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Written by **Dawn O'Porter**

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THE COWS

[DON'T FOLLOW THE HERD]

DAWN O'PORTER

THE COWS

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For Chris and Art.

COW [n] /kaʊ/:

A fully grown female animal of a domesticated breed of cattle, used as a source of milk or beef.

A cow is officially the name given to a heifer when it has had a calf.

If you want a good piece of meat, you need to go for the heifer because cows, having been destroyed by childbearing, do not a good steak make. Cows are incredibly complex animals; they form friendships and even fall in love, they experience fear, anger and can bear grudges.

Cows are destined to be in a constant hormonal state, either pregnant or producing milk. A heifer is a piece of meat, merely a potential source of produce. Beyond that, they don't offer much . . . apparently.

Some might say this is reflected in human society and the way that it regards women.

Some might not.

There are many types of women and every effort is needed for a woman not to be seen just as a heifer or a cow. Women don't have to fall into a stereotype.

Cows don't *need* to follow the herd.

1

A Late Friday Night in April

Tara

I see a bead of sweat pop out of his forehead and flop down his face like a melting slinky. He's nearly there, I can tell. Just a few more gentle pushes from me and this guy will explode with everything I need. He sniffs and hits his nose with the side of a clenched fist. I think it was an attempt to wipe it, but ends up being more of a punch in his own face. The sweat runs over his chin, down his neck and settles on his white collar. It rapidly spreads, forming a little wet patch then, as if on a factory line, another pops out and follows its exact journey. He's going to break any minute, I know it.

We've been alone in a small bedroom in a Holiday Inn just off the M4 for over three hours. I deliberately requested a room facing the road so that I could insist the windows had to be closed because of the noise of the traffic. It's boiling in here; the hottest day of the year, and I had to shut down the

aircon because the camera picked up the noise. He won't be able to take it much longer. Me? I'll endure anything to get the soundbite I need.

He agreed to do the interview purely on the basis that it was just me and my camera in the room with him. The sleazy creep seems to have forgotten that the basic function of recording equipment is to capture a moment that could potentially be broadcast to millions.

I've been making a documentary about sexual harassment in the workplace for months. Shane Bower is the MD of Bower Beds, and I have interviewed multiple female members of his staff who have all told me about his wandering hands. Yesterday, I door-stepped him at nine a.m. as he left the house for work. I told him about the accusations and asked him what he had to say. He denied it, of course, and got into his car. I threw a business card in and instinct told me he'd be in touch. I was right; two hours later my phone rang. He asked me what my programme was about and what I wanted. I told him I was making a short film about sexual harassment for a new digital channel, and that I wanted to know if the allegations were true. He denied it on the phone, but I told him I had mounting evidence against him, and that he would be wise to try to convince the viewers of his innocence, because the footage would be broadcast with or without his contribution. Hearing that, he agreed to an interview. With only me. In a bedroom. I made sure the camera was recording the second he walked into the room.

'I don't doubt that you're telling the truth, Shane,' I say

from behind my camera. I'm lying. He's so guilty you can smell it on him.

'I just think the audience will be confused as to why so many of your staff seem to tell the same story. The one about you asking them to jump on the beds, then asking them to jump on your—'

'OK, OK, please, stop saying it,' he says, spitting and spluttering from all of his orifices, the wet patch on his collar now creeping down onto his shoulder. 'I love my wife,' Bower continues, and I see genuine fear in his eyes. He is stunned, like a spider in the middle of the night that freezes when you turn the lights on. But if you leave the lights on long enough, the spider will move. It has to.

I keep the camera rolling, he doesn't ask me to stop. I am always amazed by how people resist the truth to this point but then explode with it, almost like it's a relief to just get it out. He could shut this down and storm out, giving me no concrete proof and leaving himself open to wriggle his way out of all of this, but guilty people so rarely do. I hand them a rope, and they always hang themselves.

'My kids, they are everything to me,' he says, fluid pouring out of his face at such a speed I wish I had a dribble bib to offer him.

'If you're honest, then maybe it will all be OK,' I say, knowing I'll cut almost everything I have said and edit this to look like he built himself up to his own demise. And then he gives it to me, the most glorious line I could imagine.

'Those silly sluts acted like they were gagging for it. How is a guy supposed to know they didn't want it?'

Ahhhhhhh, beautiful!

I lower my camera, leaving it to record just in case he offers me any more nuggets of TV gold, but it really doesn't matter what happens now. I've got what I need. A confession. An end to my scene. The police can take it from here; I'll follow it up with them.

