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The Bitter Pill: How Second-Wave Feminism Failed, and Why It Doesn't Matter

By Brianna McGurran

I met Jonathan on Tinder. Newly single after realizing I didn't love the sweet, stable guy I thought I'd marry, I downloaded the creepy dating app to inundate myself with proof I made the right decision. Jonathan's pictures were cute; he was tall and played guitar. "Aspiring musician in Williamsburg waiting tables. You know, just livin' the dream!" his bio read. He seemed warm and creative, and he promised the spontaneity and originality my ex lacked. I swiped right on his photo to show I liked him, and it was a match: he liked me, too. I got a lot of matches, but this one gave me a flutter in my chest.

He texted me an hour later. We talked about music, and he didn't seem like a serial killer. I was surprised that our interactions were so polite and normal: I assumed all men on Tinder were sex addicts with poor grammar. I reminded myself that I was on Tinder, too, and that I shouldn't judge too harshly. He asked me where I was from and sent me a video of him singing in his sunny loft. When he asked me out for coffee the following Sunday afternoon, I said yes. He had to work that night at a restaurant in Union Square so he suggested we meet nearby. "Sure, no worries," I said, even though it would be a long trip from my place in Brooklyn. I was glad we'd meet in public, at the Grey Dog coffee shop. He was a stranger, after all.

That Sunday at noon I opened my closet door and thought about how utterly second-wave feminism had failed. I stared at the chaotic mass of tank tops, jeggings, off-the-shoulder sweaters and wrap dresses strewn on my drooping Ikea shelves. I pored through my stack of jeans in every color and fit and grabbed the ones with the high waistband. I liked them because they covered the roll of skin at my belly that wouldn't go away no matter how much yoga I did. I pulled out my go-to date top, a V-neck white shirt with buttons down the front. I put on my favorite brown knee-high boots and turned toward my full-length mirror. My outfit needed to seduce and pacify, to assure Jonathan that I cared how I looked but wouldn't be high-maintenance.

As I stepped into the bathroom I took stock of how much concealer I'd need to pretend my skin was flawless and dewy. I plugged in my flat iron to let it heat up while I rubbed on foundation. My make-up bag on the bathroom shelf overflowed with half-used eyeshadow and lip gloss in shades like Sapphire Siren, Pink Wink and Glow For It. I dug through it to find my favorite mascara and pumped the wand a few times to eke out the last of the \$12 goop from the tube. I grabbed my flat iron, pressed three-inch chunks of unruly blonde hair between the ceramic plates and pulled.

I didn't know what Jonathan's favorite movie was or where he'd gone to college, but I wanted him to think my hair looked shiny. My beauty regimen made me realize that nothing has been resolved in the decades since the New York Radical Women threw their bras and high heels into a trash can outside the 1968 Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. We're told Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem liberated us, but American women still spend \$7 billion a year on cosmetics. Women had more than 10 million surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures in 2013, an increase of almost 500 percent since 1997.

And in the past few years, it's suddenly not cool to be a feminist. It's not anti-establishment to say you don't identify with that label; it's the status quo. Two years ago, Billboard named Katy Perry Woman of the Year at its annual Women in Music luncheon. Hair tied back, dressed in a pink sheath with crepe flowers along the neckline, Perry thanked her mom, her sister and her cousin, "who just had a baby with no epidural." She told the audience that the title "Woman of the Year" didn't make her an activist.

"I am not a feminist, but I do believe in the strength of women."

In November international human rights organization Equality Now honored Salma Hayek for her work with Chime for Change, a nonprofit she co-founded to promote women's rights in developing countries. Hayek made it clear that her work with the organization – whose motto is "Education. Health. Justice. For every girl. Every woman. Everywhere" – didn't mean she was a feminist. She also has her own cosmetics line, Nuance Salma Hayek.

"I'm not a feminist," Hayek told People magazine on the red carpet that night. "If men were going through the things women are going through today, I would be fighting for them with just as much passion. I believe in equality."

Every time a Perry or a Hayek distances herself from feminism, blogs like Jezebel and Feministing pounce. Jezebel recently published a post called "The Many Misguided Reasons Famous Ladies Say 'I'm Not a Feminist.'" I don't know where I fall – I've called myself a feminist since I was in college at NYU, yet I know guys like when I wear makeup and act demure on dates. And a few months ago I found out that all the back-and-forth doesn't matter. The final verdict won't be found in words spoken on the red carpet or in rejoinders on women's blogs. The future of gender relations will be decided in an obscure corner of the Internet populated primarily by angry white men.

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Feminists in the 1970's are the ones who most people think of when they use the term "feminist." They wanted women to regain the power that girdles, false eyelashes and society's impossible standards of beauty took away from them. They saw makeup and body-shaping lingerie as instruments of the patriarchy. One vocal faction believed pornography tyrannized women because it perpetuated images of men in control. "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice," said Robin Morgan, one of the organizers of the Miss America protest in 1968.

