

NO WAY OUT BUT YOUR FOOTSTEPS

If you've ever wondered how to pick up girls, well, it's easy. You dig a big pit and you cover it in leaves and you put something nice on the other side. You're going to ask me how I know, aren't you? All right, fine, I admit it, I fell into the pit. And if you're going to ask me how long I spent in the pit, I don't mind telling you that it was 28 years in the end, and I'm quite aware how ridiculous that sounds. Do you know, the nice thing on the other side of my pit wasn't even that nice. A mean wizard tricked me. He said <<**You're clever in a way that only pretty people are**>> and before I could say <<**Hey wizard, that doesn't actually make sense**>> it was too late. I had already fallen into the pit. And there I remained. Gross. God, I was so young. Since I was lying in the pit anyway, I had plenty of time to think about how stupid it all was.

I climbed out of the pit in the end, somehow, brushing moss and lichen and snails off my clothes, still absolutely raging at the wizard—and not even so pretty anymore, on account of the 28 years, and the pit and all. It turned out the pit had been in the grounds of an enchanted forest all along, and in the enchanted forest there was a castle, and legend had it that inside the castle lived a handsome prince. To be honest, it was an extremely large forest and there were clearly several pits—and, one would also assume, several castles and several princes. We'd all heard the rumours that not everyone made it out of their pits, which put the moss and snails into perspective. But still, there were certainly a hell of a lot of dishevelled girls wandering around.

If you think you know where this is going, please, take a look at yourself. If you're one of those dishevelled girls, twigs in your hair, you haven't slept, you haven't eaten, the absolute last thing you're going to care about is what some silly little prince thinks. Nobody who has spent any length of time lying at the bottom of a horrible damp pit is in a hurry to take a job as a princess. Nonetheless, the dishevelled girls formed their own whisper network—as dishevelled girls tend to do—and there were rumours that there were jobs going at the castle as clowns. Sure, this lacked some of the princesses' prestige, but it came with better conditions of pay and tenure. Anyway, what we're really here to talk about is taste. One thing you do learn, lying in the bottom of a pit, is how to make a perfect playlist. And one thing you learn as a clown is that handsome princes just have their own way of doing things. They weren't all bad, or anything. Some of them were just charmed, in an almost awkward way. They were sporty and cheerful and good at stuff. If you lobbed a cricket ball at them, they'd straight-up catch it, they'd get scouted for the County team, whether they liked it or not. That brought with it some freedom. It meant they could choose to be uncomplicated from time to time.

Handsome princes are allowed to just *like* things. Even things that are a little obvious, even things which clowns like us would never allow ourselves to say we liked without explanation, even if those things were good. Do you know the type of thing I mean? *Midnight Cowboy*. The song *A Horse With No Name* by America. I mean, like...Rothko! How could we all forget about Rothko? We do forget, don't we, even though Rothko should really be for us, not them. But being able to just say you "like Rothko" without a million mille-feuille layers of explanation, is just about the most handsome people thing possible. I suppose it's quite sweet, really, even though it's not something we could ever do ourselves. As I was picking yet more thorns out of my grazed knee in the enchanted forest one day, I realised that any fairytale prince's favourite Talking Heads song is always going to be *Once In A Lifetime* because, well, they just don't understand why it wouldn't be. Then the thing that the mean wizard had said to me all those years ago started to make a bit more sense, after all. Sometimes handsome people simply are clever in a very specific way, and the mean wizards are just jealous.

<<**How do you steer so straight in the same old pattern?**>> wrote Ad Reinhardt to Rothko. <<**No way out but your footsteps!**>> How do you respond to that, even? The most tender heckle. A burn, a kiss, everything happening all at once. It's an amazing letter to write to anyone, really, let alone someone who's going to fuck your wife after you're dead.