings. It is more than just a question of what I think *other* women should do; unfortunately it's most of all a question of what *I* want to do.

What I believe in. How my relationships should look in 15 years. What kind of job I want to have. My appearance is the appearance of all women. I'm part of it, I am *also* all women. And how I look is an attempt to navigate through a world that has various options at the ready for how I could ultimately be as a woman, but makes sure that none of these options means that I am successful.

[END OF SAMPLE]