Activists in the second wave knew that women viewed themselves through men's eyes. They wanted women to recognize the extent of men's power over them, and ideally to eschew men's expectations for what to wear and how to act. "One conforms in body type and behavior and values to become an object of male sexual desire, which requires an abandonment of a wide-ranging capacity for choice," radical feminist Andrea Dworkin wrote in her book *Intercourse*. Dworkin became infamous for her belief that sex itself, the ultimate expression of male-female relations, could subjugate women. "Violation is a synonym for intercourse," she wrote.

But all that has changed. There's a growing movement of women who say they're not ashamed

to dress nice for their boyfriends or to take on domestic duties at home. Since Dworkin and Morgan showed women an alternative to the way they'd been living, a new alternative has emerged. Now it's hard to ignore the women who say that feminism hasn't worked and that, in fact, it's bad for men and women alike. Wholesale refutation of feminism has let women unapologetically return to behavior that values men's opinion of them over everything else. There are radical anti-feminists and there are moderate anti-feminists, but they all add up to a new normal. I won't leave the house without makeup on and I act agreeable so men will like me. I'm afraid that makes me one of them.

The website WomenAgainstFeminism.com appeared last summer. The homepage is broken into squares, like the opening credits of "The Brady Bunch." It shows pictures of women, most of them younger than 25, who hold handmade signs that declare why they don't need feminism. "The difference between the sexes should be enhanced, not erased," one reads. "This isn't 1920! We're not fighting for anything anymore. Women have freedom!" says another. Search the hashtag "#WomenAgainstFeminism" on Twitter and you'll find thousands of tweets like this one from female user @luv_lluvs: "Never agreed with modern feminism since I was younger and to know I'm not the only one who feels this makes me happy."

There is a huge, growing atmosphere of female anti-feminism beyond Twitter. Karen Straughan is one of the most popular anti-feminists and men's rights activists. She has 75,000 followers on YouTube. She lives in rural Canada with her three kids, and when she's not posting videos online, she works as a waitress.

"I never saw feminism as something that was valid," she told me. "There was so much emphasis on how women are victims, on how the worst thing that could possibly happen to a woman is to be hit by a man."

Straughan's videos are usually about 30 minutes long. She lectures while she sits at her kitchen table. She has short brown hair and a calm, bewildered way of talking about feminism and its failures. Her most popular videos focus on what she calls men's disposability: the "women and children first" lifeboat ethos that treats men's safety as secondary to women's. Her most controversial argument is that women hit their partners more often than feminists let on, and that they initiate partner violence at least half the time – position that statistics can't easily back up.

"The most rare form of domestic violence is the man who hits his wife because she burns the toast," she said, without naming a source for her data. "The woman who beats her husband because he didn't get that promotion – that's twice as common as the other." She's radical, but she's popular. And she's only getting more popular.

Janet Bloomfield is another aggressive female voice in the contemporary men's rights movement. She contributes to the blog "A Voice for Men," an online hub for anti-feminist commentary. Like Straughan, she's a mother of three who lives in Canada, a perky blonde who volunteers at her daughter's dance studio. Online she's known as "Judgy Bitch." Her views are so extreme that she's been banned from Twitter five times for harassment. She uses a pseudonym because she wants to avoid the hassle of death threats.

She writes angrily about child custody laws that favor mothers instead of fathers and says many women's charges of rape and sexual assault are overblown. She said she didn't care about men's issues until she had her son. She said seeing the world from his perspective helped her realize that the law supports women more than men, and that feminism wrongly pushes for a world where women are superior.

"The reality is that we live in a world where we actually have more rights than men," she said. "It's feminists who are standing in the way of true equality."

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I got to Union Square so early, I sat on the steps facing 14th Street and watched people walk in and out of Best Buy for half an hour. I reversed the camera lens of my iPhone so I could check my hair and re-apply my lip gloss. It was a sunny and clear September day, and I let myself feel a ripple of excitement. Maybe this would be part of the story I tell my grandkids, the minutes I spent waiting before my first date with Jonathan. At 10 minutes to 2 I stood up to go to the coffee shop. I looked at my phone and saw a text from him.

"So sorry, I overslept! Stayed out too late last night :/ Be there in 20 minutes!"

I was annoyed but relieved that reality would be postponed for a little while. "No prob! Haha I know how that goes for sure. See you soon!" I wrote back.