And I'm wrapped in time for lunch. Damn, I'm good at my job!

'Nailed it,' I say, throwing the camera cards down on my boss' desk.

'What, he confessed?' says Adam in his usual grating way – thrilled about the footage, worried he might have to praise me.

'Yup. The perfect confession. I got him, I told you I would.'

'OK Tara, stop acting like you're in an ITV cop drama. He was an easy target.'

'An "easy target"? I had to lock myself alone in a small room with him for hours to get that. There was nothing easy about it.'

Adam gets up from his desk and, taking the camera cards with him, walks into the main office, where he waves them and says, 'We got him.' There is a round of applause, as everyone realises that the show we have been plugging away at for months has a good ending. I stand behind Adam, watching him take the praise, wishing I had the guts to scream, 'THERE IS NO FUCKING "WE". I GOT THIS ALL BY MYSELF.' But of course, there is no 'I' in team.

'OK, Tara, Andrew, Samuel – can we have a quick meeting

in the snug, please?' Adam says, urging the three of us to follow him into a little room with multicoloured walls, bean bags, magazines, a TV and a big circular IKEA rug. It was designed to motivate creativity and it's where the development team come and pretend to work. They sit and watch hours of TV, read books, magazines and study the MailOnline to come up with ideas for TV shows. There are three of them, led by Samuel, and in the last two years only one of their ideas has actually made it to the screen. Not that it matters, but I'm on my fifth.

I dread these meetings, as I have to deal with three very strong male egos who all know I am amazing at my job but can't bring themselves to admit it. There is Andrew – Head of Production, Samuel – Head of Development, and Adam – the boss. People say TV is a male-dominated industry, and the reality of that is certainly true. It's odd though, because there are actually loads of women in television and a lot of them have high-ranking jobs. The problem is that when it comes to viewing figures, the general consensus is that women will watch male-centric programming, but men won't watch anything too female. So if everything is more male than female, then broadcasters won't lose the 'football' audience. Already, before a single programme has been made, they are saying that what women want to watch is less important than what men want to watch. This sexism filters up through the industry to the people who make the shows, and you can find it in all its glory right here in the offices of Great Big Productions.

As we sit down on the brightly coloured plastic bean bags, my faux-leather trousers make an enormous fart sound.

Everyone, of course, knows what caused the noise, but I can sense an element of doubt, and possibly hope, that I did just humiliate myself with a real guff. There is a pause for aroma, and when the air is confirmed clear, Adam starts the meeting.

'OK, so . . . oh no, wait, we need coffee,' he says, calling in his PA, Bev. I knew he would do this; he takes any opportunity he can to show me he is the boss, and this is a classic move of his. 'Can we get three coffees please, and some water?' he says as Bev enters the snug. She's wearing a skirt that's a little too short for work, and a white shirt that you can see her pink bra through. 'Chop chop,' he adds, hurrying her along so he can get on with his plan, which is to stare at her arse and make weird grunting noises as she walks away. There is a 'Phwoar' and a quiet, 'How's a guy supposed to get any work done?', a few other snorty sounds and of course, the glance at me, to make sure I am watching it all. I look directly at him, leaving no doubt that I have acknowledged his fake sexual intentions.

This is how Adam has tried to mask his homosexuality from me, since a moment two years ago when I walked in on him watching a men only three-way on the Internet. He panicked when he realised I could see his screen reflecting on the window behind him, and told me it was research for a show he was developing.

'About gay orgies by swimming pools?' I asked.

'Yes,' he answered, closing his computer but not getting up.

We never mentioned it again, and of course, I never saw a treatment for a show about gay orgies.

Since then, Adam has taken every opportunity he can to show me that he fancies women. Objectifying his assistant, Bev, is his signature move. I don't know why he isn't just honest about it, but he's more interested in being the big guy than the gay guy. I actually feel quite sorry for him, that level of denial must be exhausting.

'Shall we talk about work?' I suggest, wanting to move things along.

To cut a long story short, we are a TV production company who has realised that the future is online. Therefore, we are working to create digital content and multiple web series to build our online presence so that when TV becomes irrelevant, *we* are still relevant. We will make shows predominantly about real people in real situations, and I have been pulled in to head this up because I have a history of making brilliant TV shows about all echelons of society that my boss thinks would work excellently in fifteen-minute webisodes. He's right, because he's very clever, despite being incredibly rude and annoying. It's a massive deal for me as I've worked tirelessly for years on long-running and low-budget productions and now finally have this opportunity to make much 'edgier' (horrible TV word) programmes, with less Ofcom and more swearing. We're launching with my sexual harassment doc. It's going to be brilliant, and kind of my dream job. The downside is I have to spend a lot of time with these three.