A few minutes later I walked to the Grey Dog and stood in line. I thought it would be nice to order coffee and grab a table so we'd have a place to sit when he showed up. The line got shorter and shorter, and I considered whether my pathological attraction to musicians meant I was destined to wait for late dates in cafes the rest of my life. Just before I reached the counter, I looked behind me and saw the tall, sandy-haired guy from the Tinder photos walk in. He arched his eyebrows and nodded his head when he saw me. His mouth was bigger than I remembered, and his stubble was kind of uneven. But he was cute.

"Hi, Jonathan?" I smiled and reached out my hand for him to shake.

"Hey, yeah! Sorry I'm late." I watched him take in my height, my hair, my jeans. He smiled softly and looked away, and I noticed with him that there weren't any seats nearby. Parker Posey, the actress from "Best in Show," stroked a Maltese dog in her lap next to us.

"This place is crowded. Want to go somewhere else?" he asked. I shrugged and said sure.

He motioned for me to go first. We walked out and turned north onto University Place. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket. It felt weird to walk so close to someone I didn't know, before I had taken the time to decide that's what I wanted the world to see. He was four or five inches taller than me, with a loping, confident stride, and I liked that he made me feel delicate. His dark blue jacket looked good across his broad shoulders.

"So, yeah, last night was insane," he said. He told me how he drank in Williamsburg until 4 in the morning with his rich lawyer cousin, who wanted to go out because his wife wasn't in town.

He told me about all the bars they went to and how, as soon as they got home, they passed out immediately on leather couches in his cousin's pristine condo. We stood close together at the corner of 14th Street and University Place while we waited for the light to change. He smelled like stale whiskey and cigarettes.

* * *

The Red Pill showed up on Reddit a year ago. It's named after the pill in "The Matrix" that, when swallowed, reveals the "truth of reality." Its founders had a theory. Feminism is about more than equality, they said: it's a way for women to set the rules of the dating game. Since the 1970s women have pumped themselves with rhetoric about confidence and empowerment and "having it all." In the process, they've demonized masculinity. They've turned men not into equal partners in the fight but into antagonists and scapegoats. Feminism has upended the long-standing model for relations between the sexes: it lets women say no.

Reddit has more than 170 million visitors a month and 8,000 active subreddits. There's a subreddit dedicated to nearly everything: lucid dreaming, personal finance, Taylor Swift's armpits. Men are twice as likely as women to visit Reddit regularly, and the largest single group of users is men aged 18 to 29. Reddit doesn't release its own demographics, but user bburky analyzed open-source data on the site and found that, based on self-reported gender, active redditors are 70 percent male.

The Red Pill is a forum for men to share tips on how to find women, how to keep wome, and how to maintain their superiority over women. Feminism is the Red Pill's greatest enemy, and users talk about it in apocalyptic, vaguely evolutionary-biological language.

"It puts women into the best position they can find, to select mates, to determine when they want to switch mates, to locate the best DNA possible, and to garner the most resources they can individually achieve," pk_atheist wrote in the first Red Pill post.

Red Pill Women showed up on Reddit around the time the Red Pill appeared. It has 8,000 subscribers, mostly women who believe feminism has failed, that insistence on equality has created a generation of entitled women with unrealistic expectations for their lives. In their relationships Red Pill Women are sweet, empathetic and easygoing. They encourage their boyfriends to be the best versions of themselves. They refer to their husbands as their captains, and to themselves as first mates. Men will act more confidently, be more vulnerable and want to take care of you, they say, if you aren't a chore to be around.

Women on the subreddit earnestly discuss the importance of a sculpted body, the virtues of cleaning their boyfriends' apartments and the most inspirational stay-at-home-mom TV characters. They don't all seem politically conservative or old; some are as young as 16. They want to become "more attractive, appealing, and capable of finding a good man."

drugdoctor87 has posted in the subreddit since it started last year. She told me she began following Red Pill rules when she looked at her friends' relationships and realized the happier ones were more traditional. She'd always been a tomboy, and she'd never paid much attention to

her weight. But she found Red Pill Women and started to work out, eat better and test out products that made her hair look good. She met a guy. Now she wears clothes that flatter her figure. She grows her hair long. She's not snarky and she doesn't pick fights. She laughs easily. She is happy.

"Everything became simple and easy," she said.

This is catastrophic, I thought, when I first came across Red Pill Women a few months ago. This is the end of feminism, this is the fourth-wave surrender to the patriarchy, this is the rejection of the approximation of equality women have pushed for since the 1970s. I called Michael Kimmel, a feminist gender studies professor at Stony Brook University and a founder of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism.

"This is very old and well-worn territory," he told me.

He proceeded to outline a story every student of American history has heard, about how Elizabeth Cady Stanton set in motion the first wave of feminism – the women's suffrage movement – when she wrote the "Declaration of Sentiments" at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

But here's what they don't teach: that in 1913, Josephine Jewell Dodge, the wealthy daughter of a former governor of Connecticut, wrote a *New York Times* editorial that vilified the suffragists. "It is a pathological fact that women, as a sex, must respect and revere the divine mission of their sex, which is motherhood," she wrote. "The moment they outrage or distort or deny the purpose for which they were created they become shirkers and drones."

Dodge started the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, a counter-movement that snaked alongside the suffragists. Which might explain why I dressed for my date with Jonathan the way I did, why I hadn't followed the advice of the second-wave feminists to ignore men's opinions of me. I asked Kimmel about why I had internalized some of these anti-feminist views, why I still wore concealer, mascara and a low-cut shirt to meet a guy I didn't know. He said I shouldn't be surprised. We're in the middle of a new counter-movement, he said, one that tries to subvert the fact that women and men are more equal than they have ever been.

There's a lot of evidence to show that some measures of equality have decreased since the heady days of the mid-1980's, when working mothers donned big shoulder pads and swarmed the office parks of America. Married men's share of domestic work more than doubled from 1965 to 1985. Since 1985, though, men's contributions have stalled. They actually did less work around the house in 2009 than in 1985. Women are also more likely to stay home to raise their children. In 1967, almost half of mothers didn't work outside the home. After falling to less than a quarter fifteen years ago, the share of non-working mothers has since ticked up, to almost a third of women in the latest statistics.

Yet Kimmel pushed on. He told me you can't deny that feminism's second wave gave women equal access to the workplace and higher education, helped women get reproductive rights and established domestic violence and rape crisis centers. By 1985, for the first time, more than half

of all women were in the labor force. What they worked for did come true. Janet Bloomfield, Karen Straughan and others will be another blip on the timeline of women's progress, just like Josephine Jewell Dodge was. My generation will come out of our continued obsession with pleasing and placating men. It's already been written.

"These are efforts to hold back the tide of history," said Kimmel. "I always assume they're kind of doomed to fail."

* * *

Jonathan and I walked up to Think Coffee on Sixth Avenue and 14th Street. I looked at the menu and picked the cheapest option, a small iced coffee. He ordered the same. When it came time to pay I reached for my wallet.

"I got this," he said. "I don't get a lot of chances to feel cool, so let me take this one." I giggled and said I was happy to help.

We walked back to Union Square and sat at a table on the west side of the park. He told me about the open mic nights he performed at. His stuff sounded like At the Drive-In, he said. I didn't mention that I hated them, but as an olive branch I offered that I loved Radiohead. Didn't everyone?

"I never really got into them," he said. I silently picked at the edge of my coffee cup.

He hadn't asked me any questions yet. He told me he was sick of his current loft in Williamsburg, which was infested with rats when he moved in. He recently got into an argument with his roommate about keeping the place clean, and his roommate had left town without paying last month's rent. It sounded stressful and immature and the exact kind of story you don't bring up on a first date.

"Did you see Parker Posey when we were in line at the Grey Dog before?" I asked him brightly, changing the subject.

"Parker...Posey? Who's that? I'm really bad with pop culture stuff," he answered. He watched my face contort into surprise. "Oh, I mean, if you love, her, I love her!" he said. It was supposed to be charming but it sounded strained, pathetic, unwelcome.

His phone jingled and he reached for it in his pocket. I watched him type out a text for a minute or so. I didn't pick up my own phone and play around. I decided to wait and see when he'd look up.

"Sorry, I'm not usually so rude," he said. "I actually get really pissed about how technology has ruined our communication style as human beings."

I nodded and said I agreed. I looked past him at a couple sitting with their dog at a table nearby. The woman arched her head back and laughed.

An hour had gone by and it was almost time for him to go to work. “I really don’t want to go, but I have to make drinks for rich people now,” he said. “Want to drop me off at the restaurant?”

We walked to Boquería, a Spanish restaurant on 19th Street back in the direction of Think Coffee. He invited me to watch him play at his next open mic night the following week. I said maybe I would go; I wanted to be his dream girl, but I also never wanted to see him again. When we got to the door, we stood and looked at each other for a few seconds. I thought how this would be a funny story to tell my friends, a laugh we’d share about online dating.

“Well, have a great night at work,” I said, backing up toward the street.

“I think you’re great,” he said. “I really want to take you out on a second date and see what happens.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “Sure, yeah, a second date.”

We hugged and he looked me up and down one more time before he turned into the restaurant. His eyes looked earnest and hopeful. I walked up Sixth Avenue, hands back in my pockets. I wondered if he’d text me, and what I could possibly say in response. I thought about whether, despite it all, I would make out with him, and whether he would write a song about me if we dated.

I sat in class the following afternoon and heard my phone buzz. I knew it was him. I waited until my professor released us for a break and shoved my hand into my backpack.

“Hi! I had a really good time yesterday! Would you want to get dinner together soon?”