'Just because we're now working on online content doesn't mean we can be more relaxed about money. The budgets are small. You realise that, don't you?' says Andrew, looking at me patronisingly, as if I have no concept of being thrifty. He's

not particularly good at his job, and knows it. He uses rudeness to mask his fear of getting fired.

'Don't worry, Andrew. I won't use the budget to buy tampons and shoes. I think I can control myself.' I use rudeness to stick up for myself.

'And the hours will be long. Low budgets mean long days,' he continues, knowingly.

Oh, here we go! This is where I have to re-explain my situation, even though they already know it very well.

'I have to leave at five p.m. to pick Annie up from childcare,' I say. I am careful to say 'childcare', instead of 'my mum's'. They take it more seriously when they think I pay for it.

Queue the eye rolls from Adam, the stroppy huffing from Andrew, the switch of crossed legs from Samuel as I admit to being, as Andrew once put it, 'uncommitted'. They know exactly what they're doing, and they also know it will be fine.

'I can't get childcare beyond five thirty on weekdays,' I continue. 'You know this.'

'Can't you get your mum to have her when we get busy?' says Adam, pushing his luck.

'No, I can't,' I say, defiantly. Of course Mum could have her, but that isn't the point. I want some time with my daughter. I leave at five, that was the deal I signed when I started at Great Big Productions four years ago, and Adam has been trying to back out of it ever since.

'Fine,' says Andrew, huffing and crossing his arms like a petulant child. Samuel also tuts and crosses his legs in the other direction. The irony of the time they are wasting on this is beyond them.

'It's just not really fair though, is it? On the others?' Adam says. I know he doesn't actually have a problem with me leaving at five because it never affects my work. He's just found an opportunity to assert himself and he's taking it.

'I'm a single mother, Adam. Please don't "fair" me. I work full-time and all I ask is that I get out at five p.m. to pick my daughter up from childcare. I'm here two hours before anyone else in the morning and I haven't taken a sick day in three years. I do my job.'

He takes a few minutes to let the tension give me a headache before saying, 'Being "on the job" is what got you into this mess.' Cue dirty laugh, cackle, snort. Etc.

'Good one,' I say, sitting back on my bean bag, making another huge fart noise. 'Sorry, big lunch.'

That moves them on.

Cam

www.HowItIs.com
Camilla Stacey

I'm six foot one, an un-natural blonde and if I don't pay any attention to my eyebrows, they meet in the middle. I should also mention that I have quite freakishly large hands and feet and exceptionally long limbs. I appreciate I sound a bit like Mr Tickle and Cousin It's love child but actually, I'm kind of nice looking.

I look like I'm from the Amazon, but the truth is, I'm straight out of North London – my dad is from Woking and my mum's from Barnet. I'm just long with big hands, what can you do?

I've never had an issue with the way I look, despite my imperfections. I don't know about the fear of putting on a bikini, or taking my top off in front of a guy. I don't worry about my weight because I never gain any, no matter what I eat. I wear size ten clothes even though I'm probably a size eight, but need to go bigger because of my sprawling appendages.

My face is nice too, I like it. I look a bit like Emma Stone but with a stronger nose and more olive skin. My eyes are big and brown, I have freakishly long eyelashes and my cheeks are naturally blushed. My teeth are not straight, but I never considered getting a brace after Kate Moss made being a bit wonky really beautiful. I've taken a lot of time to absorb the way I look, not in a vain way, more in a scientific way. I've stared at myself naked many times, because it's my body and I should know it better than anyone else. I've squatted over mirrors to see what men see, and inspected my face with a magnifying mirror and counted my wrinkles. I know myself really well, because I've taken the time to do so. At thirty-six years old, I'm happy with who I am.

I suspect some people will read this and be angry

with me for being positive about my own image, because we're not supposed to do that, are we? We live in a world that celebrates being thin, or having big boobs or a nicely toned arse. Society encourages us all to get, and feel, beautiful. But the minute someone admits to enjoying their own appearance, we think they've taken it all a bit too far. But don't be angry with me for saying I like the way I look. I'm not saying I think I'm perfect, better than anyone else or desirable to all mankind, I'm just saying that body image isn't something that gets me down. I've got plenty of issues, but the way I look isn't one of them.

I can't be the only one who feels this way. So come on, what do you see when you look in the mirror?

Cam x

Stella

What do I see when I look in the mirror? I think to myself, as I eat the last mouthful of an all-butter croissant and finish reading Camilla Stacey's blog. I love Cam; Alice and I used to quote her best bits to each other. It's like she's always thinking what we haven't thought of yet. *What do I see in the mirror, Cam?* Well, my description of myself wouldn't be as positive as yours, that's for sure. It isn't that I don't think

I'm attractive; I have no issue with what I actually look like. It's just that looking in the mirror makes me either sad for my past or scared of my future. If all I could see was the way that I look, I probably wouldn't hate doing it so much. Instead I see the ghosts of my mum and sister staring back at me.

I scroll down my Facebook feed. As expected, it's flooded with messages.

Thinking of you x x

Hope you manage to smile today, I know that wherever she is Alice will be having a few glasses of Champagne x

Can't imagine how today must feel for you. I always remember the two of you and your wild birthday parties. Miss her so much. Lots of love x

Still doesn't feel real. Hope today isn't too painful. I'll be wearing my pink ribbon with pride x x

There must be twenty-five messages, saying anything but the words 'Happy Birthday'. I haven't seen most of these people since Alice's funeral five years ago but they still, every year, write these vacant messages all over my page. They probably wouldn't even remember if Facebook didn't remind them.

Looking through my feed, there are countless status updates about Alice, people claiming their relationships with her, outpouring their sadness. Hoping for sympathy and attention by writing pained messages about how much they miss her.

It's all so transparent. I've never even mentioned her on here; I hate attention-seeking posts. The ones where people write boldly or cryptically about the bad things in their lives, all with the hope their 'friends' post sympathetic messages. One, written by Melissa Tucker, a girl who went to school with us and who played netball with Alice, says,

Today is the birthday of one of the best friends I ever had. She was fun, and beautiful, and kind and generous. I've never known anyone else like her. RIP Alice Davies, the world is a darker place without you in it.

'Never known anyone else like her?' She was my *identical* twin sister. I don't know if Melissa is cruel or stupid, but I have to fight with myself not to write abusive words all over her page. Who says that?

I look at the little green dot to the bottom left of the screen, 'Alice Davies – online', and imagine her lying on her bed in our flat, posting silly things on her Facebook page like she used to.

I told everyone I shut her page down when she died, but I didn't. Instead I unfriended everyone and set her account to private. I am her only 'friend'. To everyone else it isn't there, but I can look whenever I like, and read all of her old posts. Like the one where she said she couldn't cook the sausage dish she wanted to do because the local Sainsbury's had run out of cherry tomatoes. It's the really mundane day-to-day ones that I love the most. Just her, plodding along, living life.

Every morning when I arrive at work, I log in to her account on my phone, so that when I am at my computer it says she is online. The little green dot makes me feel like she's right there, sitting on her bed, able to say hi at any moment.

'Hi,' says Jason, coming out of his office and making me jump. 'Sorry, didn't mean to startle you.'

I quickly shut down my Facebook page and open the company website, even though it would be weird if I was just sitting here looking at that. Jason probably won't look anyway, he's not that kind of boss.

'I have to go. Dreading this!' he says, standing in front of me with his arms crossed. This is Jason's default position; it's not defensive, or rude. It's just how his hands fall when he isn't holding his camera.

'Don't dread it. She just wants to hear how you're doing, right? You don't have to show her anything?' I say, reassuringly.

'Well I was supposed to hand the first draft in last week, so I'm going to have to explain why I didn't.'

'Just tell her it's coming along fine, and you're all set to meet your deadline. Can I make a suggestion? You need to go on shutdown – no TV or Internet until you've finished.'

'That sounds hideous. But maybe,' he says, uncrossing one of his arms to rub his face. He looks harassed, but it suits him. Jason is rugged, he never looks like he slept well, even if he says he did. He wears loose-fitting shirts with jeans as standard. He's tall and slim with an energy that means he finds it hard to sit still. His brain jumps from thought to thought, not giving him time to worry about what he says, so he often speaks out of turn – but the sparkle in his eye

means he gets away with it. Part of his charm is how open and easy to be around he is. It's why he is so good at his job. Well, the photography part anyway; he's proving to be useless at writing books.

'I found an app that's basically a massive child lock for your computer, you won't be able to do anything until you've written a certain amount of words, wanna give it a go? I can also delete your social apps and create blocks for your phone?' I say, thinking it might be his only hope.

Jason takes his computer out of his bag and puts it in front of me.

'Go for it. I need to do something dramatic. Leave my laptop on my desk, I'll come in tomorrow to work. You can do my phone on Monday?'

'No problem.'

He stands for a moment too long looking at me. I raise my head, as if to urge him on.

'You're lucky you know, Stella. That your life doesn't grind to a halt if you can't think of anything to say, or write or take a picture of. You just come to work, then go home to your boyfriend in the house that you own, and tomorrow you know that everything will be the same, it will all be perfect. I envy you.'

Jason envies me? What? I have to stop myself standing up and screaming with such force that he'd fall backwards and hit the floor. He's jealous of *my* life? Has he any idea what it's really like? No, he doesn't. I've never told Jason anything about me. Not about Mum, Alice, my health. He just knows the basics – I live in London, in a flat I own, with my boyfriend

Phil. That's all my boss has ever needed to know. But it's odd, I think, that we come to this studio five days a week, eight hours at a time, talk almost constantly . . . well, *he* does. I'm not even sure how it's possible to skim over the depths of real life in this way and still get along so well, but it is, and we do. A successful working relationship has all the qualities of a bad relationship. If only spending this much time with a boyfriend was this simple.

'I'm not sure I'd call it perfect,' I say, playing down the massively imperfect situation that is my existence.

'Well it seems pretty good to me. You have a boyfriend, security. You'll get married, have kids. A proper family. I'll probably die alone in my studio after being knocked over the head by a falling tripod, or something equally as pathetic.'

He looks aimlessly across the studio, blue eyes still sparkling, despite his ageing, weathered face. Normally, we skirt around the personal details of our lives but there's something about writing this book that is making him relook at everything around him, including me.

'Actually, I'm jealous of *you*,' I say, gently, finding a little voice in the back of my head that feels the need to be heard. 'You get to create, and people are excited by that. You take photographs that change the way people think. Look at them,' I say, gesturing to the studio walls, where huge prints of his work keep me entertained every day. Portraits so detailed, it's as though the subjects' thoughts are written across their faces. 'You capture moments that we'd all miss if it wasn't for you showing them to us. And now you're writing a book. Something that will live even longer than you. A physical piece of evidence

that proves you existed. Maybe fifty years from now, someone will be sitting in a hotel, or waiting at an airport, or going through bookshelves at a friend's house, and they will see a copy of your book. And they'll see your pictures and read your words and they'll wonder who the brilliant person was, who captured such stories. And they'll turn back to the front cover, where they'll see your name. And they will read aloud "Jason Scott" and they'll think about how clever you were, and how grateful they are for you inspiring them, and helping them pass that time. And then they'll put the book down and someone else will come along and they will love it too. That's your legacy. The great work, that you produced. You're the lucky one.'

There is a long pause as Jason looks at me quite intensely. He's so sexy, sometimes I have to imagine him on the toilet to get that out of my head.

'That sounded like a speech you've been rehearsing for weeks,' he says, having never heard anything so profound come out of my mouth. I'm quite militant, usually, I suppose. It's what he employed me for. He's a scatty artist who needs organising, and I like organising other people's things because it distracts me from the chaos in my own mind.

'I just think you should be proud of what you've achieved, even though it's hard work sometimes,' I continue, opening his computer as if to close the conversation.

'You're right. I should,' he says, watching me for a moment as I search for the Internet-blocking software and start to download it.

'You're good with words. Maybe you should write my

book?' he winks, playfully. He's only half joking. 'Up to anything tonight?'

'Actually, it's my birthday. So just a small dinner with Phil and some friends,' I say, as unexcited by the prospect as I sound.

'Bloody hell, Stella, you should have said, I'd have got you something. Where are you going?'

'Oh, nowhere glamorous. A nice tapas place on Bermondsey Street, Pizarro. Very chilled.'

'Is it a big one? Your sixtieth or something?' he says, finding himself pretty funny.

'Oi, watch it. No, I'm just plain old twenty-nine. Nothing special, no big deal.'

'OK, well, have fun. Get really drunk and do crazy stuff. I'll see you Monday.'

'See you Monday,' I repeat, watching him leave.

When the door closes, I push his computer aside and get back on mine. For a few moments I stare at the little green dot, willing it to do anything that shows me Alice is really there. Of course, it never will. I click onto her page and write,

Happy Birthday, sis. I miss you x

I pack up my things, and leave.